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On the Hebrew Cultural Center in Berlin in the Twenties

Hebrew Culture in Europe – the last attempt

Historical Background

Twice in its history, Berlin has played a decisive role in the history of modern Jewish literature and culture. Once, towards the end of the eighteenth century, when the first and the second generations of the Haskalah¹ (Enlightenment) movement sought to create Jewish culture in Germany, that is to say, to produce philosophical, historical and literary texts in Hebrew and German, either through translation or through writing original works and compiling old Jewish texts. This episode in the history of German-Jewish culture is rather profusely documented and had been extensively examined and discussed².

This is, however, not the case with an additional chapter of Jewish-Hebrew cultural life in Berlin, which despite its short duration, played an important role in the creation of modern Hebrew culture in the twentieth century.

It is perhaps less well-known that Berlin featured again as an important center for Hebrew letters shortly before the destruction of Jewish life in Germany: In the early twenties the idea of establishing a cultural center in Palestine had not yet been assured (at least not as concerns the establishment of Hebrew literature³), while the threat of the Holocaust was yet to be felt. Subsequently during the period of the Weimar Republic, a time of great hopes and bitter disappointments, a last effort to build a Hebrew center in Europe was made⁴. Berlin served as the playground for the swift rise, and for the even swifter fall, of this undertaking.

Berlin, a bridge between the rich world of the Hebrew life of the past, and the hope for a prosperous cultural life in the future, was chosen to this end due to its traditional image in Jewish cultural life⁵. Berlin traditionally served Eastern Jews as a symbol of the prospect of materializing their aspirations in the field of learning and higher education. It was known as a metropolis of cultural activities, which offered great possibilities to the Jews. As one of the most prominent Hebrew writers, Samuel Joseph Agnon, describes the city in one of his stories about Germany, for European Jews Berlin was both an

important metropolis and a good place to settle in:

I then knew that I would not be able to settle in this place and would have to return to Berlin. Berlin is a great metropolis and is used to Jews⁶.

1 ISAAC EISENSTEIN-BARZILAY: The Ideology of Berlin Haskalah. In: Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research 25. 1956, p. 1–38. – ISAAC EISENSTEIN-BARZILAY: National and Anti-National Trends in the Berlin Haskalah. New York 1959. – WERNER CAHNMAN: The Three Regions of German-Jewish History. In: HERBERT STRAUSS/HANS REISSNER (eds.): Curt C. Silberman Jubilee Volume. New York 1969, p. 1–14. – CHAIM RABIN: The Continuum of Modern Literary Hebrew. In: GELNDA ABRAMSON/TUDOR PARFITT (eds.): The Great Transition. New-Jersey 1985, p. 11–28.

2 JACOB KATZ: Die Entstehung der Judenassimilation in Deutschland und deren Ideologie. Phil. Diss. Frankfurt/Main 1935. – JACOB KATZ: Out of the Ghetto. Cambridge, Mass. 1973 (enlarged Hebrew edition: Tel Aviv 1986). – ROBERT LIBERLES: (1) Was There a Jewish Movement for Emancipation in Germany. (2) Emancipation and the Structure of the Jewish Community in the Nineteenth Century. In: Leo Baeck Institute Year Book 1986, p. 35–67. – MORDECAI LEVIN: Social and Economic Values. The Idea of Professional Modernization in the Ideology of the Haskalah Movement. [In Hebrew.] Jerusalem 1975. – JEHUDA REINHARZ/WALTER SCHATZBERG (eds.): The Jewish Response to German Culture. Hannover and London 1985. – DAVID SORKIN: The Transformation of German Jewry 1780–1840. Oxford and New York 1987. – HEINZ MOSHE GRAUPE: The Rise of Modern Judaism: An Intellectual History of German Jewry, 1650–1942. Huntington, N. Y. 1978.

3 ZOHAR SHAVIT: The Literary Life in Eretz Israel. Tel Aviv 1982.

4 DAVID PATTERSON: Moving Centers in Modern Hebrew Literature. In: ABRAMSON/PARFITT (eds.): The Great Transition (see note 1), p. 1–10; ZOHAR SHAVIT: The Rise of the Literary Center in Palestine. *ibid.*, p. 126–129. – DAN MIRON: On the Perplexity in Hebrew Literature at the beginning or the Twentieth Century. In: Measef 2. 1961, p. 434–464.

5 LUDWIG GEIGER: Geschichte der Juden in Berlin. Berlin 1871. – STANLEY NASH: In Search of Hebraism. Leiden 1980. – H. G. SELLENTIN: Geschichte der Juden in Berlin und des Gebäudes Fasanenstraße 79/80. Festschrift anlässlich der Einweihung des Jüdischen Gemeindehauses. Berlin 1959.

6 SAMUEL JOSEPH AGNON: Ad Hena. [Hebrew.] Tel Aviv 1968, p. 33.

During the Weimar Republik, the image of Berlin as a city of all possibilities was enhanced, attracting waves of immigrants from East Europe, many of whom were Jewish. In 1895 only 65,611 Jews lived in Berlin; their number more than doubled in the next thirty years. In 1925, the number of Jews living in Berlin consisted of 172,672⁷!

At the beginning of the century, Berlin already functioned as a major cultural center for Jewish life in Germany. As early as 1900, two hundred organizations, Jewish to some degree, were active in Berlin. Some of the more relevant ones our discussion include: Vereine für Jüdische Geschichte und Literatur (1895), Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaft des Judentums (1902), Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums (1904), and Verband ostjüdischer Organisationen der russischen Juden (1917). (Year of establishment in parenthesis.) Berlin also enjoyed the largest number of Jewish publishing houses – the best known included publishing houses like Ullstein and Samuel Fischer which did not address a specifically Jewish public, and publishing houses which essentially addressed the Jewish public, like Schocken Verlag, Jüdischer Verlag and Philo Verlag.

This phase of Jewish cultural life in Berlin has been discussed and described⁸ to some extent. The role performed by Berlin in the life of Hebrew culture remains less well-known, however, and is seldom studied. Its scope and dimensions call for an encompassing study. In this paper, however, I would like to refer to a few of its aspects, mainly those concerning Hebrew publishing in Berlin.

The Attempt to Transfer

the Hebrew Cultural Center to Berlin

Hebrew publishing in Europe reached its peak towards the end of the nineteenth century. To a certain extent it continued to flourish at the beginning of the twentieth century, although its approaching decline could already be felt. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, Hebrew publishing houses in the literary centers of Warsaw, Odessa and Moscow, were active as never before: New literary periodicals were published, endless plans were made, to be realized by the new publishing houses which sprang up like mushrooms after the rain.

For reasons I discussed elsewhere⁹, Hebrew literary centers began to decline in eastern Europe, already towards the end of the nineteenth century. They received their death blow after the Russian Revolution, when the Hebrew language was banned.

The Hebrew literary establishment of Odessa and Moscow was forced to flee¹⁰ in order to save its life and the life of Hebrew culture and literature. In 1921, a group of Hebrew writers applied to the Russian authorities and asked for permission to leave. With Gorki's intervention, permission was granted, in spite of the Yevseksiya attempt (the Jewish section of the Soviet Government), to prevent these writers from leaving Russia. In 1921, the Hebrew cultural establishment left Russia, after having just experienced the horrors of the Russian revolution, and the destruction of the Hebrew cultural center in Russia. In a letter to Moshe ben Eliezer of 1922, Hayyim Nachman Bialik, the national Hebrew poet and a person of high standing in the literary life, wrote:

I am wandering now in exile. Our hardship of twenty five years of me and my friends in Moriya is forlorn¹¹

When they left Russia they took with them, as another Hebrew writer attested: "The last living vestiges of Hebrew culture." They sailed for a new life in Berlin and joined other men of letters who had already begun to be active there, expecting Berlin to furnish the last chance for the existence of Hebrew literary centers in Europe.

The effort to rebuild the Hebrew cultural center in Berlin was characterized by intense publishing activity in Hebrew. The biggest and most important Hebrew publishing houses pitched their tents in Berlin in the hope of establishing a flourishing Hebrew cultural center. They assumed that a new center of Hebrew culture would be created in Berlin, side by side with the continuing activity of Jewish cultural life and Jewish publishing houses in Germany, in ge-

7 SELLENTIN (see note 5), p. 54.

8 INGRID BELKE: In den Katakomben. Marbach/Neckar 1983 (Marbacher Magazin), S. 25. – VOLKER DAHM: Das jüdische Buch im Dritten Reich. Frankfurt/Main 1979. – STANLEY NASH: The Hebraists of Berne and Berlin, circa 1905. In: ABRAMSON/PARFITT (eds.): The Great Transition (see note 1), p. 44–58. – ELIAS HURWICZ: Shay Ish Hurwitz and the Berlin He-Atid. In: Leo Baeck Year Book 1967, p. 85–102.

9 SHAVIT: The Literary Life ... (see note 3). – ZOHAR SHAVIT: The Transfer of the Literary Center to Palestine. In: BENJAMIN HARSHAV (ed.): Modern Hebrew Literature. California UP (forthcoming).

10 M. ALTSHULER: The Beginning of the Yevseksiya, 1918 bis 1921. [Hebrew.] Tel Aviv 1966. – ZVI SCHARFSTEIN: The Destruction of the Hebrew Culture in the USSR. In: MENAHEM RIBOLOV: The Hebrew Organization. [Hebrew.] In: The American Hebrew Yearbook 10/11. 1948, p. 643 until 687. – LAIB ZANZIPAR [Arie Refaeli]: Ten Years of Persecution. [Hebrew.] Tel Aviv 1930.

11 Letter 360 (see note 12).

neral, and in Berlin, in particular. They also trusted Western Jewry to come to their aid.

It is true that up to this point, Western Jewry, and especially German Jewry, had greatly disappointed them by being, to say the least, disinterested and unfriendly to both Hebrew culture and to Eastern Jews. Bialik in a moment of anger and despair, claimed that they were cut off from the living body of the people with the sharp knife of a foreign culture and a foreign language¹². But under the new circumstances, Bialik and his companions hoped for a change of attitude on the part of Western Jewry towards their own people, and for a reunion between German Jewry and Eastern Jewry.

Why Berlin?

Hebrew men of letters were confident that Berlin would replace Warsaw and Odessa. They had huge plans for Berlin, as their rich correspondence of the period makes clear. To give just one example: In the spring of 1921, Bialik wrote a letter to the leaders of the society for "Wissenschaft des Judentums", who resolved to publish a journal entitled *Dvir* in the Hebrew language. Bialik wished to see this as a good omen for future cooperation between eastern and western Jewry. He expressed his hopes in a letter, where he refers to his understanding of the course of development of the future Hebrew center in Berlin. An extract from the letter reads as follows:

At a great and historic hour brothers who had been separated by the strong arm of history, met at the same inn. Is it conceivable that this confrontation will remain without fruits? My heart says that this will not be the case¹³.

Bialik's hopes were based on the prosperous cultural life of Germany Jewry: Since the end of the nineteenth century, numerous books, newspapers and other publications identified as Jewish were published in Germany. To give but some figures: In 1933 about sixty papers appeared with a total circulation of 1,040,400 among a population of about 520,000 Jews. Schocken Verlag in Berlin published 225 titles between 1931–1938¹⁴, and most likely enjoyed a wide readership!

An indication of the scope of the readership can be found in the data concerning the distribution of *Weltgeschichte des jüdischen Volkes*, which was published by Jüdischer Verlag during 1925–29 (together with two volumes of *Geschichte des Chassidismus*). This publication (twelve volumes in all) was printed in a total number of 100,000 copies!

The intense cultural life of German Jewry gave rise to the belief that, in Berlin, one could find the

necessary conditions for the establishment of a Hebrew cultural center, that is to say: patterns of cultural activities, a reservoir of readership, and a group of writers willing to maintain a steady and continuous cultural enterprise, which could assume commercial possibilities as well.

This contention was endorsed by the previous existing Hebrew activities in Berlin. The publication of *Hamagid*¹⁵ was transferred to Berlin as early as 1918 so that censorship could be avoided. Preparations for the publication of *Ha-Shiloah*¹⁶ in 1896 were also made there. From the early twentieth century onwards a group of Jewish students and intellectuals gathered in Berlin, including David Frischmann (who died in Berlin), Simon Bernfeld, Samuel Abba Horodezky, Micha Joseph Berdichevsky, Yaacov Cahan, Zalman Shneour, Saul Tschernichowsky, Simon Rawidowicz and Shay Hurwitz, who established a periodical called *He-Atid*¹⁷ in 1907. In 1911, the center of the Zionist Federation was transferred to Berlin, and consequently the Central Committee met there in September 1912. On 6. 10. 1911 the newspaper *Die Welt* began to be published in Berlin as well. Later on in 1922, both Hebrew and Yiddish (!) writers established a Union of Hebrew writers and Journalists in Berlin. Zionist leaders and functionaries frequented Berlin as well: Zalman Shazar and Shmaryahu Levin for instance. Zionist operations in Berlin were also on the rise.

It must, however, be emphasized that historically speaking, these activities remained sporadic and never assume large-scale proportions. All the same, from the new-comers point of view, they created the impression that Berlin represented a terra firma on which to base themselves, and that the first foundations of a Hebrew center had already been laid. The literary establishment, consisting mostly of members of the Hebrew Renaissance movement [*Ha-thiyah*] felt as if Berlin was just waiting for them to

12 HAYYIM NACHMAN BIALIK: Letters in Five Volumes. Tel Aviv 1938/1939, letter 310 (translation of all Hebrew texts are mine, Z. S.).

13 SIMON RAWIDOWICZ: Conversations with Bialik. Tel Aviv 1965, p. 65.

14 BELKE (see note 8).

15 Ha-Maggid. Lyck-Berlin-Krakau 1856–1903. The first modern newspaper in Hebrew.

16 Ha-Shiloah. Krakau-Warschau-Odessa-Jerusalem 1896 until 1926. The leading literary Journal in Russia until World War I.

17 He-Atid. Berlin 1908–1926. Six volumes on matters concerning Jews and Judaism.

expand the basis of Hebrew activities which flourished since the end of the nineteenth century.

Why not Palestine?

Before describing the prolific Hebrew activity in Berlin, I would like to make one digression concerning the preference of the members of the Hebrew Renaissance movement for Berlin as their next destination. From a Zionist point of view (and the members of the Renaissance movement held themselves party to the leading powers of the Zionist movement), one might have expected a different course of development: that Palestine would become their next preferred destination, and that they would join the Hebrew men of letters who were already laying the basis for Hebrew center in Palestine.

From 1910, a group of Hebrew writers, the most famous of whom include Joseph Hayyim Brenner (who was later murdered during a pogrom), Asher Barash, Yaacov Rabinowicz and Samuel Joseph Agnon, began to establish in a new center for Hebrew culture in Palestine¹⁸. The small and deprived Jewish community in Palestine managed to build and support cultural life which practically lacked any commercial basis, but which nevertheless had a very strong ideological claim and motivation that made its existence possible. Cultural life in Palestine became possible not only because 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. The reading public was small in absolute numbers, 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 cultural life to be a necessary precondition for the existence of the Jewish community in Palestine, and even as an indication of its existence. As a result, the men of letters in Palestine were ready to take part in many enterprises, even at the cost of personal sacrifice.

Bialik might perhaps have shared their beliefs, but was not sure they could indeed materialize. Furthermore, he personally was not prepared for great sacrifices, at least not at this stage of his life. Thus, in spite of the fact that a new cultural center was being built in Palestine, and that men of letters like Barash and Rabinowicz spared no pains in a stubborn effort to maintain cultural life in Hebrew after the murder of Brenner, the leaders of the Hebrew Renaissance initially refused to make Palestine their chosen land. They believed that Berlin, as a

metropolis of culture, had much to offer to a new Hebrew center, whereas, Palestine, deserted and far from the cultural centers of Europe, would not be able to nourish any cultural activity. Bialik believed that the chances of rescuing Hebrew culture were much better in Berlin. In one of his conversations with Rawidowicz, he claimed:

I do not believe in the eternity of Israel. This is the last generation. If we do not now raise a generation which knows Hebrew, speaks Hebrew and is educated in Hebrew – we are lost. This is the last attempt. We must do whatever we can!¹⁹

In another conversation he expressed his scepticism concerning Palestine rather frankly:

Is it at all possible to publish books in Eretz Israel? Books are so very expensive there!²⁰

Bialik could not of course afford to express publicly his feeling about the chances of establishing a cultural center in Palestine and had to pay lip-service to the Palestine enterprise. Thus, as far as public statements were concerned, Bialik declared his commitment to Palestine and affirmed that Berlin was just a corridor leading to Palestine. Not only in public speeches, but in semi-official letters as well, he did repeat this commitment, as in a letter to Ben-Ami, dated 9. 12. 1920, where he wrote:

What more can I tell you. We plan, Rawnitzki and I to come to Eretz Israel with Moriya!²¹

Yet his daily involvement in Hebrew publishing in Berlin, as well as his remarkable plans, demonstrate a different attitude. He personally doubted very much the prospects of a cultural center in Palestine, did not join the people of *Dvir* who did immigrate to Palestine immediately after leaving Russia, and in a private letter to Jehoshua Hana Rawnitzki of 13. 10. 1922 plainly stated:

You have never believed me and have never listened to me when I warned you that nothing can be done there in Eretz Israel and that we must lead the entire work of Moriya towards Berlin!²²

Thus, Berlin attracted the Hebrew literary establishment who feared the harsh conditions of a Palestine lacking the necessary resources and the necessary cultural institutions. This preference for Berlin was supported, at least initially, both by the traditional function of Berlin as bridge between East and West for the Jews in particular, and by the current favorable social and economic conditions in Berlin.

¹⁸ SHAVIT: *The Literary Life* ... (see note 3).

¹⁹ RAWIDOWICZ (siehe note 13), p. 65.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²¹ BIALIK: *Letters* ... (see note 12), letter 310.

²² *Ibid.*, letter 358.

Since the Russian Revolution, Berlin had become a place of refuge for the Russian Jewish and non-Jewish Intelligentsia and seemed to be an oasis for the waves of refugees. In his Petrograd Diary of May 1921, Simon Dubnow noted:

We are witnessing a grandios exodus of the intelligentsia. Many turn to Berlin. Berlin is the only point in the universe where I might conclude my literary work in a few years time²³

However, the effort to build a Hebrew center in Berlin was new in nature and was neither self-evident nor sustained by existing Jewish cultural activity, as the newcomers wished to claim. The Jewish publishing houses in Germany, even those which did emphasize Jewish themes, were indifferent to Hebrew culture. Except for Schocken Verlag and Jüdischer Verlag which maintained a small Hebrew department, other publishers like S. Fischer Verlag, Verlag J. Kaufmann, Marcus Verlag and even Philo Verlag were neither interested in Hebrew, nor in modern Hebrew culture.

In light of this, the undertaking of the twenties was innovative in nature, because it involved an effort to create Hebrew culture in the Hebrew language, and not *Jewish culture*. That is to say, efforts were made in Berlin to create by means of the Hebrew language all the components of Hebrew culture, and, in particular, of Hebrew literature – first and foremost by the publication of a variety of texts: history books, scientific books, dictionaries, dramas, epic and lyric poetry, short stories and novels.

The temporary flow of Russian Jews not only made the newcomers feel at home, but supported the conviction that a public for Hebrew culture would be created in Berlin. A new cultural atmosphere prevailed and was believed to provide the indispensable support and resonance needed for any cultural activity.

The economic situation seemed at first to be encouraging as well: The high inflation in Germany of 1923 made the rate of exchange very favorable. As Ben-Zion Katz testified in his memories:

The year 1923 was awful time for republican Germany. The mark lost its value daily. When someone had a five dollar note he did not want to change it since one dollar could support the entire family for one day²⁴

The high inflation made Berlin very attractive financially for publishing houses which enjoyed outside financial resources. No other publishers and printers could compete with German publishers at that time. Publishing in Palestine was, for instance, five to ten times more expensive than in Berlin.

Most Hebrew men of letters were fortunate to profit from possessing foreign currency, usually English pounds. In his first report on his publishing activities in Berlin, written in 13. 10. 1922, Bialik informed Rawnitzki:

It seems as if Dvir has taken root [...] A. A. before leaving Berlin promised to transfer to Dvir not less than 1500 pound from our account in the Bank in London. This sum can ensure the decent maintenances of Dvir for the first year²⁵

Furthermore, according to several commitments made by Jews in the United States, the men of letters expected further financial support from the USA.

As we shall soon see, the conclusion that the necessary conditions for establishing a Hebrew cultural center genuinely existed in Berlin, proved false, but not before serious efforts were invested, however, in the attempt to realize such a center.

Flourishing years in Berlin

The group of intellectuals and men of letters who settled in Berlin for shorter or longer periods of time established an island in the midst of Berlin, where Hebrew writers and their followers were energetically, making big plans for the future of Hebrew literature. Some coffee shops and restaurants were frequented by various Hebrew writers: A Café near the Hackischer Markt, owned by a Jew named Dovrin served as a headquarters, and the Romanische Restaurant in the western part of the city also became very popular later on.

Here, in the middle of the German-speaking world and of German culture, a small enclave of Hebrew life maintained itself. It is worth noting that this process characterized not only the Hebrew literary life. A similar development took place concurrently among Russian intellectuals and men of letters who immigrated to Berlin²⁶.

The number of newcomers was so large that at a certain point of time, between 1919–1923, most of the prominent Hebrew writers of the literary establishment, as well as Jewish artists, stayed in Berlin or visited the city. They include: Samuel Joseph Agnon, Zalman Schneour, Chaim Tschernowitz and Zvi Vislavski. Even the painter Leonid Pasternak lived in Berlin at this time, and painted some of the prominent Jewish artists.

23 Ibid., letter 358. – HURWICZ (see note 8), p. 99.

24 BEN-ZION KATZ: *Memories*. 1983, p. 151.

25 BIALIK: *Letters ...* (see note 12), letter 358.

26 KARL SCHLÖGL: *Das Domizil eines Schattenreichs. Russische Emigranten im Berlin der zwanziger Jahre*. In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* Nr. 175 vom

1. August 1987.

In the newly created Hebrew enclave, the spoken language at the tables was Hebrew, seasoned with Russian and Yiddish. The literary life of Berlin at the time was characterized by its intensity and dynamism. Some of its intensity was luckily documented in various memoirs and diaries²⁷. It suffices to read Rawidowicz's Berlin diary, which documents almost daily the meetings of Hebrew men of letters, in order to be impressed by their hectic lives: Authors, poets, essayists and journalists met almost daily and passionately discussed problems of both Hebrew culture and Zionist politics. Their everyday life was composed of rushing between printers, booksellers, proofreaders and the writers themselves. Typical evidence for their lives can be found in the following description of Zalman Shneour, a Hebrew poet who was not as enthusiastic as his companions, but who nevertheless could not conceal his admiring attitude towards Bialik's work:

From time to time I was able to drag him from the piles of proof papers on his table and take him with me to Charlottenburg Gardens. Pale and overworked he would go out and his mind still busy with thousands of things. He would rush back to his apartment and to the proof papers. Drowning in his work, he would skip his dinner and breakfast²⁸.

The scope of publishing activities initiated in Berlin between the years 1921–1924 was extremely wide. It points not only to the extent that plans that were actually realized, but also, perhaps more significantly, to the range of the aspirations of those involved in publishing activities: More than ten new publishing houses were established, and a couple of others were planned. Plans for huge projects were proposed: the Hebrew Encyclopedia, Lexicons, books in all possible fields—Music, Art, Philosophy, History and Literature. The publication of original as well as translated texts was initiated; programs for the publication of old and new works were sketched. The materialization of all these plans would have required decades. Hebrew publishing in Berlin assumed it would be there to stay.

Bialik and Dvir

A full description of the complete enterprise of Hebrew publishing in Berlin requires a great deal of space. Here I would like to limit myself to a brief and partial description of the case of Bialik and Dvir in Berlin. I have chosen to deal with this case because both the man and the publishing house became symbols for the national Renaissance of modern Hebrew culture, and enjoyed a distinguished status in the Zionist movement. Also Dvir is much better docu-

mented than other Hebrew publishing houses in Berlin due to Bialik's published and unpublished letters and to the unique literary diary by Rawidowicz which provides first class evidence of the Berlin period in Bialik's life.

Bialik came to Berlin almost obsessed by his wish to realize there the work interrupted in Odessa. In his memories, Zalman Shneour describes how Bialik was passionately and deeply involved in various publishing initiatives. Though his tone is ironical, it still gives expression to Bialik's optimistic mood:

[...] Moshe Kleinmann had already told me about the miracles of the popular *Dvir* publishing house which will be established upon the ruins of Moriya in Odessa. And, it, that is to say, the new publishing house, will save Hebrew literature from all its persecutors in Soviet Russia and from the hands of its publishers in other land. Relief and deliverance will be granted to all writers and poets who will join it²⁹.

At first Bialik acted very cautiously. He was afraid to get involved in large investments. In order to reduce risks, he preferred co-operation with other publishers on the basis of sharing investments and profits. In his letter to Rawnitzki of 26. 10. 1921, he told him about various possibilities of cooperating with other publishers³⁰. Very soon, however, he began to believe strongly in the possibility of realizing in Berlin many, or perhaps even most, of his publishing projects. In a letter to H. P. Bergmann of 21. 12. 1921 he wrote:

As I have already told you, Moriya is still active and will become even more prestigious than it ever was³¹.

As early as the beginning of 1922, only a few months after his arrival in Berlin, Bialik was able to inform his partner Rawnitzki about the realization of a number of major projects begun in Russia: the publication of the six volumes of *Sefer Ha-Agada* (Book of Jewish Legends), as well as of a monumental volume of poems and tales by Saul Tschernichowsky, the other prominent Hebrew poet alongside Bialik. Bialik's plans for the compilation ("Ingathering" or "Kinnus") and publication of all that was valuable in the Jewish heritage from the Middle Ages onwards started to take shape in the form of a newly revised and annotated edition of the complete writings of Ibn Gabriol (a medieval Jewish poet), which was published a year later (but completed only in 1929 in Tel Aviv). The variety of his pub-

27 KATZ (see note 24) and RAWIDOWICZ (see note 13).

28 ZALMAN SHNEOUR: Bialik and his Contemporaries. Tel Aviv 1953, p. 95. [Hebrew.]

29 Ibid., p. 90/91.

30 BIALIK: Letters ... (see note 12), letter 357.

31 Ibid., letter 363.

lishing plans is indicated by three other books which were published concurrently: a collection of Biblical stories, Tschernichowsky's translation of Hiawatha and a selection of Heine's poems translated by S. Ben Zion.

Furthermore, Bialik planned to republish all of *Moriya's* books by photocopying them and thus saving heavy costs. Plans for new books were also initiated. Most of them required long term planning, high professionalism and high costs, which point to Bialik's intentions concerning the length of his stay in Berlin. For instance, the following enterprises could be realized only by a big publishing house and a daring publisher: a voluminous history of *Divre Yeme Israel (The History of the People of Israel)* by Shimoni, an anthology of medieval Hebrew poetry: *Otzar Ha-Shira Ve-H-Melizta (The Treasury of Hebrew Poetry)* and a Hebrew series on world literature. Other plans consisted of scientific editions of standard and classical books in translation and original Hebrew texts. They included newly written voluminous works such as S. Bernfeld's *Introduction to Holy Scriptures*, two volumes of which, comprising 80 printing sheets, had already been published in Berlin.

In addition, Bialik was trying to establish new publishing houses and new joint productions. With Yaacov Seidmann (Tom Seidmann-Freud's husband) he established the Ofir publishing house, which published a few children's books (most of them were illustrated by Tom Seidmann-Freud³²). Concurrently he established Achinoar which planned to concentrate on the publication of literary texts. With Ayanot he planned to produce the works of Avraham Kromchel³³. Together with Hurwitz he was running Klal, which was affiliated to Ullstein and published small and cheap booklets such as Bialik's story *Arye Baal Guf* (Arye the Fat), a selection of Yehuda Halevy's poems and a collection of love- and folksongs with music by the composer Abraham Idelson.

The scope of Dvir's enterprises in Berlin was indeed impressive. In a triumphant letter of 15. 6. 1922 to Dubnow, Bialik told him that in less than half a year he had managed to publish about 500 printing sheets of *Moriya* books (an average book consists of 5–7 printing sheets)³⁴. This he regarded as merely the beginning. For Hebrew culture in Berlin, the sky was the limit. Everything spoke for it.

Compared with the hardships Bialik experienced in Russia, no wonder that Berlin seemed at first a

paradise for Hebrew publishing. Not only Dvir prospered at that time. Other Hebrew publishing houses were also very active: even Stiebel transferred some of his activities to Berlin. New publishing houses were established, while others continued to operate: Eshkol, Ayanot, Rimon, Yalkut, Chorev, Yuval and Yavneh to mention just few. Rawidowicz, who was one of the owners of the Ayanot publishing house, even went as far as to claim that compared with the other publishing houses, Dvir's activities were marginal³⁵.

Even if we disregard his estimation, we can still conclude that publishing in Hebrew had indeed prospered.

Even sales of books went well at first. It seemed as if the consistent and acute problem of Hebrew literature, that is of selling books, had finally been solved. Books were sold, and in quite a large quantity. The Hebrew department of the Jüdische Verlag took upon itself the distribution of Dvir publications. Later on, distribution was given to Dr. Rosenstein, the distributor of Ever books. He promised Bialik that he would sell all Dvir and *Moriya* books in a short time, and apparently succeeded rather well. Only a month after the agreement with Dr. Rosenstein was made, Bialik informed Rawnitzki in a letter of 20. 2. 1922 that *Sefer Ha-Agada* would probably sell out soon, and that there was a need for a new edition (the first one consisted of 2 000 copies)³⁶.

It is true that Bialik's enthusiasm was occasionally spoiled by technical difficulties he had to face, such as problems in getting paper, low-quality print and broken and faulty type. In one of his meetings with Rawidowicz, he complained about the quality of the publication of *Sipurei Hamikra* (Biblical Stories): Afterwards he began to complain about his assistants and the printing house.

In Odessa *Moriya* books were published so beautifully. [...] And here, it is awful, awful³⁷.

On another occasion he complained about the high inflation and the continuous decline in the value of the Mark, which made it impossible to draw up a proper budget for any book. True, inflation was very favorable as long as money from the United States continued to flood in, but when it did not, or

32 BARBARA MURKEN: Tom Seidmann-Freud: Leben und Werk. In: Die Schiefertafel 4, Nr. 3. 1981, p. 163–201.

33 Eventually published by Ayanot. Berlin 1924.

34 BIALIK: Letters ... (see note 12), letter 375.

35 RAWIDOWICZ (see note 13), p. 78.

36 BIALIK: Letters ... (see note 12), letter 372.

37 RAWIDOWICZ (see note 13), p. 43.

when the budget for a book had already been planned, inflation made life very difficult for Hebrew publishers (naturally not only for them). Thus for instance, on the same occasion Bialik complained that the proofreading of his book took three months and that the printing expenses would consequently be ten times more expensive than what was originally planned³⁸.

However, financial and technical problems seemed trivial to Bialik at this stage and did not weaken his belief in the strength of the Hebrew cultural center in Berlin, as he wrote to Rawnitzki in his letter of 30. 3. 1922:

Dvir is out of its napkins, and has gone beyond childhood illnesses. From now on Dvir, is a strong and reliable institution³⁹.

This was then the situation in 1922–23: The glorious cultural Hebrew centers of Russia and Poland had been totally destroyed. Berlin became very attractive and raised great hopes. Palestine was deserted. It seemed that there was neither cultural justification, nor an economic basis, for a cultural center in Palestine. When towards the end of 1922, Bialik reported on the high prospects of Dvir in Berlin, he informed Druyanow that he failed to find supporters for an editing committee which would reside in Palestine. In his letter of 29. 10. 1922, he wrote:

All those people of means to whom I have appealed, groups and individuals, when they came to the paragraph about placing the editorial board in Eretz-Israel, fled as if I were a tiger⁴⁰.

Sudden Decline

Very soon, however, Berlin became the tiger which threatened the existence of Dvir and forced Bialik to flee to Palestine. Once inflation was checked, the entire house of cards upon which Dvir was built tumbled. Since the entire existence of the literary center was based on a mistaken analysis of reality, and was made possible due to the economic advantages of inflation, the termination of the inflation meant its demise. The stabilization of the mark brought disastrous consequences for Hebrew publishing. Dvir, like other new publishing houses which based their calculations on the high rate of exchange, found itself in severe economic difficulties. As Ben-Zion Katz wrote:

The year 1924 was a happy year for the Germans, also for the Jews in Germany, but a miserable year for the immigrants. They got used to living good and easily with a small amount of dollars, and suddenly the mark became stable and life became very expensive⁴¹.

As a matter of fact, the writing on the wall could have been read earlier. Firstly, the number of books sold fell drastically. When Bialik met Rawidowicz at the beginning of 1924, to discuss their plan to publish Kromchel, he referred to the book's sales prospects as poor:

I wish we could sell three hundred copies of Kromchel books. You know, the time of panic is gone. Two thousands copies is a large quantity⁴².

Bialik, who was at first taken in by the misinterpretation of the situation in Berlin, was shocked to realize that, as a matter of fact, there was no public for Hebrew literature in Germany. In a letter to Dubonow of 24. 9. 1924 he asked desperately:

Has it all ended? Have all book buyers suddenly died?⁴³

Bialik was wrong. The Hebrew readership which was supposed to exist in Berlin never died, because it had never been born. The belief in the existence of such a readership in Berlin was nothing but a momentary illusion, and the bitter awakening from this illusion was due to come. Those involved in the new initiatives were so busy, so preoccupied with their work, that they hardly noticed (or perhaps refused to notice) that all they had managed to create was nothing but an ex-territorial island. Elias Hurwicz describes their attitude in rather moderate terms:

While it must be admitted that German Jewry as a whole took comparatively little interest in the revival of spoken Hebrew, and for the great majority Hebrew was nothing but the scarcely intelligible idiom of the prayer book, there were always cells of the Hebrew Movement in Berlin⁴⁴.

Judging by the total lack of communication between Berlin Jewry and the Hebrew writers, I would go as far as to state that the Jewish "Berliners" were hostile to Hebrew culture in general and to its representatives in particular. Bialik and his colleagues failed to realize that Hebrew activity in Berlin was based on the invasion of immigrants who had no standing among the local Jewry. In this sense, the existence of the Hebrew cultural center in Berlin was more artificial than anywhere else in Europe, because it could not lead to a creation of an authentic readership.

38 Ibid., p. 66.

39 BIALIK: Letters ... (see note 12), letter 352.

40 Ibid., letter 385.

41 KATZ (see note 24), p. 134.

42 RAWIDOWICZ (see note 13), p. 75.

43 BIALIK: Letters ... (see note 12), letter 417.

44 HURWICZ (see note 8), p. 97.

In his article on Agnon and Germany, Tudor Parfitt finds literary evidence for this attitude in one of Agnon's stories about Germany:

From the general tone of the book we can infer readily that the center of Hebrew letters in Germany, of which Agnon was so outstanding a representative, was a temporary phenomenon with no real roots in German Jewish society⁴⁵

Looking back at the Berlin period, Bialik claimed of his sojourn in the city:

Working in Ashkenaz [Germany] is not worth it. Whoever works here, will lose his money. I have seen this in advance. I already foresaw it two years ago⁴⁶

But this approach does not correspond with Bialik's actions and speeches while he was still in Berlin. It is true that in 1923 Bialik already began to have doubts concerning the prospects of the center in Berlin. Upon meeting Rawidowicz then he said:

I feel that there is no basis here. We sow here and the seed do not take root⁴⁷

but he did not draw the necessary conclusions, until it was almost too late. Two prosperous years passed before the illusive character of the center in Berlin was recognized. In spite of their retrospective awareness of the artificial nature of the literary center in Berlin, the Hebrew men of letters totally misinterpreted the situation at first. In 1922 they firmly believed in the prospects of Berlin as the future center of Hebrew culture. Moreover, as already mentioned, in the continuous discussion concerning Palestine, Bialik took sides against the supporters of a cultural center in Palestine. Later on he tried to justify his refusal to go directly to Palestine. In a farewell party given to Bialik just before he left for Palestine, when he already knew that Berlin could not serve as a center for Hebrew Literature, he even then repeated his contention that he had no other choice but to go to Berlin first:

I could not immigrate directly from Russia to Israel. The working conditions in Israel were not favorable. We decided to establish the Dvir company here in Berlin and to work here. We have succeeded and now I am going to Eretz Israel⁴⁸

Only after the scope of the disaster had become clear and Dvir went bankrupt, did Bialik and his people emigrate to Palestine.

In evaluating the Berlin period, we should not be taken in either by the scornful attitude of local Jewry, nor by the illusions of the newcomers, and should adopt neither point of view. Analysis of the historical circumstances in retrospect discloses the ambiguous position of the Hebrew center in Berlin. On the one hand, it is clear that from the point of view of pure publishing much was indeed achieved.

The books published in Berlin at that time were the pillars of Hebrew literature. In Bialik's formulation in his farewell speech when he left Berlin, Berlin gave Hebrew culture the chance to realize how naked it was, and provided a good opportunity to clothe it⁴⁹.

On the other hand, the hopes of Hebrew immigrants to create a living center were based on their mistaken understanding of the actual state of affairs. When analyzing the causes of their failure in Berlin, they held the German economy as responsible. This, however, was not the case. It was their false assumptions and misinterpretation of history which made the span of the Berlin interlude so short. They refused to understand that there was no chance of making Germany Jewry into a Hebrew public, and that the lack of an authentic readership was a severe obstacle which would prevent the flourishing of any cultural center.

In a letter to his wife in 1924, Bialik wrote:

Between us, our business here [in Berlin] is buried very deep. We were run into a nice corner. God knows if we will ever manage to get out of it⁵⁰

Luckily they did manage. With much painstaking efforts, Dvir was transferred to Palestine. There, a center of Hebrew culture gradually, painfully developed, in the face of many economic difficulties, but it was a center possessing one great resource no other center of Hebrew culture in Europe ever possessed before: an authentic readership, which for the first time in modern history, could make the ideology of Hebrew culture into a dynamic reality.

Closing Circles

In Berlin a cultural circle was closed: The imprint on Dvir books "Tel Aviv and Berlin" which indicated the cooperation between Berlin and Tel Aviv as far as Hebrew publishing was concerned, quickly turned into an opposition. This opposition between Jewish-Hebrew culture and Jewish-assimilated culture had a long history of *Kulturkampf*. Without being aware of it, those who took part in the attempt to establish a Hebrew center in Berlin also took part in closing a circle of Jewish history. This circle was opened in

45 TUDOR PARFITT, in: ABRAMSON/PARFITT: *The Great Transition* ... (see note 1), p. 67.

46 RAWIDOWICZ (see note 13), p. 81.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

50 HAYYIM NACHMAN BIALIK: *Letters to his Wife Mani*. Jerusalem 1953, p. 62.

Berlin two centuries ago with the Enlightenment movement. The Enlightenment movement started a historical process, which involved a bitter contradiction between Hebrew culture and Jewish-German culture. This process came to an end in the last effort to establish in Berlin a center of Hebrew culture. Berlin served as a platform for the beginning of Hebrew culture as well as for its defeat.