

CULTURE CONTACTS AND THE MAKING OF CULTURES

Papers in Homage to
Itamar Even-Zohar



Edited by

Rakefet Sela-Sheffy and Gideon Toury

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Tel Aviv

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Table of Contents

To The Memory of Robert Paine	V
Acknowledgements	VII

Introduction

Rakefet Sela-Sheffy	1
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Part One

Identities in Contacts:

Conflicts and Negotiations of Collective Entities

Manfred Bietak	
The Aftermath of the Hyksos in Avaris	19

Robert Paine†	
Identity Puzzlement: Saami in Norway, Past and Present	67

Rakefet Sela-Sheffy	
High-Status Immigration Group and Culture Retention: German Jewish Immigrants in British-Ruled Palestine	79

Wadda Rios-Font	
Ramón Power y Giralt, First Delegate to the Cádiz Courts, and the Origins of Puerto Rican National Dis- course	101

Israel Gershoni	
Culture Planning and Counter-Planning: The Young Ha- san al-Banna and the Formation of Egyptian-Islamic Cul- ture in Egypt	131

Gisèle Sapiro Recadrer la mémoire collective: l'exemple de la France à la Libération	147
Nitsa Ben-Ari Popular Literature in Hebrew as Marker of Anti-Sabra Culture	219
Jón Karl Helgason The Role of Cultural Saints in European Nation States	245
Part Two	
Repertoire Formation: Invention and Change	
Orly Goldwasser The Advantage of Cultural Periphery: The Invention of the Alphabet In Sinai (Circa 1840 B.C.E)	255
Gabriel M. Rosenbaum The Rise and Expansion of Colloquial Egyptian Arabic as a Literary Language	323
Gideon Toury The Invention of a Four-Season Model for Modern Hebrew Culture	345
Panchanan Mohanty Why so Many Maternal Uncles in South Asian Languages?	365
Thomas Harrington Urbanity in Transit: Catalan Contributions to the Archi- tectural Repertoire of Modern Uruguay	391

Nam-Fung Chang	
The Development of Translation Studies into a Discipline in China	411
Yaacov Shavit	
The Reception of Greek Mythology in Modern Hebrew Culture	437
Saliha Paker	
Translation, the Pursuit of Inventiveness and Ottoman Poetics: A Systemic Approach	459
Notes on Authors	475

POPULAR LITERATURE IN HEBREW AS MARKER OF ANTI-SABRA CULTURE¹

Nitsa Ben-Ari

By way of introduction: *Shel mi ata yeled*, by Hanoch Bartov

In 1970, the well known Israeli writer Hanoch Bartov published an autobiographical description of his boyhood in Petach Tiqva. One of the most delightful passages describes his infatuation with pulp literature, lent to him in secret by one of his friends. His father does not approve, immediately associating pulp fiction with Yiddish Schund (trash):

Is it for this obscenity that we save from our mouths and send you to Gymnasium, so that you read this filth? For this, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda revived the Hebrew language? For this, generations of Jews martyred themselves, so that you print Sabine and Regine in the twenty-two sacred letters? (195-196).

The boy hides the coveted booklet in a hard-cover classic, none other than Theodore Herzl's *Diaries*, and is praised by his father for his serious reading. Till one day he "must have closed his eyes for just a minute, let his imagination run loose and saw the Captive from Tel-Aviv in her prison in Beirut" – when his father finds out. Then comes the outburst:

Extraordinary. At last I have some satisfaction. My son, ..., who must be a gymnasium student, has really learnt much ... His mother is afraid he'd damage his eyes, and I brag to Sharoni that my son is reading Herzl! ... If this is what you want to fill your head with, this straw, this garbage, this Schund, I don't care. I can't do more for you than I have done. Let it be. The Captive from Tel-Aviv! ... But to contaminate Dr. Herzl's writing with this filth, with the Captive from Tel-Aviv! Go ahead! Do whatever you want ... You don't want to study, you don't want to be a human being, that's ok, go roll in the street with Kashani the drunk. Go work in a garage. But Dr. Herzl as a cover, and for whom, for the Captive from Tel-Aviv! Woe to me that I should live to see this! (196)

¹ A slightly different version of this article was published in *Translation Studies* 2:2 July 2009, 178-195.

This short passage encapsulates so many of the key-words I intend to use below: New Jew vs. Diaspora Jew; serious Hebrew reading vs. Yiddish Schund, or trash; Gymnasium pupil vs. garage worker; Ben-Yehuda, the 22 sacred letters, and of course Herzl's *Diaries* vs. *The Captive from Tel-Aviv*. But before we return to the beautiful captive from Tel-Aviv, let me introduce this mini-drama in the context of my present research.

My presentation is part of research I have been conducting in the past two years, which entails a remapping of the Hebrew publishing industry, by means of decoding the identity of many of the agents of popular literature, so far ignored (in the double sense of the word) or hidden. The data accumulated by means of interviews and internet sources was quite different than I'd expected, forcing me to rethink and redefine my work hypotheses. It soon helped me realize that the two distinct production systems of mainstream and popular literature, operating side by side, represented much more than different tastes. What I am going to present is an intermediary suggestion for analyzing this data. I will do it in three parts: the first introducing popular publishing, the second analyzing the accumulated data with the help of a series of binary oppositions, the third illustrating some of the points raised with a summary of one of the interviews. *The Captive from Tel-Aviv* which I intend to present retrospectively as a threat to the supremacy of the Sabra ethos will help me conclude.

Part 1: Short background review: Mainstream & Popular Publishing in Israel 1940-1970²

Two kinds of popular cultures emerged in Israel before the establishment of the State: one imposed from above, by ideologues who felt the New Hebrew working classes had to be supplied with cultural activity such as "folk dancing", "folk songs", theater, newspapers, cultural clubs etc., and authentic popular culture, imported from the countries of origin or developing from within (Y. Shavit 1996: 327-346). This was obvious in the theater, where side by side with mainstream production,

² The span of time selected here is from the early 1940's to the late 1960s. The starting point coincides with the establishment of the main ideology-based publishing houses in Palestine.

small fringe groups (often performing in "old-country" languages such as Yiddish or Romanian) supplied vaudeville that used to be fashionable in the Diaspora. This was obvious in literature, where ideological mobilization was perhaps at its highest.

The idea of popular culture for the masses is not an Israeli invention. Mussolini, in Fascist Italy, did not oppose popular literature for the working classes, in fact between 1920 and 1930, some claim until 1934 and even 1938, literary censorship was lax. Popular literature in the form of translations, especially from English and American literature, enjoyed tremendous popularity. This in a regime which paraded its "Italianità", so highly trumpeted by the Fascist leaders. Researchers³ assume that, because of both the growing popularity of translations and the economic benefit which publishing houses, such as Mondadori, could derive from them, until 1938 the regime allowed translations to be published *in order to exercise control over the construction of a popular culture*, which was seen as a true expression of 'the fascist Italianita'.

In the case of Hebrew culture, mainstream culture-shapers initiated and promoted reading material for the workers, maintaining hegemony over their reading for a long time. As for popular literature over which they could not exercise control – it was either ignored or fiercely attacked.

Yet in the 1950s-60s small commercial publishing, that started sprouting spontaneously in the 1940s, reached a peak. They did not wave any ideological banners, nor did they brag of literary aspiration; they did not parade celebrity names, nor classical titles. They were in for the business, and they supplied their reader with materials the latter wanted to read and couldn't find elsewhere: detective stories, American bestsellers, thrillers, science-fiction, romance, erotica. The books were ignored by the critics, attacked by the teachers and read by the thousands. Many of the producers, people and firms alike, hid behind pseudonyms, changed addresses, refrained from providing basic information like place or date of publication. The books, sometimes booklets, were poorly produced, full of printing errors, with the cheapest

³ Dunnett 2005, Billiani 2005. It was, however, obvious that "the regime did not want Italy to appear too receptive to foreign influences since excessive receptivity would imply a failure on the part of the fascist revolution to create a culture of its own" (Rundle, 1999: 428).

possible covers. The line between translation and original writing was often blurred or even nonexistent. Writers masqueraded as translators to legitimize certain genres (Tourey 1995: 40-52) or to escape responsibility. Publishing and printing firms constantly invented and changed names in order to evade tax authorities or censorship or both. Reading polls did not account for them: the thousands who read them often denied the fact.

Distribution and sale methods were different in this sector: the books were sold through a completely different network, mostly in market stalls, kiosks, sometimes in second hand shops, where foreign-language books could also be found.

Until the last decade, academic research did not show much interest in mainstream publishing, but there, at least, some public figures played an important part, and they figured in research.⁴ Were it not for Even-Zohar and his students, the field, and especially that of non-canonic publishing, may have been neglected. Thanks to pioneering work done by Zohar and Yaacov Shavit, followed by serious research by Z. Shavit, mapping publishing in Israel (with a chapter dedicated to popular literature in Palestine), as well as work done on translation norms by Gideon Tourey and his student Rachel Weisbrod,⁵ non-canonic popular literature became a valid subject of research. Following in their semiotic footsteps, I found this field of popular literature "agents" (publishers, writers, translators, pseudo-translators, editors,

⁴ A group of young researchers, supervised by Nurith Govrin (Ayala Yahav, Bernard Jakobowitz, Dania Amicahi-Michlin) began to systematically look into the publishing houses that had moved from Eastern Europe to Eretz Israel. Yahav (1995) researched the influence of the publishing house Mordechai Neuman on literary life in Israel. Jakobowitz (1997) studied the activity of the Zentral publishing house in Warsaw and Amichai-Michlin (2000) that of the publisher Stiebel and his efforts of establishing a publishing house in Eastern Europe.

⁵ Pioneering work on the Hebrew detective story has been done by Shavit, Zohar and Yaacov 1974, 30-73. Shavit, Zohar 1998 provides us with a serious review of canonic and non-canonic publishing in Pre-State Israel. Tourey 1987 on the nature and role of Norms of translation 1930-1945, and Tourey 1995 on the use of pseudonyms. Rachel Weisbrod provided vital information about translations from English in the years 1950-1980. Ben-Ari 1997 on building a repertoire where none existed, and 2006 on puritan (self-)censorship in Hebrew literature and the function of popular literature in stratifying the literary system.

critics etc.) most intriguing. I decided to probe the question of who the producers of mass literature were, why they had remained in the shade despite their immense commercial success and what they represented.⁶ They supplied me with an abundant source of major information about repertoire building, culture shaping and the making of a national identity.

My addition to research in the field is a project I am undertaking at the moment proposing to dig deeper into the socio-cultural aspects of subversive popular literature. I will discuss it with the help of several dichotomies that reflect a basic split between mobilized and popular literature. The dichotomies are not always clear cut, they often overlap; they are obviously much more complex than the oversimplified manner the scope of a paper allows; they are much more subtle once you remember that publishers in the periphery had their own stratified system, too, with fierce competition, hierarchies and battles for domination.

A word about using "the Sabra", for the sake of those not familiar with this mythological creature. Mythological, for he probably never existed, except as a cultural emblem. The Sabra – the New Hebrew born in Israel or raised in Israel from early childhood – was a conglomeration of images, an idealized cultural creation in which were imbued all the specifications, the hopes, the dreams, of the New Jew. A fusion of physical, behavioral and mental characteristics, which mainstream literature, folk music and the film industry did their best to shape and glorify. During the massive waves of immigration (1948-1953) it was set as a model for the melting pot. The Sabra represented a break with the Diaspora (especially with the loathed Yiddish language and culture) and a direct link with the Biblical Hebrews of yore.⁷ He was not an intellectual, he was not encouraged to be an individual, he was Ashkenazi, of socialist ideology; he was puritanical, he did not smoke, or drink

⁶ Step one was about sheer identity. So many puzzles presented themselves in my last book *Suppression of the Erotic* (2006), where pseudonyms played a major part, that I vowed to try to solve them in my present project.

⁷ Dov Baer Borochoy called for the inversion of the pyramid and the creation of a productive Jew, living off his work. Max Nordau called for the "Muscular Jew." Ahad Ha'am thought a new Spiritual greatness must characterize the new Jew. What they all had in common was a dissatisfaction with the Diaspora Jew.

or play cards, he was pure even in thought. The key-word for his drive was sublimation, this Freudian slogan replacing love, romance, intimacy and desire with passion for a cause.

Of course it is not any historical figure but the image of the Sabra, in opposition with his counterparts, or "others" that will help me in this socio-cultural remapping of Israeli publishing. I evoke the Sabra image, although in itself it has been exhausted in research, to help me offer some new thoughts on the subject of the popular book industry and of Israeli identity.

Part 2: Producers and Readers in the Periphery

a. Center vs. periphery

The relationship between center and periphery can be studied from various angles.

From the point of view of the *producers* one can study the split between the institutionalized houses and the small private enterprises, with the mainstream clearly mobilized to the cause of the New Hebrew and the melting pot ideology. Sifriyat Poalim [literally: workers' library] was established in Kibbutz Merchavia in 1939. It had a socialist banner-like logo, quite symbolic: a book+hammer. Ha-kibbutz Ha-meuchad ["the united kibbutz"], established in 1940 chose three icons as logo: a parchment+ a quill pen + an ear of corn, signifying the happy marriage between books and agriculture. Am Oved [working people] was established in 1942 by the Histadrut, the workers' Trade Union. It added a tree branch to its letter logo. The Bialik Institute was established in 1935, a year after the National Bard's death, by the World Zionist Executive of the Jewish Agency. These are but a few examples of the sort of institutions functioning in the center. In all, the mainstream in the 1940s and on consisted of heavily subsidized ideologically propelled institution/party-backed organs.

The periphery was immediately recognizable by publishers with private or family names: M. Mizrahi, Sh. Friedman, Idit, Narkis. Some were less recognizable: Ramdor was Shalgi's publishing name, since Ram & Dorit were his children's names. Deshe Publishing was not called after "grass", which is what it means in Hebrew, but was the acronym for the three partners who founded it, David, Shimon and Eli. Malan Press was the acronym for its founder, Moshe Levy Nachum,

the "mukhtar" of the Yemenite Quarter. Moreover, the name Malan and Aharon Amir later selected for their mutual publishing endeavor was Tzohar, and even to untrained political ears of the period it must have been an echo to the Zionist-Revisionist acronym and party name. Others also chose names that included a code, easily deciphered by the trained ear: Hadar [glory or pomp] the name chosen by Yaacov (Yoel) Amrami for his publishing house, was not a private name, but a name with Revisionist connotations, since "pomp" was absolutely not a socialistic value. To which I'll come later.

From the point of view of the literary production – it was marginal in both the literal sense – coming from the margins, and in the semiotic sense: if it was mentioned at all, it was always in the pejorative sense, as a product to be put aside, if not banned altogether. People sniggered at Mizrahi's "Good Book Club", no matter how great a fortune it made him. In fact, although he was the most successful publisher in the periphery, he was sniggered at by his peers too, who nicknamed him "the Turk".

It was marginalized to such an extent that publishers could afford to take risks inconceivable in the center. For instance, unlike mainstream disdain for the notorious banned books, the periphery was bold enough, or brazen enough, to publish them. This is where Henry Miller (Deshe Publishing) and D. H. Lawrence (M. Mizrahi) appeared for the first time in full (Miller), or relatively full (Lawrence) versions.

Geographically, it is hard to determine whether the production was peripheral, for most literary activity, canonic and non-canonic, took place around Allenby street. There was, however, a hierarchy even in this small area. Mainstream publishers had offices in Allenby street (Sifriyat Poalim, Am Oved in its beginning). The cheap printing shops producing popular literature would concentrate South or South-West to them, in the (old) Central Bus Station area, in the Yemenite district, and in the vicinity of the markets off Allenby street. Eli Kedar, pseudo-translator and entrepreneur spoke about meeting small commercial publishers around this area. Yet the difference was even more marked, for it would be misleading to speak of publishing houses or offices of popular literature. Publishers were mostly operating from home. When

I asked my interviewee Aharon Amir⁸, now famous author and editor, Israel Prize laureate for translation, about the whereabouts of the offices of the various peripheral publishing companies he had worked for he burst out laughing, saying: "Office? What office? People would work from home, take a bunch of papers to the printers, then run around distributing the books themselves..."

In the colportage tradition, the books would indeed be sold by peddlers around the markets. Not that this did not happen with "high" literature as well, to be found in respectable bookstores, for there, too, agents would travel from house to house selling books and encyclopedias. Meir Mizrahi⁹ started his business selling books and booklets he and his wife carried in rucksacks to friends and acquaintances who wanted to read detective stories they knew from back home in Turkey. In 1958, with a clientele established, he put up some boxes as a stall in the Levinsky market where he sold remainders bought cheaply from bankrupt publishers. Only much later, in the 1970s, did he open a big store in Allenby street, near the big synagogue. By then he had published Agatha Christie, John Steinbeck, A.J. Cronin, Nicholas Monsarrat¹⁰, Harold Robbins, and a hoard of other forgotten bestsellers, side by side with Dickens and Tolstoy and Jules Verne and children's serialized comics.

Incidentally, the kibbutzim happened to be the periphery, and the big cities were the center. Yet, when it came to the ethos, especially the Sabra ethos, it was associated with the communal settlements, where "real Sabras" were supposed to be found.

b. Commercial vs. ideological motivation

As opposed to publishers and culture shapers who regarded books as an ideological tool, the small private publishers began operating mostly in order to make money. The entrepreneurs I interviewed spoke of commercial and financial motives, of finding a "niche" in the market. Not that ideology did not figure. Malka, Shmuel Friedman's daughter, mentioned her father's quarrel with the establishment, and his persis-

⁸ Interviewed January 2008. Sadly passed away February 28, 2008.

⁹ Interview with Meir Mizrahi February 2006.

¹⁰ The end of World War II produced an avalanche of American war novels, translated in the periphery.

tent refusal to register to the Trade Union, as part of his credo.¹¹ She said it had damaged his business, because his repeated requests to go into school-texts had been rejected. Most of the books he published were best-selling (American) novels, competing with Mizrahi on titles such as *Peyton Place*, *Grapes of Wrath*, *East of Eden*, books by Ian Rand, Vicky Baum, Damon Runyon (Carmi's first translation of *Guys & Dolls*). However, Friedman also published a collection of the extreme leftist political satires called *Uzi ve Shut* (Uzi and Co.), and sought the friendship of "Canaanites" such as Benjamine Tamuz and Ratosh.

Only in the late 1960s and 1970s did mainstream publishing revert to considerations such as "profitable", bestselling, supply and demand, and they did so mostly because their subsidies began to run down.

One must not forget, however, that this financial argumentation was part of a bigger ideological framework, that of enhancing the private sector. Which, in itself, was part of the economic agenda of the "Right-wing" parties, as opposed to that of the various Socialist or Labor parties.

This "ideology vs. market" polarity became even clearer when I learnt how many people in the popular book production also "happened to" work in newspapers and magazines. Not the Leftist party organs, such as *Davar* or *Al Ha-mishmar*, but private, non-mainstream, sometimes even subversive papers. To name but a few: *Yediot Acharonot*, and especially *Ma'ariv*, who gave voice to non-establishment views, *Gamad*, *Bul*, *Haolam Haze*, of outright subversive character, *Olam Ha-kolnoa* [The World of Cinema], established by Shmuel Friedman, *La'isha* [for the Woman] established by Ariele Karassik. The latter "bourgeois" type magazines were instant hits, answering to real demand, yet despised by culture planners. In fact Friedman claims to have managed to survive in the publishing business thanks to his *World of Cinema*, which was printed on the cheapest paper and sold very cheaply. Aharon Amir claims it sold about 10,000-15,000 copies per year, in the early State years, though people rarely admitted to reading them. They represented daily (gossip) contact with the fashionable European and American glamour world: another interviewee, journalist, translator and writer Ariele Hashavia was representative of *Laisha* in

¹¹ Interview with Malka (Malki) Friedman-Shafir, March 2006.

Hollywood, a post much envied by his peers, and probably by his readers, derisively looked down upon by the mainstream.

Which leads us to the third dichotomy, a major one, to be examined:

c. Left vs. Right, socialist vs. conservative, Mapai vs. Revisionist ideology

In broad generalization, before and after the establishment of the state of Israel, mainstream ideology, shaped and imposed by what is now sometimes called the "Mapai" or Ben-Gurionist ideology, saw two avowed enemies, one in the extreme Right parties and one in the extreme Left, or Communist parties. Those who accepted and assumed the mainstream image of the Sabra or New Hebrew found their way into the establishment and were often integrated into the select body of culture shapers. Those who refused to participate, for various ideological reasons, found the way to the mainstream more or less blocked, opening only much later, with the rise of the Likkud party after the 1977 change of government.

Apparently, it was even more serious in the case of the "porshim". Ben-Gurion never forgave the dissidents who, during the British Mandatory Rule, left mainstream Hagana to found their own more militant Revisionist underground movements, and in State years the doors to establishment institutions were barred to them. Many intellectual youngsters who were formerly members of Etzel ("The Irgun") or Lehi ("The Stern Group") could not find an adequate place in the book industry.

Before having started the investigation, and on the basis of my previous research, my working hypothesis was that people who had an interest in literature and were rejected by mainstream publishing made a start in non-canonic publishing. They looked for a niche rejected by the mainstream and found it in "low" status literature. Some succeeded in promoting themselves to "higher" literature; others stayed in the periphery, enjoyed some commercial success and on the whole remained anonymous.

Further investigation that I conducted showed a more complex, and much more surprising picture. The ideological/political affiliation of many participants *opposed*, more often than not, the normative one accepted/required, by the establishment. In interviews with people active

in the popular literature enterprise, many divulged their past activity in underground movements (extreme-Left or extreme-Right)¹². Inquiring after deceased publishers, writers and translators, I found that many were anti-establishment in their views and "porshim" in their militant underground history. The list of people belonging to this category grew: Sh. Friedman, Ezra Narkis, Eli Meislsh (Deshe Publishing), Yaacov Yoel Amrami (Hadar Publishing), Benjamin Geppner (Ledori Publishing), Uri Eliyahu Amikam (Idit Publishing), Eliezer Carmi (Carmi & Naor), Sh. Katz (Karni Publishing), Maxim Gilan (poet and translator). The case of Gilan is quite intriguing, for according to Aharon Amir, he never actually belonged to the "ranks" but *assumed* a former-Lehi identity, for it gained him status points in the political track he chose later in life.¹³

An invisible ideological line began to present itself, connecting, on the one hand, Revisionist leader Zeev Jabotinsky with publishers, writers and translators who produced popular literature thirty or forty years later. Jabotinsky, the first entrepreneur of chapbooks, was also one of the first translators of detective stories (Shavit 1998: 472). As opposed to culture shapers who insisted on publishing only "valuable", classical literature to propagate reading Hebrew among the working classes, Jabotinsky was of the opinion that popular literature would help propagate reading Hebrew more than any other, more didactic, literature. The ideological line did not necessarily entail publishing Right-Wing material: some did, others did not. Publishers like Eli Meislsh of Deshe did not hide their Revisionist ideological stand, yet confessed they had been mainly propelled by profit.¹⁴ When directly asked,

¹² Mapai was a socialist Zionist movement founded in 1930, which led the Yishuv along the lines of "practical Zionism" until the establishment of the State. In 1968 it was to become the core of the Labor Party. Shortly before and after the establishment of the state of Israel, mainstream ideology, shaped and imposed by what is now sometimes called the "Mapai" or Ben-Gurionist ideology, maintained two avowed enemies: the right-wing parties and the extreme left (Communist) parties. In fact, Ben-Gurion's stock-phrase was that he was willing to form any coalition "without Herut or Maki" (without Menachem Begin's Nationalist party or the Communist party).

¹³ After 1967 Gilan exiled himself to Paris, founded the magazine I&P (Israel and Palestine) and allegedly established contacts with Arafat.

¹⁴ Even Deshe published a politically subversive novel, a translation from Ara-

however, many acknowledged the participation of other members of the extreme-Right or extreme-Left in the popular book production. Aharon Amir told me that having founded Tzohar Publishing with Malan (Moshe Levy Nachum), he looked for translators and writers, and "naturally" supplied jobs to his friends from the "ranks" of the "Ha Va'ad le-gibbush ha-no'ar ha-'ivri" [committee for the fortification of Hebrew youth]. Amos Kenan just came out of prison, and he offered him a job of writing his serialized *Tarzan* or *Capricorn* booklets. In the true spirit of the underground he refrained (in 2008) from mentioning other names (still classifying information, smiling, talking about the belated effect of the "conspiracy"): "I also supplied work to other friends from the Committee, I can't remember their names now."

Other publishers were not as aware or politically involved. Publisher Ezra Narkis told me he had joined the Irgun, the right-wing anti-British underground movement, in his youth. He also had, as a high-school pupil, translated a story by Conan Doyle, whose name he could not even pronounce at the time. He was surprised to hear from me that his much admired leader, Zeev Jabotinsky, had translated a Sherlock Holmes story when in the Turkish prison.

While at first there seemed to be no apparent direct ideological link between all the participants in this industry, they seemed to be working along the same lines commended by the Revisionist leader decades ago. Does this invisibility hide a shared silent identity?

Following these initial discoveries, my present working hypothesis is comprised of two arguments: one, that the choice of popular literature made by publishers in the periphery was *political*, as was everything else in Israel of the period. Secondly, that although it is important to try to determine whether the many participants in the popular book industry were rejected by mainstream publishing or chose not to participate in it, it is of greater importance to stress that the choice of genres was *an act of subversion*. Obviously, they did not see any potential personal gain in adhering to mainstream norms. What matters is that they did not choose the popular literature niche by accident or by default. The choice answered their commercial sense, but also defined them in terms of an opposition. Breaking with the Diaspora and the Old Jew was not uppermost in their minds, neither was the collective commune

bic of Lebanese author Lila Ba'albaki's novel *Ana aḥya* (*I Shall Live*), 1961.

or the Sabra. Their publishing policy was not motivated by didactic values, but it was political. They adhered to market laws as an ideology, creating different production and distribution lines and even shaping an alternative readership. Unlike the subsidized firms, their interest in the reader was commercial, but it was not by accident or default that they focused on the non-Sabra. In adherence with laws of supply and demand, they watched this versatile readership closely, aware of every twist and turn in its nature and in the nature of the reading material it required. Whether this readership could be defined along the same ideological lines, or turned to them for the same reasons, remains to be clarified.

d. "Elite" versus masses

The term "elite" should not confuse us. We are not talking about a small intelligentsia, nor about a snobbish book-club readership of the upper classes. The elite of the period is that of the culture shapers and their avowed readers, collective commune or Kibbutz dwellers, or workers in the big cities. This socio-semiotic elite defined what would be taught in schools, which books would be available in school libraries, which in public libraries. Which books or writers would receive prizes, recognition or even critique, which would find favor with the critics.¹⁵ The elite, however, did not determine which books would enjoy commercial success, for at this stage commercial success was still a despicable term.

We know, retrospectively, that the masses did have an impact, even if belated, even if dependant on a variety of political and socio-economical factors. However, at the time, as well as today, some forty or fifty years later, regardless of their financial success, and of their own accord, people in the popular industry admitted to me that they deemed themselves inferior. Many refused to talk to me of their "dubious" past. Miron Uriel, a diligent pseudo-translator, explained his refusal over the phone, saying that those days had been a dark chapter in his life, which he'd rather not remember. Inferiority feelings made publishers start by showing me "serious" books they have produced. Miz-

¹⁵ Critique of pulp literature was to be found, if ever, in the then notorious *Ha'olam Haze* magazine. In the rare case where it was mentioned in central organs such as *Davar*, it was treated as "vomit pills" (see Shavit 1998, 470)

rahi began the interview by showing me the *Que Sais-je* series he had published, then the *20th Century Encyclopedia* and the *Anthology of Hebrew Writers* written by Baruch Karu, before showing me his Agatha Christie's bestselling booklets. He did boast, however, of being the first to start serialization, having bought the rights for all novels of Agatha Christie, Ellery Queen, Erle Stanley Gardner, writers he had known from back home in Turkey.

The common use of pseudonyms was a way of displaying a sense of inferiority, too. Though some celebrities today confess, in a sportive spirit, that they had hidden under those pseudonyms, it is mostly done with a kind of nostalgia. This accounts for the production in 2007 of a documentary film about the notorious *Stalag* series, combining sex and Nazism.

All along, it was the periphery that had to define itself in terms of the mainstream. It looked up to the literary elite and in many ways epigonically copied its stylistic norms. Eventually, however, the mainstream became conscious of the prosperous activity in the periphery and had to re-define itself accordingly, whether by relaxing strict linguistic and stylistic norms, by introducing colloquial Hebrew, or by gradually adopting popular genres.

From the point of view of *readership* other binary oppositions should be presented.

e. Sabra vs. new immigrant

Prospective readers of popular literature were at first mainly new immigrants. In fact, in the first stage, immigrants would read in their mother tongue. This was especially true of romance or erotica, for the puritan Sabra did not read "smut" in principle. Publishers in the periphery were real entrepreneurs in that they didn't turn to the established readership. They had to "invent" one. True, many had migrated with their reading public. But this is true only metaphorically. For the rest they had to work hard at establishing one. Aharon Amir told me how the Farago brothers, for whom he translated as a youngster, brought suitcases full of hundreds of Hungarian pulp novels when they left their small printing firm in Hungary. They then found out who of the old-comers from back home had a standing in Hebrew culture, identified Avigdor Hameiri, and offered to start a publishing firm

with him, called *Ha-roman Ha-zair* [the tiny novel]. Soon, however, they realized they had to present part of the Hungarian repertoire as local Hebrew, especially as their inventory began to dwindle, and no other chapbooks could be imported from Hungary (see also Rosenbaum 1999, 88-107 [1983, 19-21], quoted by Shavit 1998, 478-479). Amir admired their entrepreneurship. But mostly he admired Meir Mizrahi whom he had known in the past, too. The man made literature in Hebrew accessible for thousands upon thousands of newcomers, he said, he deserves all the praise for that.

However, readership of pulp fiction varied. Detective pulp fiction soon became the favorite, even part of the biography of pre-State Israeli youth (Rosenbaum 1999 [1983, 9], Shavit 1998, 475).

f. Town vs. agricultural settlements

Could the cliché binary opposition of town vs. kibbutz apply here? Was popular literature available only to town people? True, due to the means of distribution, pulp literature was not for sale out of urban centers. Itamar Levi, now a famous second-hand book dealer, told me he had an agreement with the kiosk owner near his house in Ramat-Gan: he would buy 100 gr. sunflower seeds and for the time it took him to eat them, he was allowed to read a booklet, a Western or detective story, without paying (see also Levy 1996). However, one should take into account the large hand-to-hand distribution of used books. Most people borrowed the books. Soldiers passed them from hand to hand, so did pupils. Hardcover bestsellers could be found, if not in school libraries, in municipal lending libraries.

Instead, the distinction to be made between city dwellers and those who lived in agricultural communes should perhaps be rephrased as "bourgeois" (in the original and the borrowed sense) vs. pioneer/ worker/ commune farmer.

g. Israel vs. Diaspora

The key word for pulp fiction, viewed by the mainstream, was "cheap" if not "garbage". Pulp fiction encompassed cheap American bestsellers, cheap French literature, literature for women, which, historically speaking smacked of Yiddish "Schund" – or trash. In fact, at its very origin stood Yiddish models such as the Damsel in Distress mod-

el, and Israeli titles of the 40s and 50s (e.g., *Tamar*, *Smadar*), were adaptations of Yiddish titles such as *Regine* or *Sabine*, themselves adaptations of popular French or German booklets (Eshed 2002, 232). Schund, it must be said, was the derogatory name coined by serious Yiddish writers for the popular chapbooks in Yiddish; but for the New Hebrew culture, it seems, these were superfluous subtleties. I am going to take up "Yiddish" as a metaphor of all that was wrong with the Diaspora Jew, on the part of the Sabra, and the anti-establishment refusal to break up with old traditions, on the part of immigrants. From this point of view, new immigrants from Arab speaking countries would serve the same function.

Mizrahi, Narkis and others I interviewed, mentioned the new sort of readership they were aiming at: new immigrants from the Levant and Arab countries. Mizrahi spoke of newcomers from Mediterranean cities such as Thessalonica. Narkis spoke mostly of immigrants from Arab countries in the Middle-East and North Africa. Explaining how he identified the niche for erotica such as the bestselling *Stalag* booklets, he said that the new immigrants from these "under-developed" countries would be excited by the mere hint of a woman's bare foot.

These are a few of the dichotomies my interviews with the "agents" of popular literature brought forth.¹⁶ I would like, however, to shift the perspective in order to make a final point.

¹⁶ The binary oppositions examined above are but a few of the possible dichotomies that can be of useful in analyzing the nature and function of popular literature in the formative pre-State and State years. I do not intend to tackle them in this essay.

A possible opposition could also examine pulp literature within the subsystem of children or youth's literature. I do not intend to go into questions pertaining to children's literature, but will mention a few. According to Z. Shavit, popular literature in pre-State Israel played an important role only in its contacts with children's literature (Z. Shavit 1998, 483). Researchers such as Yael Dar (Dar 2002) studied the function of bestselling pseudo-translation serials such as *Tarzan* or the local *Hasamba* in the making of a militant Sabra youth. These adventure stories gained favor with the young readers, and much opposition on the part of educators. In the case of the pseudo-translated *Tarzan* booklets, written by Aharon Amir (among others) and printed by Malan, the lines are not clear-cut: is it meant for youth only? Is it to some extent "mobilized"? Educational? The periphery mobilized to the Sabra cause? What was uppermost in the mind

From the point of view of *Culture planning* one must study the cultural shift within which popular literature flourished, namely, the process of normalization or Americanization that took place in the 1970s.

Regev and Seroussi¹⁷ see three variants in modern Israeli culture: Hebrew-ness, global Israeli-ness and orientalism [mizrahiyut]. Hebrew-ness was the dominant feature in the formative period of the Yishuv in Palestine and the first 15 years after the establishment of the state, till the early sixties. From the mid sixties and on a new variant began to establish itself, that of a global Israeli-ness, which became dominant in the 70s. It did not cut itself entirely from Hebrew-ness, but criticized its separatist isolation, its ethnocentricity, its ideological rigor, inserting practices and substances from western cultures into the local system. Authors of the Dor Ba'aretz generation, the personal cinema and Israeli rock music has been seen as its representatives. Yet popular literature, I argue, preceded both the tendency towards normalization and the one towards orientalizing in about 20 to 40 years, helping promote it. Subversive popular literature urges one to see the process in terms of regression to former norms, preceding the Sabra image, eventually undermining it.

The process of normalization included a gradual shift from the communal to the individual. Subversive popular literature, as I see it, persisting as a side stream to canonic literature, played a role in this process. Zionist sublimation and heroism, sacrifice of the I for the commune could be contrasted with individual pleasures, individual achievement, superheroes, supermen, super detectives, super spies, super cowboys, super lovers, passion for a woman not for a cause. Eroticism – not sublimation; luxury, richness American style, not modesty or asceticism. Individual love would begin to replace romantic nationalism in the 1960s, claims author Gadi Taub in his essay "The New Israelis"¹⁸, and again I'd argue that the popular genres paved the way in

of publisher Moshe Levy Nissim, who in the 1950s had suggested "doing something for youth, too," as Amir recalls? Or does it belong to the category of foreign serials of macho heroes such as Patrick Kim the Karate champion, Bill Carter the super-cowboy or Machista the super Roman? Does it signal the approach of Americanization?

¹⁷ Regev 1999; Regev & Seroussi 2004.

¹⁸ Taub 2003.

privatizing both the production and the themes. Moving to the romantic and personal, looking for something to replace the ethos, be it with an instant "espresso" ethos maybe, produced a sense of immense freedom from the collective. Again things are not as black and white as all that. The superheroes who single-handedly crash their many foes have been believed to function as a metaphor for the small-country-surrounded-by-enemies theme. Yet I believe superheroes belong to a different category, undermining the Sabra image, in that they do not operate in a collective and do not wish to be part of one. They are loners who, like chivalrous knights, come to the rescue of individuals in distress. Their loneliness is a distinct and distinguishing feature, separating them from the collective mob.

Part 3

Before I conclude, the following interview – one among many I conducted – may serve to illustrate the points made above.

Interview with Ezra Narkis, "king" of the chapbooks¹⁹

Narkis was reluctant to see me. I had to phone a couple of times to make an appointment. He refused to be photographed, claiming he was old and not at his best, nor did he produce any picture from the past. To my introductory statement that I respect publishers in the periphery for their baldness in opposing the mainstream, printing banned literature and eventually introducing stratification to a petrified literature he reacted with slight suspicion. He lives in a villa in an affluent neighborhood, where he keeps a basement office. He is still active, editing and re-writing books for private customers and publishing on a small scale, mainly how-to books. When I came in, Narkis proudly showed me his latest – two new books he was publishing: one, a Backpacker's Guide to Latin America, the other a Guide for New Nannies.

Narkis was born in Jerusalem, to the Khadria family who had emigrated from Syria and dealt in selling vegetables. As a teenager he joined the Revisionist right-wing *Irgun* underground movement, which sought militant ways of fighting the British. He told me something so far kept as a secret. One of his underground missions was supplying

¹⁹ Interviews held 20-21.2.2006

daily meals to a certain person in hiding in a Tel Aviv apartment, later revealed to be Menachem Begin, wanted by the British mandatory government.

From a very young age he wrote and translated mystery books, and dreamt of becoming a publisher. His first literary attempt was translating a story by Arthur Conan Doyle when he was still in school, and didn't even know how to pronounce the name. From the Hebrew letters he had assumed it was Devil. He was surprised when I told him that the Revisionist leader Jabotinsky had initiated the first Hebrew pocket books. He had no idea that Jabotinsky himself had translated Arthur Conan Doyle when he was in the Turkish prison.

When, in the footsteps of Mizrahi, whom he admired and considered his better, Narkis started his own business, he soon realized there was a hunger for erotica. His sharp business senses identified a new reading public. As he put it: young men who came from Arab, or under-developed countries, for whom the mere thought of a woman's bare leg was enough to arouse excitement. To my question of whether he realized he was swimming against the current, he answered in the negative: he was swimming wherever the current carried him. He saw a niche, and filled it. He realized there were a lot of new immigrants who would read smut, and decided to give them well written books, better than the cheap material others provided.

His greatest success in this field was the series called the *Stalags* (see Ben-Ari 2006, 163-173). The success of the first booklet, *Stalag 13*, made Narkis print dozens of other books describing British or American prisoners (sexually) tortured by sadistic and nymphomaniac SS female officers in prison camps. This was in violation of obscenity laws, because of the combination of sex and Nazism that would be offensive to Holocaust survivors. But the law was not preoccupied with the marginal book industry, until the *Stalags* had become an outstanding commercial success.

Was Narkis preoccupied with censorship? He was not afraid of censorship. He spent one night in jail: his wedding night (10 February 1963) after *Stalag 13* had been published – just because his lawyer neglected to pay the bail. The judge scolded both the lawyer and the police, and let him go.

How did this amazing commercial success start? According to Narkis, the writer, Eli Kedar came to him and offered a book that every other publisher had rejected (Kedar's version is slightly different). Narkis bought the rights for 200 Lira and printed the booklet. Kedar translated it into English and immediately went (what a mistake!) to Germany to try and publish it there. After several months of destitute living he took a ship back. On the deck he saw a young woman immersed in a book, and realized it was his. Moreover, it was the third edition! He stormed into Narkis's office and demanded a share. Narkis made him sign a letter in which he declared he got an extra 100 Lira as a gift, and had no further claims. When he had signed, Narkis showed him the next issue: it was to be the 7th edition! In five months he sold nearly 40,000 books, making a small fortune.

The most notorious book of the series, *I was Colonel Schultz's Bitch*, was not published by Narkis, but by one of his many competitors, Peretz Halperin. The book was so outrageous that complaints arrived. The police confiscated the book, and when Narkis heard of it he immediately ordered his writer, Miron Uriel, to produce a double, to be entitled *Colonel Schultz's Bitch*, with not one pornographic scene in it. Not even a kiss on the cheek. In a couple of hours he had the book and sold 3 editions before the readers could see the sham. Narkis did not hesitate to copy other successes. When 007 James Bond became popular, he published a book entitled *Agent 001*, by Sean Canary.

Narkis published about 25-30 *Stalags* and other booklets combining Nazism and sex. According to him, 99% of the books he produced were not translations: he invented so many names of translators as he went along, that he cannot remember them all, any hint of vegetable (Yarkoni) would suggest it was him. He copied pictures from American and British magazines for his covers; he conjured data for the covers – often excerpts of "critique" by world renowned journalists. About 80% of the books were written by Miron Uriel, who wrote a book in 2 hours and never reread what he had written. Since Uriel, who passed away in 2006, refused to be interviewed, Narkis was the sole source of information concerning his work.

Once the barriers came down, Narkis was very frank and open. He shared another secret with me, namely that he was preparing a re-print of the *Stalags*. He showed me copies of a few old issues (he had to buy

them, for he never bothered to keep any), which his secretary was now copying. He insisted that he would have to clean the language, take out some outrageous sex and correct typos.

In lieu of conclusion: back to *The Captive from Tel-Aviv*

I promised to come back to *The captive from Tel-Aviv*, and indeed she will help me sum up. The series was written by H. Shunamit, pseudonym for Shlomo Ben-Israel, who was the first writer of Hebrew detective stories²⁰. Well-versed in Yiddish and European popular literature, Ben-Israel started the serial *The Captive from Tel-Aviv* in the 1930s. It was an immediate bestseller, and sold by the thousands, 5000 copies per issue, according to Eli Eshed (Eshed 2002, 234).

It is the story of the young and beautiful Aliza Rosenthal from Tel-Aviv, the daughter of a German-Jew businessman who still misses his European way of life. Aliza falls in love with a charming tanned Sephardi Jew, who can dance and kiss her hand and wear elegant white suits, not knowing that he is in fact a rich Syrian merchant on business in Jaffa. Jaffa is described as the cradle of sin, but also of eroticism, and so is this George Gibly. The man kidnaps her and brings her to his palace in Beirut. The family in Tel-Aviv believes that she eloped with this Arab. Shame and sorrow make them fall ill. The man who comes to her rescue is a *halutz*, Dov (Borka), a young Russian pioneer who is trying to enter Eretz Israel illegally. Wandering around the Beirut palace garden, he hears the wails of the captive girl. He waits outside the walls at midnight, but just as he is about to rescue her, she is kidnapped again by another criminal, who then sells her to no other but Muchamad Gibli, George's father, who has a large harem of his own in Damascus. Borka, pretending to be a detective, joins George in his pursuit of the girl. During the chase on the road from Beirut to Damascus, George Gibly is shot dead, but Borka saves himself and drives on. Gibly senior adds the stunned girl to his large harem, complete with concubines, eunuchs and black servants. He is about to rape the new arrival, when Borka climbs the wall, bends the iron bars on the window "with inhuman forces" and saves her. They find a ship that is ready to take them

²⁰ Ben-Israel started a series about the legendary Israeli detective Tidhar in 1929, see Shavit 1974

out of Lebanon, when the girl's innocence is again threatened, this time by the sailors, who had caught a glimpse of a beautiful white girl on board. Some more shooting follows – I will spare you the details, till finally Borka and the girl land in Alexandria, Egypt. The girl's father has in the meantime died of grief, and her mother lies on her deathbed. But the girl's purity is untouched.

Shavit (1989, 481) claims that, as opposed to stories about the commune lives of pioneers in Eretz Israel, the Tidhar detective stories written by Ben-Israel in pre-State years painted life in Palestine with a cosmopolitan hue. As you see, this is also true of *The Captive from Tel-Aviv* attempting to bring the world into small peripheral Palestine. The erotic detective-story takes place in three Middle-Eastern countries, involving passion crimes, women-trade, oriental palaces, harems, dark and dingy cafes, international police inquiries. Small Tel-Aviv of the 1930s is shown as a cosmopolitan city bustling with cafes, cinema and dancing.

To take it a step further, and in opposition to Jaffa, the dark den of Evil, crime and erotica, I would emphasize the image of The Arab, the "other," as dangerous and sexy, as is his mirror-image, the oriental Jew. Both will continue to function in that image in Israeli literature of the following decades (Ben-Ari 2006, 116-130). The protagonist is a would-be pioneer, strong, disheveled and clever, romantic but not sexy; he gets along by a combination of wit and courage, but with a lot of help from fellow Diaspora Jews.

Granted, *The Captive from Tel-Aviv* is a city story, a bourgeois story, a Yiddish epigone. But it is more than this. It is the precursor of a long line of adventure stories, detective stories, erotica, romances and thrillers that will inundate the market in the 1950s and 1960s despite the disdain and opposition of culture planners. I would go even further: if breaking with the Diaspora and Yiddish culture had been the original aim of these culture planners, the survival – and ultimate success – of the cheap cosmopolitan popular genres reflects the persistence of (metaphorical) Yiddish. In spite of the war declared upon Yiddish language and culture, and the temporary triumph of the Sabra ethos, (metaphorical) Yiddish was vital enough to survive in the periphery and finally have the upper hand. Even when the main reading public changed

from Ashkenazi to Oriental, the *function* of Yiddish literature carried on, signaling the possible failure of the New Hebrew.

The issues of the book industry and its conflicting policies cannot be separated from the formation of the Israeli identity as postulated by Zionist cultural policy. The re-mapping of the book industry that I suggest, sheds new light on the intricate fight for hegemony in Israeli society of the years 1940 till 1970. The polarities presented reflect a schism in Israeli society in a critical period, a schism that may have augured normalization, but may as well have warned of the disintegration of the Zionist dream.

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