

Fritz Friedlaender (Melbourne)

ARTHUR ELOESSER

Centenary of his Birth

As Arthur Eloesser once told me, his first ambition was to be an academic librarian. In this he did not succeed, because the Berlin Königliche Bibliothek only accepted Jewish applicants if they were specialists in remote subjects such as oriental languages. I think we should not regret the fact that his ambition was thwarted, for whilst there **is no lack of** learned librarians, there are not so many literary critics of Arthur Eloesser's calibre.

He was born in Berlin on March 20, 1870, the scion of a respected and cultured Jewish upper middle-class family. When he brought his academic studies to a close with his thesis " Das bürgerliche Drama—Seine Geschichte im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert " (1898), the choice of this subject was already characteristic of his life-long dedication to the world of theatre and drama. Frustrated in his original ambition, he worked as theatre critic and associate editor of the literary section of the *Vossische Zeitung* from 1899 to 1913.

Intuition of a Great Critic

Eloesser possessed the intuition of a great critic, assessing the pros and cons of a literary work and forming a sound and balanced opinion. It is remarkable how rarely he committed an error in judgement. For example, when Georg Hermann brought him the first chapters of his "Jettchen Gebert" for the *Vossische Zeitung*, Eloesser immediately decided to publish them. " But you don't know how the story goes on", exclaimed the astonished Hermann. " If something is well written I am not interested in the plot", retorted Eloesser. "This was the most intelligent remark about literature I ever heard ", Hermann afterwards told a friend.

In the course of his work for the *Vossische Zeitung* Eloesser went to France. The outcome of this visit was his book, " Literarische Porträts aus dem modernen Frankreich" (1904), in which he drew attention to the French *avant-garde* literary movement.

As his desire was to exert a direct influence on the choice of the productions, he accepted the position of a dramaturg at the Berlin Lessingtheater. However, in 1928, he resumed his work as theatre critic for the *Vossische Zeitung*, holding this appointment until forced by the Nazis to abandon it.

His work as a dramaturg as well as a dramatic critic testifies to his deep-rooted love of the theatre. Apart from Professor Max Herrmann and Julius Bab, nobody could rival Dr. Eloesser as an authority on the history of the German theatre. This is clearly shown in his documentary work, " Aus der grossen Zeit des deutschen Theaters " (1912), in which he portrays eminent German actors by drawing on their memoirs. Eloesser's edition, " Der Junge Kainz—Briefe an seine Eltern" (1912), was a major contribution to the biography of this outstanding actor, while his noted monograph, "Elisabeth Bergner" (1926), brought the charming actress vividly to life.

His love of the theatre caused Eloesser to fall under the spell of that dramatist who had in his time conquered the stage, Gerhart Hauptmann. He became Hauptmann's champion and personal friend. He supplemented Paul Schlenther's authoritative Hauptmann biography after its author's death and, in 1922, was one of the speakers at the celebration of Hauptmann's 60th birthday at the Berlin University. Reviewing Hauptmann's idyllic poem, "Anna", in the *Neue*

Rundschau, Eloesser paid tribute to him "as our most Christian and our most pagan poet".

It was a consequence of his allegiance to Hauptmann that Eloesser was critical of the subsequent expressionism, and especially of Wedekind ; Rilke's genius did not appeal to him either. However, from Hauptmann he went back to Heinrich von Kleist, writing a Kleist biography, editing his works (1910), and contributing to research on this great dramatist.

Another giant of modern German literature whose life and work Eloesser assessed was Thomas Mann. In this fine biography, published in 1925 on the occasion of Mann's 50th birthday, he elucidated the coherence between Mann's personal experience and his work.

His solid scholarly background added weight to Eloesser's literary judgement. This quality manifested itself in his *magnum opus*, "Die deutsche Literatur vom Barock bis zur Gegenwart" (2 vol., 1930/31). Many students of German have covered this comprehensive subject, but Eloesser's fresh and individual approach to the leading figures of modern German literature makes his presentation particularly colourful and lively.

Enjoying the confidence and respect of his colleagues, he was asked in his later years to take over the chairmanship of the "Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller." Eloesser was an unassuming man, of kindly disposition, gifted with a mild sense of humour. He was a family man, deeply attached to his wife and children, and also sentimentally attached to Berlin, the city of his birth. This emerges in his autobiographical work, " Die Strasse meiner Jugend - Berliner Skizzen " (1919), where some of his best *feuilletons* are included.

The Challenge of 1933

At the same time he was very conscious of his Jewishness and, therefore, prepared to meet the challenge of the Jews after 1933. He placed his services as a lecturer and organiser at the disposal of the "Kulturbund der Juden in Deutschland," planning its programme together with Julius Bab. His lectures made a strong impression on his audience, especially on young people, for they raised each subject to a high level. In 1934 he also became an esteemed contributor to the "Jüdische Rundschau ".

But the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis did not blind Eloesser to the existence of a mutual relationship between the Jewish mind and the German culture. It was the purpose of his last book, "Vom Ghetto nach Europa " (1936), to demonstrate how creative Judaeo-German intellectuals had absorbed the gist of German culture and, vice-versa, enriched its fabric. This work includes a particularly remarkable, detailed and affectionate pen-portrait of Heine, ranking amongst the best written about the poet.

Arthur Eloesser died on February 14, 1938. He was thus spared experiencing the final catastrophe of German Jewry.

BECHSTEIN STEINWAY BLUTHNER
Finest selection reconditioned PIANOS.
Always interested in purchasing well-preserved instruments.

JAQUES SAMUEL PIANOS LTD. 2 Park
West Place, Marble Arch, W.2
Tel.: 723 8818/9