THE GREAT TRANSITION

The Recovery of the Lost Centers of Modern Hebrew Literature

Edited by

GLENDA ABRAMSON
and
TUDOR PARFIT

ROWMAN & ALLANHELD
PUBLISHERS
Contents

PART I  INTRODUCTION
1  Moving Centers in Modern Hebrew Literature
    David Patterson  1
2  The Continuum of Modern Literary Hebrew
    Chaim Rabin  11

PART II  CENTRAL EUROPE
3  Hebrew Literature in Vienna 1782–1939
    Erzsi Silberschlag  29
4  The Hebraists of Berne and Berlin Circa 1905
    Stanley Nash  44
5  Agnon and Germany
    Tudor Parfitt  59

PART III  EASTERN EUROPE
6  Odessa as a Literary Center of Hebrew Literature
    Ezra Spivak  75
7  "Assimilation," haskalah and Odessa Jewry
    Steve J. Zipperstein  91
8  Vilna and the Literature of Reform: 1825–1855
    David Aberbach  99
9  Hebrew Communist Literature in Soviet Russia
    Ruth Karon-Blum  103
10  Tchernichowski—Against the Tradition
    Glenda Abramson  110

PART IV  THE GREAT TRANSITION
11  The Great Transition
    Gershon Shaked  117
12  The Rise of the Literary Center in Palestine
    Zohar Shavit  126
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part I</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 13 The Cultural Center in Palestine  
  Yehezkel Shavit | 130 |
| 14 The Influence of the Early Years on Hebrew Literature in Israel  
  Nurith Geerin | 135 |
| 15 The Pain of Transition  
  Leon Yudkin | 145 |
| 16 The Hebrew Theater in Palestine Before World War I  
  Hadassah Shy | 150 |
| Glossary | 169 |
| Index | 171 |
The Rise of the Literary Center in Palestine

ZOHAR SHAVIT

Hebrew literary centers in Europe began to decline towards the end of the nineteenth century except for a short period between 1880 and 1890, during which they flourished. After that, it should be said, they never managed to recover, in spite of extensive efforts and huge investments to reestablish centers in various areas of Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. At the same time, with fewer resources involved, an alternative center arose in Palestine the development of which was long, complex and painful.

Before dealing with the issue of the decline and rise of the Hebrew literary centers, one’s understanding of the term “literary center” should be clarified. “Literary center” here refers to an area in which an established group of writers consistently, over a period of time, produce literary texts through established literary institutions (such as periodicals and publishing houses) and address those texts to potential or real groups of readers who, in one way or another, support the literary establishment, either commercially or ideologically. Hence, this notion involves more than merely a group of writers, whatever the value of their writing, but assumes also the existence of a potential or actual readership and of literary institutions.

With this notion as a point of departure and with the assumption that it is the structure of literary institutions that determines their ability to function, we shall briefly examine the role that the nature of the literary institutions played in the decline of the Hebrew literary centers in Europe on the one hand, and on the other the attempt (successful in the historical perspective) to build a center in Palestine, which until then was devoid of any basis from which the necessary institutions could develop for such a center.

Two questions will have to be asked here:

1. What happened to the Hebrew cultural life in Europe which had appeared to be so promising in 1880, yet looked so hopeless by the beginning of the twentieth century?
2. What were the reasons for the transfer of the literary centers from Europe to Palestine, a transfer which had already begun in 1910, when all the conditions (by any objective criteria) were against such a transfer (the economic situation and the lack of any Jewish intellectual base)?

Before answering these questions, the widespread view that it was the Holocaust that destroyed the Hebrew centers in Europe should be rejected. The Holocaust might have swept away the remnants of the declining centers, but by the 1930s the only Hebrew cultural center in existence was in Palestine. True, it was still supported by Jews in Europe and America and its economic basis was as it had always been; but nevertheless it was regarded not only as the hegemonic center but as the only Hebrew cultural center in the world.

The reasons for this were of course complicated and involved with various factors, but primarily there were two reasons: (1) the different legitimations and motivations for the existence of a Hebrew center in Palestine as opposed to Europe; and (2) the liability of maintaining a fully stratified cultural life for authentic readers which was “natural” only in the yishuv, while efforts to maintain such cultural strata in Europe turned out to be futile due to the different nature of the reading public there. The preference of a “natural” and authentic cultural life over an artificial one accounts, then, for the transfer of the cultural center to Palestine, in spite of the economic, social and intellectual obstacles, and in spite of the fact that the men of letters in Europe refused to accept the decline of the Hebrew centers and preferred to stick to their image of these centers as flourishing and possessing high potential.

The image of the flourishing European centers was the result of the status of these centers between 1880 and 1890. The Hebrew centers in Europe did experience ten years of flourishing development. During those years, literary life was more active than at any other time in the history of modern Hebrew literature. New periodicals and newspapers appeared: haaretz, hashiloah, buh ahiasaf, hayom, hatzofim, and hamelits, among others. Hundreds of new books were published by new publishing houses.
cause culture on the whole and literature in particular enjoyed a high status—both in Europe and in Palestine—but also because it was based on a new and stable reading public, small in absolute numbers (the number of copies of each book bought in Palestine hardly exceeded 1,000 during the first decade, 3,000 copies during the twenties), but huge in proportion to the population. The writers and their public not only regarded Palestine as the Massada of Hebrew culture but, unlike their counterparts in Europe, believed widespread cultural life to be a necessary precondition for the establishment of the Jewish community in Palestine. Moreover, culture was regarded as an indication of the existence of such a community. Because of this they were ready to take part in many enterprises, even at the cost of personal sacrifice, in order to have the fullest possible cultural life. It should be admitted that many of their activities and plans were never realized and many failed. Yet, as figures show, by 1925, 23 publishing houses were reported to exist in Palestine. In 1928, 321 books were published in Palestine, while only nine Hebrew books were published in Poland and six in Germany. In addition, the readers were willing to support this enterprise: 12,000 books were sold that year each month to a population of 160,000.

True, the economic basis was shaky and the center in Palestine needed the support of the Jews in Europe and America. Periodicals like ketuvim were sold in equal numbers in Europe, America and Palestine (1,500 copies); but over 2,000 copies of the newspaper davur were sold in Palestine, while only 684 copies were sold abroad in 1928. However, this support decreased towards the 1930s. (During 1926, for instance, over 1,000 copies of Bialik's book were sold in Palestine—while only 170 copies were sold in all of Europe and America.) These facts indicate the hegemonic status of the Palestinian center, which was supplying books to Europe and America, in contrast to its dependent position at the beginning of the twentieth century. Relations between the centers in Palestine and other centers had changed. In Palestine, men of letters no longer needed to appeal to writers in Europe and pray for literary material. They could now supply all their own cultural needs, as well as those of Jews living abroad.

The process of this transfer of the cultural center to Palestine started at the outbreak of the twentieth century, and was completed in the 1930s. During this process a small and deprived Jewish community managed to build and support in Palestine a fully stratified cultural life which had practically no commercial basis, but nevertheless had a very strong ideological claim and motivation which made its existence possible.