

AGNON IN GERMANY,
1912–1924:
A CHAPTER OF A BIOGRAPHY

by

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In October 1912, the twenty-four-year-old Hebrew writer Shmuel Yosef Agnon embarked on a ship in the port of Jaffa, then Palestine, the destination of his trip being Germany, or, to be more exact, the city of Berlin. Agnon left for Germany in the company of Dr. Arthur Ruppin, known as the “father of Zionist settlement in Eretz Yisra’el.”¹ The friendship between Agnon and Ruppin had developed in Jaffa, where Agnon had tutored both Ruppin and his wife in Hebrew. And it was probably with the support of Dr. Ruppin, himself a native of Germany and a graduate of a German university, that Agnon decided to leave Palestine, where he had resided for more than three years, to see the world, which in those days meant Berlin.

This essay is based on a lecture delivered on February 27, 1990, at the Tauber Institute for Contemporary Jewry, Brandeis University.

1. This biographical datum was finally established by R. Weiser, “Igrot Sh. Y. Agnon leY. H. Brenner,” in *Shai Agnon: meḥkarim ve-te’udot* (Jerusalem 1978), p. 40.

Agnon's stay in Germany—which he would later refer to with a deep sense of guilt and much regret—lasted for twelve years. Though it is a common assumption that the writer's long sojourn in Germany was due to his having gotten “stuck” there when World War I broke out, one should remember that Agnon spent almost two years in Germany before the war started, and remained there for another six years after it was over. The fact is that before he decided to return to Palestine, he had established a relatively permanent home in Bad Homburg, together with his German-born wife Esther Marx (whom he married in 1920) and their two very young children. Indeed, Agnon took his absence from Palestine so much for granted that in a letter to the eminent scholar, editor, and publisher Fishel Lachower a few months after his arrival in Germany, in which he complained about his financial difficulties and the burden of having to teach to make ends meet, he came up with the idea of leaving Germany and going to the United States.² The question of leaving Germany was also raised in some of his letters to Salman Schocken after the war, when Agnon still seemed reluctant to entertain the notion of returning to Palestine.³ Today it is quite clear that Agnon's precipitate but final decision to get out of Germany in July 1924 took shape almost incidentally after a fire that broke out in his home in Bad Homburg had completely destroyed his rich library and all his manuscripts. This highly traumatic event was interpreted by Agnon as an omen or even a punishment for his long stay in the *galut* (after having made *'aliyyah*) and pushed him to go back to Ereṣ Yisra'el, leaving everything behind him.

Agnon's twelve-year stay in Germany was spent in several places. For the first four years he lived in Berlin, the city which had been his original destination, and which he visited from time to time even after he moved elsewhere. By 1917 he had decided to join his sister in Leipzig, where he remained until the end of the war. His stay in Leipzig was interrupted by two long vacations that took him away from urban Germany. In the summer of 1917 and the spring/summer of 1918, Agnon spent a few months in Bruckenaue, Bavaria, a famous resort that the then ailing writer chose for the pur-

2. The letter was probably sent at the beginning of 1913. Agnon's letters to Lachower are kept in the Genazim Institute, Tel-Aviv. Later on, in a postcard sent on April 19, 1913, Agnon tells Lachower that he has decided to give up his idea of going to the United States.

3. The Agnon-Schocken correspondence, which lasted for fifty-five years, has recently been published by Agnon's daughter, Emunah Yaron. See *Sh. Y. Agnon—S. S. Schocken: hilu-fei igrot* (Jerusalem, 1991). p. 116.

pose of convalescence. In the postwar years Agnon lived and worked for a while in Munich, and after his 1920 marriage he settled in the Frankfurt area—first in Wiesbaden and then in Bad Homburg, a small town where many Jewish writers and intellectuals had moved after the war. Agnon made short visits to Nuremberg, Weimar, Sternberg, and Königsberg—the last city being the hometown of his wife. During this period he left Germany only twice. In August 1913 he attended a conference on Hebrew language and culture in Vienna, organized by the Organization for Hebrew Language and Culture in Berlin.⁴ From Vienna Agnon traveled to his hometown, Buczacz, to visit his ailing father, Shalom Mordechai Czaczkes. Soon after returning to Berlin, in November 1913, Agnon had to return to Buczacz, this time to attend his father's funeral, which put an end to the East European chapter of his life.⁵

Quite paradoxically, despite the fact that this twelve-year period was one of the most problematic in German history—the long war having almost ruined the country, which was beset by the political instability of the postwar years as well as by a severe economic crisis which led to unprecedented inflation—Agnon's presence in Germany happened to take place at a most fortuitous historical moment. Of course, one should not underestimate Agnon's difficulties during the war and its aftermath. Letters that he wrote at the time to his patron and future publisher Salman Schocken, as well as the fictional works on wartime Germany that he wrote some decades later, provide a portrait of the artist as a stranger faced with the shocking reality of a country at war, and, in particular, with endless daily hardships: the shortage of housing, which forced him to move often from one place to another; the shortage of food and many other basic goods; and, more than anything else, the threat of being drafted into the German army. Indeed, the fear of being drafted terrified Agnon to the point where it caused real damage to his health: the self-starvation and heavy drinking and smoking, intended to make him fail the army physicals forced upon him as an

4. Agnon's name is included in the list of participants at the conference, published in *Hista-drut le-safa vela-tarbut ha-ivrit be-Berlin* (Warsaw, 1914), p. 149. I am grateful to Mr. R. Weiser of the Jewish National and University Library for bringing this document to my attention. As the conference took place between the August 25 and 28, Agnon would also have had a chance to stay in Vienna for the Eleventh Zionist Congress, which started on September 2.

5. Some of the biographical details mentioned in this paper are included in Arnold J. Band's comprehensive study of Agnon, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of Sh. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1966), pp. 20–25.

Austrian citizen, made him so ill that he had to be hospitalized for a traumatic period of almost six months.

However, Agnon's arrival and prolonged stay in Germany occurred at the height of a German Jewish renaissance which had already begun on the eve of World War I and which kept up its momentum during the war and its aftermath. This period is characterized by many historians as a turning point in the course of German Jewish history. The shift from the long-term drive for assimilation to a growing concern for the cultivation and maintenance of Jewish identity led to a reevaluation of East European Jewish culture, which had been treated for decades with a sort of contempt. Martin Buber's publication of two collections of Hasidic stories, *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman* ("The Tales of Rabbi Nachman," 1906) and *Die Legende des Baalschem* ("The Praise of the Baal Shem," 1908), both epitomized and stimulated the completely new ethos of a new generation of German Jews.

It is no wonder, then, that it did not take the young Agnon very long to become a celebrity in this new milieu, for he was read, admired, and constantly courted by the leading figures of the German Jewish intelligentsia. "The appearance of Agnon in Germany in those years," writes Gershom Scholem in his memoirs, "was a major event for me and for some people of my age-group."⁶ And, Scholem goes on to explain, "This, after all, was the time when a kind of veritable cult of the Eastern Jews (*Ostjuden*) reigned in Germany, which represented a backlash against the arrogance and presumption which at the time were accepted attitudes in the circle of assimilated Jews from which we were descended. For us, by contrast, every Eastern Jew was a carrier of all the mysteries of Jewish existence, but the young Agnon appeared to us as one of its most perfect incarnations."⁷ For despite his exposure to the definitely secular Zionist-Socialist culture of the second *'aliyyah*, Agnon remained the almost archetypal *Ostjude*, committed both aesthetically and intellectually to Jewish life and tradition as it had been shaped for centuries by Polish Jewry. The dean of this new wave of German Jewish culture, Martin Buber, did his best to encourage Agnon to remain in Germany and establish his reputation there: "Agnon hat die Weihe zu den Dingen des jüdischen Lebens" ("Agnon is carrying the sacred

6. Gershom Scholem, *Devarim be-go* (Tel-Aviv 1975), p. 463.

7. Gershom Scholem, "Agnon in Germany: Recollections," in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays* (New York, 1976), p. 119.

authority in matters of Jewish life”), Buber wrote already in 1916. And, he continued: “Er is berufen, ein Dichter und Chronist des jüdischen Lebens zu werden” (“He is called to become the writer and chronicler of Jewish life”).⁸ In his memoirs, Gershom Scholem, who was then on the verge of becoming one of the greatest Jewish scholars of modern times, declares that, after reading what Buber had written, he became a lifelong devotee of Agnon, playing an active role in introducing the young writer to the German Jewish audience. Scholem was joined in this by many other members of the German Jewish intelligentsia, like Aharon Eliasberg, Moshe Marx, Max Strauss, Ernst Simon, Gustav Krojanker, F. M. Kaufmann, Max Brod, Nahum N. Glatzer, and even Franz Rosenzweig—all of whom were, in one way or another, not only consumers of Agnon’s wares but also active participants in helping him build his literary career during this period.

Of crucial importance at this time was Agnon’s encounter with Salman Schocken, an affluent businessman and active Zionist from Zwickau, who also was a well-known maecenas of Jewish culture. Schocken, whose vision was largely shaped by the neo-Jewish renaissance in Germany and the new cult of the *Ostjuden*, became a fanatical admirer of Agnon, to whom he was introduced in 1916 by Leo Hermann, secretary of the World Zionist Executive in Berlin.⁹ Schocken was so impressed by Agnon that he decided to become his patron, which he was for the rest of his life (and, in years to come, also his publisher). He supported Agnon financially, helped him weather the physical hardships of the war, advised him on all minor as well as major matters, and provided him with the moral support that he desperately needed in those years in order to get on with his literary work. In a way, Schocken controlled Agnon’s intellectual life and literary development

8. Martin Buber, “Über Agnon,” *Treue (Eine Jüdische Sammelschrift)* (Berlin: Leo Hermann, 1916), p. 59. See also Grete Schaeder, “Martin Buber: Eine biographischer Abrif,” in Martin Buber, *Briefwechsel* (Heidelberg, 1972), vol. 1, pp. 58–59: “In Bubers eigener Gegenwart entsprach kein anderer Dichter seinem Erzähler-Ideal mehr als sein vijähriger Freund, der hebräische Dichter Samuel Joseph Agnon.”

9. Of the few accounts of the life and activities of Salman Schocken (including his special relationship with Agnon), some were written by his eldest son, Gershom Schocken. See, e.g., “Ich werde seines gleichen nicht mehr sehen,” *Der Monat* 20 (November 1968): 13–30; “Darko shel Salman Schocken 'el ha-yahadut uve-tokha,” *Ha'arets*, January 20, 1989 (a lecture delivered on the thirtieth anniversary of Schocken’s passing). See also Volker Dahm, *Das Jüdische Buch im Dritten Reich (Zweiter Teil): Zalman Schocken und Sein Verlag* (Frankfurt a.M., 1962); Stephen M. Poppel, “Salman Schocken and the Schocken Verlag: A Jewish Publisher in Weimar and Nazi Germany,” *Harvard Library Bulletin* 21 (January 1973): 20–49.

by sending him books to read, mainly works of European literature, about which Agnon would report in letters to his patron. Agnon reciprocated by helping Schocken build up his huge collection of rare Jewish books, as well as by being his chief consultant on issues related to Jewish life, literature, and learning. The Schocken-Agnon relationship established at that time in Germany, which is documented in the hundreds of letters the two wrote to each other over the decades, was one of the most crucial and formative events in Agnon's life in the period under consideration.¹⁰

Agnon's presence in Germany also coincided with the emergence of a new—though temporary—center for Hebrew writing on German soil, a historical fact that is absolutely crucial to any understanding of this chapter in the writer's biography. The first letter that Agnon wrote upon his arrival in Germany, on November 9, 1911, was addressed to the distinguished Hebrew writer Micha Josef Berdychewsky, who was then living in Berlin. In it Agnon tried—though unsuccessfully—to persuade Berdychewsky to hire him as his secretary.¹¹ Berdychewsky was not the only Hebrew writer who happened to live and work in Germany at that time. Among the many others, of all ages, were David Frischmann, David Shimonvitz (Shimoni), Zalman Rubashov (Shazar), and Fishel Lachower. This process reached its climax in the two or three years after the Russian Revolution, when Germany became a temporary haven for the many Hebrew writers and institutions that were not able to continue functioning in the Soviet Union. The people and institutions that moved to Germany went not only to Berlin but also to Bad Homburg, where a substantial community of those involved in Hebrew literature and culture had been established. In addition to Agnon, Bad Homburg attracted such writers, publishers, and men of letters as Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Jacob Fichman, Aḥad Ha-Am, S. Ben-Zion, Y. Ḥ. Rawnitzki, Nathan Bistirtski, and Shoshanah Persitz—as well as many others.¹² Bialik, who was naturally the great eminence of the place, not only became a close friend of Agnon's, but also gave legitimation to the younger writer's doubts about remaining in the *galut*: if Bialik was living in Bad Homburg, this was the right place for him too.

10. The relationship between Agnon and Schocken, as reflected in their correspondence, is discussed in my essay "Ba-ḥanuto shel mar Schocken," *Ha'arets*, July 5, 1991.

11. Avner Holtzman, "Berdychewsky ve-Agnon: panim 'aḥerot," *Dapim le-mehkar besifrut* 3 (1986): 168–169. After being refused once by Berdychewsky, Agnon tried once more, offering to assist him without any charge. This offer also seems to have been rejected.

12. Frieda Kahn, *Generation in Turmoil* (New York, 1960), pp. 108–109.

Having the good fortune to be surrounded by German Jewish intellectuals and by mainly Russian-born Hebrew writers, Agnon found that Germany was the best possible milieu if he was to carry on with his literary endeavors. Another crucial factor in his intellectual development was his exposure to major Jewish libraries, which had not been available to him either in his Galician shtetl or in Palestine (even in Jerusalem). In this regard, there is a famous anecdote told by Gershom Scholem about meeting Agnon at the Jewish Community Library in Berlin. Scholem asked Agnon, who was looking through the catalogue very intently, what was he looking for. Agnon's blatant answer was: "I was looking for a book that I haven't read yet."¹³ Later on, when he was living in Bad Homburg, Agnon frequented the Jewish Library in Frankfurt a.M. in search of new material. At that time, there were excellent Jewish bookstores in German cities where a person like Agnon could purchase a wide variety of current as well as ancient and rare publications. When the fire broke out in his Bad Homburg home, it destroyed not only Agnon's own manuscripts but also his large collection of Jewish books, all purchased during his stay in Germany.

In a way, Agnon's stay in Germany was also constructive as far as his general education was concerned. During this period he became acquainted with much European and German literature; his reading was almost totally oriented toward the "classical" repertoire—Balzac, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Strindberg, Goethe, and Gottfried Keller, with some of these writers having a long-range effect on the development of his art.¹⁴ Arnold Band suggests that Agnon had always been attracted to the genre of the folktale, but was particularly affected by it during his stay in Germany because of its central position in German culture.¹⁵ And, indeed, in a letter to the critic Fishel Lachower in 1913, Agnon says that he has just finished translating *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte* ("The Strange Tale of Peter Schlemihl"), written in 1814 by Adelbert von Chamisso, a work that is one of the most famous and typical examples of the *Kunstmärchen* in German Romanticism.¹⁶ On the other hand, there are no signs that Agnon took any interest at

13. Scholem, *Devarim be-go*, p. 463.

14. Agnon's "reading list" during the course of his stay in Germany is documented in detail in many of his letters to Salman Schocken. See, for example, the letter in which he discusses his impressions upon reading Strindberg (Yaron, pp. 78–79).

15. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, pp. 94–95.

16. The letter to Lachower was sent by the end of November 1913 (Genazim Institute, Tel-Aviv). Agnon writes: "I translated *Peter Schlemihl* by Chamisso, a complete translation. What am I going to do with it?" And indeed, this translation was never published.

this time in figures like Thomas Mann, Rilke, Hofmannsthal, or the young Kafka, not to speak of their colleagues in painting, music, or drama. Contemporary German culture—to which Agnon could have been exposed by his very presence in cities like Berlin or Munich—was probably beyond his immediate horizon.

As we come to appreciate Agnon's overall achievements as a writer during this period, we are faced with a serious methodological problem: due to the fire that broke out in his Bad Homburg home, we have no way of making a full and accurate account of what he actually produced during his German sojourn. For example, in a letter to Martin Buber, which he wrote from Munich in August 1919, Agnon speaks of a new book he was then in the process of writing, titled (temporarily) *Roman ha-'elef* ("A Novel of the Thousand") to mark the "thousand human beings" that were included in it.¹⁷ This major work, which was probably meant to present Jewish life in Galicia in connection with the writer's own biography, was completely destroyed in the fire. The only segment saved was one that was published in 1921, "Be-Ne'arenu uvi-zekenenu" ("With Our Young Ones and Our Old Ones"), a satire on local Jewish politics in a Galician shtetl, based on historical events that had taken place in and around Agnon's hometown, sometime between 1906 and 1908.¹⁸ And, in a letter to the critic D. A. Friedman in the spring of 1921, Agnon provides a full list of his publications, which the critic had requested, and adds to it the titles of some works in progress. Among these he again mentions this novel, now titled *Bi-Šeror ha-ḥayyim* ("In the Bond of Life"), a "Berlin novel" called *Kätte ve-Grete* ("Katte and Grete"), and some theatrical pieces, including a play titled *Rembrandt ve-Esther* ("Rembrandt and Esther").¹⁹ It only remains, then, to consider the works that Agnon managed to have published while he was still in Germany, which include some twenty stories and several books.²⁰ During the

17. Agnon's letters to Buber, except those few that have been published, are kept in the Buber Archive, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem (Ms. Var. 350/65 'n). Buber's letters to Agnon from this period were obviously destroyed in the fire in Agnon's house.

18. The relationship of this particular work to Agnon's biography is discussed by A. J. Brawer, "'Bi-Ne'arenu uvi-zekenenu' bemisgeret ḥayyei meḥabro," *Yovel Shai* (Ramat Gan, 1958), pp. 39–48.

19. Agnon's letter to A. D. Friedman was published by M. Ungerfeld in *Moẓnayim* 50 (1968): 218–220.

20. For detailed information about Agnon's numerous publications, see Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, pp. 453–496 ("Works by Agnon Listed Alphabetically") and 527–539 ("Fiction in Hebrew in Order of Publication").

so-called German period Agnon published two new collections of short stories: *Be-Sod yesharim* ("Among the Righteous") and *'Al kapot ha-man'ul* ("On the Handles of the Lock"); a new edition of his first book, *Ve-Haya he-'akov le-mishor* ("And the Crooked Shall Become Straight"); and some smaller books, each of which comprised one of his long short stories, like "Giv'at ha-ḥol" ("The Sand Hill"), which was published as a self-contained forty-page book. Most of Agnon's short stories were printed in periodicals published outside Germany, mainly in the Warsaw-based *Ha-Tekufah*, the major journal of Hebrew literature in the postwar period, and also in the New York-based *Miklat*. This is not surprising, since Abraham Josef Shtibl, the owner of these journals and one of the leading Jewish publishers of the time, provided Agnon with subsidies in the years following the war. The publication of three short stories in *Rimon*, a Hebrew journal on literature and the arts located in Berlin, represented an exception to the trend. On the other hand, Agnon's books were published in Germany, all of them by the Jüdischer Verlag, a local Jewish publishing house which concentrated on books that fostered the new identity of German Jewry. Although Agnon wrote a great deal from the moment of his arrival in Germany, it is worth noting here that his works were all published after World War I (between 1919 and 1924) due to the closing down of the Hebrew printing houses in Germany (curiously enough, however, some of his works were translated into German and published during the war, even before their publication in the original Hebrew). The few works which were published prior to the war were mainly stories that had been written in Palestine, most of them submitted for publication prior to Agnon's trip to Germany.

The major trend in Agnon's writing during his German period was its highly emphasized interest in the old Eastern European world. This direction had already been evident in his early works, but it gained a tremendous momentum in the new context in which Agnon found himself after 1912. Coming from Palestine, the author invested almost no aesthetic or intellectual effort in trying to come to grips with the "brave new world" that he had found there. The exception to this was the publication of a new version of the above-mentioned story "Giv'at ha-ḥol," a poignant portrait of a young emigre artist set in the Jaffa of the second *'aliyyah*. It also seems that Agnon did not pay much attention—at least in his fiction—to the here-and-now Germany of his time. Though we will never know the final content of his projected "Berlin novel" *Kätte ve-Grete*, we do know that it was decades before wartime Germany turned into a substantial theme in his writings.

What was really on Agnon's mind during this period was mainly his native Poland—not so much contemporary Poland, but the premodern Poland that was then engaging the German Jewish imagination. Three major works composed during the German sojourn reflect this tendency in Agnon's writing. The first, a long story titled "Ha-Nidah" ("The Rejected"), was probably meant to become Agnon's first novel (one of his many projects that never materialized). This highly poeticized story, situated in early-eighteenth-century Poland, dramatizes the historical struggle between Ḥasidim and Mitnagdim, with the writer favoring the Ḥasidic tradition. Although this attitude toward Ḥasidism was not necessarily dictated by Buber, it certainly fit well into his cultural ideology. Another ambitious project, which occupied Agnon mainly during his stay in Munich, was the story "Hakhnasat kala" ("The Bridal Canopy"), published in several installments in the American journal *Miklat*. This work, which Agnon turned into his first novel in 1931, is a picaresque story which presents a vast portrayal of Jewish life in Eastern Galica (Agnon's birthplace) at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with its hero, Reb Yudel Hasid, functioning as the archetypal pious Jew, a human emblem of a civilization that had almost ceased to exist. The third work of fiction that should be mentioned in this context is *Polin* ("Poland"), a cycle of relatively short stories (defined by Agnon as "legends"), which were published in various periodicals throughout these years, and which Agnon turned into a well-wrought book in 1925, soon after his second arrival in Palestine. These stories, which are based on historical as well as folkloric material, are meant to produce a sort of epic that illuminates—through imaginative discourse—various dimensions of the overall experience of Polish Jewry as it had been shaped since the Jews' arrival in Poland at the beginning of the second millennium.

While Agnon was writing new works like "Ha-Nidah" and "Hakhnasat kala," he was no less busy rewriting some of his previous works, mainly those that he had written during his adolescence in Bucacz.²¹ As mentioned above, his small book *Giv'at ha-ḥol*, published by the Jüdischer Verlag in 1920, was a new version of a Palestinian story titled "Tishrei," which had been published in *Ha-po'el ha-ša'ir* (the organ of the labor movement in the Yishuv) in 1912. He also wrote a new version of his 1911 story "Aḥot" ("Sister") for inclusion in his second book of collected stories, *Al kapot ha-man'ul*, published by the Jüdischer Verlag in 1923. Another Palestinian story, "Ḥalomo shel Ya'akov Naḥum" ("The Dream of Ya'akov Nahum"), originally based on an anecdote that Agnon had written in Bucacz when he

was still in his teens, turned out to be a story of very different nature in the new version which Agnon produced in the aftermath of the war. The story, which was renamed "Yatom ve-'almana" ("An Orphan and a Widow"), appeared in the Berlin journal *Rimon* in 1923.²² In recent years the texts of these stories have attracted the attention of many Agnon scholars, most of whom point up the dramatic change in structure and even more so in style that the revised stories (and a few others) went through—from the rather sentimental, sometimes romantic, and highly rhetorical mode of expression that was typical of much of Agnon's early work to the more self-controlled, lucid, and "realistic" discourse that emerged in the new versions. Thus, most critics agree that, despite his becoming habituated to rewriting his stories, it was in the course of the so-called German period that Agnon actually found and molded the idiom that would become his trademark in the years to come.

The fact that Agnon's writing during his German period enjoyed such a tremendous vogue among literary critics contributed substantially to his growing reputation as a major Hebrew writer.²³ The renewed publication of works by Agnon in the years that followed the war led to a new wave of criticism on his writing, which had started just ten years earlier following the publication of his first Palestinian story, "'Agunot" (1908). Between 1919 and 1924, fifteen articles—some of them quite extended in length—were published on Agnon's books or stories. In addition, numerous references to his writing were included in discussions in the journals and periodicals in which his works were published. Only one of these articles, "Sh. Y. Agnon," published in 1924 by the eminent critic David Arie'el Friedmann, was written without reference to any particular story, representing the first attempt to survey Agnon's complete writings. Most of the articles on Agnon's work were written by such leading writers and critics as Y. H. Brenner, M. J. Berdychewsky, Shalom Shtreit, A. A. Kabak, Menahem Ribalow, Asher Barash, and Joseph Klausner. Naturally, some of Agnon's critics—D. A. Friedmann himself, A. M. Zernansky, even Berdychewsky—belonged to the relatively small circle of "German" Hebrew writers, whereas others were members of the recently emergent community of Hebrew writers in Palestine who had been deeply involved in Agnon's work since his Jaffa debut of 1908.

Highly praised by most critics—though not immune from attacks and resentment by others—Agnon was then regarded and interpreted as an artist whose fiction managed to reconstruct the "old" world of the Eastern Euro-

pean shtetl through a vernacular that exploited the traditional sources of the Hebrew language to the full. The critic Moshe Ben-Eliezer, who happened to be living in Bad Homburg at the same time as Agnon, concluded that this is what set Agnon apart from most of his Hebrew contemporaries, whose orientation was elsewhere. "Most of the Hebrew writers of our time," writes Ben-Eliezer, "deal with describing the world of the individual Jew. Some of them treat the problems of our time. What they have in common is that they are all children of their generation; they live its life, they suffer its pain, they struggle to solve the enigma of its world. But there is one writer, his name is Sh. Y. Agnon, who is content to reside in his corner and to unfold before our eyes images of a world that has passed away and no longer exists."²⁴ Although a few critics suggested that, for this same reason, Agnon might be irrelevant, the great majority were quite enchanted by his new stories and particularly by his ingenious artistic capacity to create a fictional representation of the *temps perdu*.

With Agnon's presence in Germany, his reputation definitely grew beyond the boundaries of the Hebraic world, as is well attested in the many translations of his works published in Germany during his stay there.²⁵ Indeed, Agnon's first appearance in the German language preceded his arrival in Germany; his story "'Agunot'" had been translated into German by Ernst Mueller, then a teacher in an agricultural school in Jaffa, and in 1910 was published (under the title "Seelenverbannung"), on the initiative of Martin Buber, in the Zionist weekly *Die Welt*. But, after his arrival in Germany, this tendency gained tremendous momentum. In 1916 the Jüdischer Verlag in Berlin, where he was then an editor, published two anthologies of Jewish writings in which Agnon was represented by several stories from his new cycle *Polin*, translated by Max Meyer, which had not yet been published in Hebrew. The same occurred with his story "'Agadat ha-

21. This aspect of Agnon's work is the theme of a Ph.D. dissertation by Judith Halevi-Zwick, "Tekufat Germania bi-yeširato shel Shai Agnon" (Jerusalem, 1967).

22. An examination of Agnon's literary and stylistic growth, as it is reflected in the metamorphosis of this story, is offered by Gershon Shaked, 'Omanut ha-sipur shel Agnon (Tel-Aviv, 1973), pp. 137–150.

23. The criticism of Agnon's early writings is the topic of Judith Halevi-Zwick, *Reshita shel bikoret Agnon* (Haifa, 1984), pp. 55–100.

24. Moshe Ben Eliezer, "'Al kapot ha-man'ul," *Ha-Tekufah* 8 (1923): 521–523.

25. A partial list of Agnon's works in German translation is included in Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, pp. 552–553.

sofer" ("Die Erzählung vom Toraschreiber"), which was translated by the famous Jewish lawyer Max Strauss and published, like most of Agnon's stories at this time, in Buber's periodical *Der Jude* in 1917. Strauss also took upon himself two other major projects: in 1918 he published Agnon's 1912 novella *Ve-Haya he-'akov le-mishor* (*Und das Krumme Wird Gerade*), and three years later he came out with a translation of Agnon's long story "Ha-Nidah" ("Der Verstrossene"), probably the work most typical of Agnon's German period. Ernst Mueller, Max Meyer, and Max Strauss were joined in 1920 by the young Gershom Scholem, whom Agnon was then encouraging to translate his works (as can be seen from the unpublished Agnon-Scholem correspondence of that time).²⁶ Interestingly enough, Scholem's first work in this field was his translation of "Ma'ase rabi Gadi'el ha-tinok" ("Die Geschichte von Rabbi Gadiel dem Kinde"), a story that forty years later, on the occasion of Agnon's seventieth birthday, became the focus of an insightful study by Scholem that is still considered one of the high points of criticism on Agnon.²⁷

Naturally, Agnon's publications in the German language attracted the attention of German Jewish critics and writers. Though this was done on a rather limited scale, the very fact that some of Agnon's works were reviewed by German writers, and the way in which he was received by them, is by no means insignificant. The tone of German criticism on Agnon was, of course, set by Martin Buber, whose short essay "Über Agnon," published in 1916, presented the young writer as someone who bore "sacred authority" on Jewish matters, and as the "chronicler" of Jewish life. Among the other German articles on Agnon that somehow followed Buber's general attitude was one by the well-known Prague-born writer Max Brod. In a review of two "Jewish" books—one by the Yiddish writer Y. L. Peretz, and the other by Agnon (*Und das Krumme Wird Gerade*)—Brod hailed both authors (in accord with the spirit of the time) as writers who "returned Eastern European Jewish art to mankind."²⁸ Comparing Agnon's art to that of Kokoshka, Majerink, and Rudolf Borchard, Brod was particularly impressed by the way in which Agnon managed to express "the atmosphere of his native

26. Agnon's letters to Gershom Scholem are kept at the Scholem Archive, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem.

27. Gershom Scholem, "Mekorotav shel ma'ase rabi Gadi'el ha-tinok be-sifrut ha-kabalah," *Le-Agnon shai* (Jerusalem, 1959), pp. 289–306.

28. Max Brod, "Zwei Jüdische Buchers," *Die neue Rundschau* 29, no. 2 (1918): 1362–1367.

land,” as well as by the stylistic ability that allowed Agnon to employ a prose based on the Bible, the Talmud, and the commentaries while maintaining a vital sense of the present. Another piece of German criticism on Agnon, which focused on the same book, was written by Fritz Mordechai Kaufman, a German essayist and writer on Yiddish folklore, and one of the chief advocates of the German Jewish cult of the *Ostjuden*.²⁹ Kaufman rated Agnon as one of the best European writers of his time, viewing him as an artist who fulfilled to the utmost his own expectations and those of his milieu by offering a remarkable portrayal of Jewish life in Eastern Europe in a manner typical of the storytelling tradition common among its Jews. (The word *Ostjuden* is constantly repeated in the course of this article.) Historically speaking, it seems that Brod and Kaufman (and, to a certain extent, Buber) actually established a distinct tradition of critical writing on Agnon in the German language, which was cultivated in the twenties and the thirties and which peaked with Gustav Krojanker’s *S. J. Agnons Werk* (“The Work of Sh. Y. Agnon”), the first book-length study of this writer.³⁰

The understanding of Agnon’s achievements during his German period cannot be exhausted by scrutinizing only his fiction. Nourished by the richness of the local Jewish libraries, and encouraged by the growing interest in Jewish tradition in his immediate environment, Agnon also began to compose anthologies of Jewish texts, a project which would become of major importance in the course of his work in the coming decades. Most of these anthologies were produced in the framework of his job as an editor at the Jüdischer Verlag. The most representative among them was *Das Buch von den Polnischen Juden* (“The Book of the Polish Jews”), which he co-edited in 1914 with Aharon Eliasberg, founder of the Verlag. Beside his own stories, this work included other literary, historical, and folkloric material aimed at providing contemporary German Jews with a portrait of the Polish Jewry they were so keen on getting to know. Agnon was also involved in the production of *Chad Gadja: Das Pesachbuch* (“The Book for Passover”), *Maus Zur: ein Chanukkabuch* (“The Book of Hanuka”), as well as a third

29. Fritz Mordechai Kaufman, “Der Erzähler S. J. Agnon,” *Vier Essays über osjüdische Dichtung und Kultur* (Berlin, 1919), pp. 21–23.

30. The manuscript of Krojanker’s book, which was to have been published in 1938 by Schocken Verlag in Berlin, was recently translated into Hebrew and published posthumously on my initiative. See Gustav Krojanker, *Yeširato shel Sh. Y. Agnon*, with introduction and notes by Dan Laor (Jerusalem, 1991).

book dedicated to the feast of Purim which was never published.³¹ We also know that Agnon was working on an anthology titled *Vom Juden* ("About the Jew"), in the hope that this book would contribute to "the knowledge of the soul of the Israelite nation."³² But, for reasons still unknown, this project—which was initiated and financed by Salman Schocken—never became a reality.

However, Agnon's most ambitious anthology at the time was a multi-volume work on Ḥasidic lore and literature, a totally independent venture that had nothing to do with his commitment to the Jüdischer Verlag. This book was prepared as a joint project by him and Martin Buber, the prophet of Neo-Ḥasidism in Germany. Agnon and Buber began working on the project in 1921, soon after Agnon moved to Bad Homburg, which was not very far from Heppenheim, where Buber resided. In 1923, a contract signed in Bad Homburg by the two editors and Hayyim Nahman Bialik specified the publication of at least four volumes of *Sefer ha-Ḥasidut* by the newly established Devir publishing house, which Bialik founded and headed.³³ "Bialik came to me on Monday morning," Agnon writes to Buber in a letter from 1922. "I showed him the beginning of the work and he was impressed by its importance and its beauty . . . and he also said that all the books of this generation will be forgotten after a hundred years, but that our book will live for a thousand years more."³⁴ Unfortunately, Bialik's enthusiastic response to this work would never be put to the test, as it was less than two years later that the fire in Agnon's home turned the first volume into ashes, thereby putting an end to this majestic Agnon-Buber project. In years to come, both writers would work on the Ḥasidic tales, but separately and on a much more limited scale than the one originally envisaged. Agnon's posthumous volume *Sipurei ha-Besht* ("The Tales of the Besht"), which was published in 1987, is a late and partial product of the ambitious multivolume anthology that he and Buber had planned in the course of the German period.

31. This project is mentioned in a letter Agnon wrote to Schocken in September 1917 (Yaron, pp. 56–57).

32. Agnon's letter to Schocken of March 1916. A previous letter from Schocken to Agnon (March 6, 1916) includes a contract for the book to be signed by Agnon, in which the writer commits himself to complete the project within five years (Yaron, pp. 19–20). Agnon probably also prepared an anthology of Jewish jokes (*Jüdische Witze*), mentioned in the article "Humor" in *Das Jüdisches Lexicon*, but this book, too, was never published.

33. The original contract is kept in the Buber Archive, Jerusalem. It was recently published by Avinoam Barshai, *Ha-romanim shel Agnon* (Tel-Aviv, 1988), pp. 51–52.

34. See "Shai Agnon kotev el Martin Buber," *Ha'arets*, September 15, 1985.

As mentioned above, contemporary Germany was completely outside Agnon's literary scope during his stay in that country, as his creative energy was then totally invested in fictional works related mainly to the world of Eastern European Jewry and to works of nonfiction (the anthologies), which were also oriented toward traditional Jewish culture and texts produced mainly in the Eastern European context. Strangely enough, even in the hundreds of letters that he wrote during these years, one can hardly find a statement related to contemporary events or to German politics in general. However, the German period—as a personal, environmental, and historical experience—made a definite imprint on Agnon's works of fiction, though this imprint was not to be seen until late in his career. There were early signs of Agnon's indebtedness to this German sojourn in the 1940s, with the appearance of the first few chapters of his novel *Shira*, which depicts the Jerusalemite milieu of German Jewish emigres in the Mandatory period—a community toward which Agnon felt, from that moment on, a deep sense of belonging.³⁵ Yet, interestingly enough, Agnon's real and significant response to the events that had taken place in Germany mainly during World War I did not occur until the aftermath of World War II, when he began publishing a series of works of fiction that were directly related to the period under consideration. This series opened with a story titled "Bein shetei 'arim" ("Between Two Cities"), first published in *Ha'arets* on June 4, 1946; it continued with the 1951 publication of a long short story titled "'Ad hena" ("Until Now"), and was completed with the novel *Ba-Hanuto shel mar Lublin* ("In Mr. Lublin's Store"), the first chapters of which appeared in *Ha'arets* in the early 1960s, the full work being published posthumously (under the editorship of his daughter, Emunah Yaron) in 1974.³⁶

While "Bein shetei 'arim" is a rather short though powerful sketch that describes the effect of the war on a provincial town in Bavaria (which obviously reminds us of Bruckenaue), "'Ad hena" is a very extensive and highly modernistic presentation of the horrors of war as reflected in the rear rather than on the battlefield, a vantage point that was definitely dictated by Agnon's own experience at the time. The first-person writer-narrator of

35. The novel is by now available in English translation. See S. Y. Agnon, *Shira*, trans. from the Hebrew by Zeva Shapiro, afterword by Robert Alter (New York, 1989).

36. The German theme in Agnon's writing is discussed by Baruch B. Kurzweil: "The Image of the Western Jew in Modern Hebrew Literature," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 6 (1961): 175–182. See also Dan Miron, "German Jews in Agnon's Work," *ibid.* 23 (1978): 265–280.

“Ad hena” is shown wandering between Berlin, Leipzig, and other places in Germany in a kind of a Kafkaesque *perpetuum-mobile* in an almost hopeless attempt to save the precious library of the late Dr. Levi (the library probably being an emblem for the world of yesterday). In the course of his journey, the narrator discovers that the country is in total chaos, its streets crowded with cripples, its houses filled with bereaved and broken families. In the face of this reality, the ultranationalist rhetoric used by the Germans is falling apart: “This war is a beast which is tearing everything to pieces,” comments one of the characters in the story, speaking very much in the name of the author. “It has lost by now the best of our youngsters. The end of all flesh is coming [קץ כל בשר בא], for what is the sense of taking young people and leading them to their execution?”³⁷ A different design is offered in Agnon’s posthumous novel, where the first-person narrator (who naturally reminds us of the writer) spends months of the war years working in the store of a well-established Jewish merchant, Mr. Lublin, located in the old section of Leipzig. Through encounters with four aging German artisans (the symbols of traditional European culture), the narrator becomes a witness to the ongoing decay of the city of Leipzig, a process that has been completed by the war. “The most extreme expression for modern times in this story,” says Gershom Schocken in his well-known essay on the novel, “is World War I, which not only destroys old houses, but also kills millions of young people and puts an end to the historical-cultural continuity that has in the past preserved both the city [of Leipzig] and its inhabitants.”³⁸ The critic Baruch Kurzweil sums up the “moral” of Agnon’s World War I fiction as follows: “The First World War symbolized, in Agnon’s stories, the crossroad between a harmonious and homogeneous world, the world of ‘classical reality,’ and a world whose reality is no longer marked by God’s imprint. . . . what is left is the trauma of some cruel and grotesque reality; an arbitrary and demonic world instead of the excellent, God-guided, and meaningful reality [which existed previously].”³⁹

Yet these texts are but a belated echo of events that took place during the

37. Sh. Y. Agnon, “Ad hena,” in *Kol sipurav shel Sh. Y. Agnon* (Tel-Aviv, 1953), pp. 147–148.

38. Gershom Schocken, “Prida me-’Ashkenaz, prida me-’Eropa ha-yeshana,” *Ha’aretz*, September 16, 1974.

39. Baruch Kurzweil, “Ad hena,” *Masot ‘al sipurei Shai Agnon* (Tel-Aviv, 1963), pp. 161–162.

course of a very distinct period in Agnon's life, which reached its tragic end in the summer of 1924. "One night I was half awake, and it seemed to me that the laundry hanging on the balcony behind our room was set on fire," recalled Agnon's son, Hemdat, in one of our many conversations in Jerusalem in 1989. "I heard the words '*feuer . . . es brennt.*' I got out of bed and looked for our nanny, to tell her that the laundry was burning. . . . Our nanny came and saw the flames, and took me and my sister Emunah down to the yard. We stood outside dressed in our pajamas, on a beautiful night, and saw our house burning down completely." The bad news was soon brought to Agnon, who was then recovering from an operation in a hospital in Bad Homburg. "Dear Mr. Schocken," writes Agnon in a letter to his patron on June 7, 1924, "On Friday night, June 6, when I was lying in the hospital, I received the sad news that the house in which we lived and everything that was in it was set on fire. My wife and children were saved, as God had mercy on me." Esther Agnon, to whom the writer dictated this letter, made an additional note: "The product of eighteen years of work was lost [to my husband], including a novel that he has undoubtedly told you about." While Agnon took legal action against a neighbor, a shopkeeper who probably set the fire in order to collect insurance money, and while experts were trying to find some vestiges of the manuscripts among the ashes, Agnon composed another letter to Schocken, this time expressing the magnitude of his grief. "All day long I see burning scriptures and flying letters, and at night, too, my heart gets no rest. It is told about the Besht that once he was dancing on Simḥat Torah, the Torah scroll in his arms. Suddenly he handed the Torah to one of his students and said, 'Now we shall dance with the spiritual Torah!' And he danced all by himself. I have now reached the stage where I don't have my material Torah, which means my books and my manuscripts. But what should I do about not being privileged enough to feel the spiritual Torah within me? And grief is eating me with its whole mouth."⁴⁰ The trauma of this fire was so deep that Agnon made reference to it when accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966; he described the tragic event, which had taken place in Bad Homburg more than four decades earlier, as something that had affected his life ever since.⁴¹

Agnon arrived back at the port of Jaffa—on his way to Jerusalem, his

40. Yaron, pp. 152–154.

41. For an English version of Agnon's Nobel Prize speech, see *Les Prix Nobel en 1966* (Stockholm, 1967), pp. 67–70.

newly chosen place of residence—on October 31, 1924, exactly twelve years after he had left for what turned out to be his long-term stay in Germany. Despite the tragic finale of this period, one can say with certainty that Agnon really “made it” while he was there: he turned into a well-known writer (and a much better one); he came to be recognized in a foreign language for the first time; he substantially improved his Jewish as well as his European education; he was exposed to Western Jewish culture, which had been unknown to him before; and he was “fortunate” enough to be a close witness to one of the most crucial events in modern European history. On a more personal level, he made some notable new friends in Germany, was adopted by a German Jewish patron who took good care of him for the rest of his life, and succeeded in establishing a family of his own. Indeed, although his long stay in Germany endowed Agnon with a sense of guilt—as shown in some of his fiction—it was an extremely formative experience for him as a person, as a Jew, and as a man of letters. For Germany was the place where Agnon actually went through a revolutionary phase in his *Bildungsroman*, one that prepared him for the great challenge of becoming—within the next two decades—the greatest Hebrew writer of the modern era. Emerging from the ashes of his Bad Homburg ordeal, and finding a physical as well as a spiritual haven in Jerusalem, Agnon was ready to take up that challenge.

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