

International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature

Edited by
PETER HUNT

Associate Editor
Sheila Ray

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London and New York

Hebrew and Israeli

Zohar Shavit

The history of Hebrew children's literature, dating back to 1779, is the history of an ideological attempt to build a new literary system and to invent its consumers and producers simultaneously. It is a history characterised by strong ideological inclinations, and delayed developments and regressions, until Hebrew children's literature attained the conditions typical of the European children's systems which it sought to emulate. Its peculiar circumstances of development involved the special status of the Hebrew language as the language of high culture rather than the native language of its child readership, as well as the multi-territorial existence of Hebrew culture: a situation which ended only when the centre of Hebrew culture was transferred to Eretz-Israel in the mid-1920s.

The emergence and crystallisation of the concept of childhood was a precondition for the development of Hebrew children's literature, as was the case with other European children's literatures; but Hebrew children's literature also required a substantial modification of the basic views of Jewish society, especially those concerning children's education and Jewish attitudes towards the outside world, in order to enable the initial development of a system of children's books. Only when such a change occurred at the end of the eighteenth century within the framework of the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) movement in Germany, was there culturally room for Jewish books for children.

The *Haskalah* movement firmly believed that shaping a new mode of Jewish life could be achieved through changes in educational orientation and curriculum, making them rational and secular. Such changes were implemented in the new school network; where the demand for new and different books was created. This demand meant that a system of books for children had to be established from the very beginning. The close relations between the Jewish *Haskalah* and the German Enlightenment movement, made German children's literature an ideal model for the newly established system to imitate. Hebrew children's literature endeavoured to follow German children's literature both in its stages of development, and in the structure of its repertoire. However, Hebrew children's literature could not adapt itself to the present stage of development of German children's literature, given the former's ideological underpinnings. Thus, unlike German children's literature, Hebrew children's literature was characterised by the rather monolithic nature of its texts. Even in its later stages of development, Jewish writers adhered to a limited number of textual models and seldom deviated from this fixed repertoire during the entire *Haskalah* period.

Since the Haskalah ideology provided legitimisation for Jewish children's literature in Hebrew, ideological constraints determined the nature and selection of some texts – whether original or translated – for inclusion in the system, as well as the exclusion of others.

This ideological hegemony resulted in the Hebrew children's literature system remaining incomplete for a considerable period, lacking some of the sub-systems existing in other European children's literatures at the time. The lack of popular texts was particularly noticeable: the existence of literature for pure amusement was unthinkable in terms of Jewish culture. In fact, Hebrew children's literature managed to liberate itself from the exclusive hegemony of ideology only much later in Eretz-Israel where Hebrew children's literature became a 'native literature'.

When the centre of Hebrew culture was transferred to Eastern Europe, Hebrew texts for Jewish children were still published in the German-speaking countries, but more significant developments occurred in Eastern Europe. Even there, Hebrew children's literature continued to be dependent on German children's literature for quite a long time, in contradistinction to the adult system, where the Russian system had begun to dominate. Only subsequently in Eretz-Israel was the German system gradually replaced by the Russian as a mediating system.

In Eastern Europe, writers for children continued to regard Hebrew children's literature as an educational tool and consequently wrote texts with a didactic bearing. At this stage in its development, Hebrew children's literature tolerated only one criterion for the rejection or acceptance of texts for children: the extent of their conformity to their didactic and/or ideological role. Since the educational programme endorsed strong contacts with the surrounding and neighbouring cultures, Hebrew children's literature tended to translate extensively from these languages as well as to use translated texts as a model for original Hebrew texts.

In Europe, Hebrew children's literature never managed to become 'native literature' as it was written for children whose mother tongue was not Hebrew. As a result Hebrew children's literature could not transform its rather superficial existence, and was unable to release itself from the various ideological frameworks in which it was generated. Furthermore, even later on, when its circumstances of existence indeed changed in Eretz-Israel, its traditional ideological inclination still remained very strong, and long years of cultural battles were required before Hebrew children's literature managed to liberate itself from the bonds of ideology.

In Eretz-Israel the urgent need to construct *all* components of the Hebrew culture led to the creation of an entire cultural conglomerate for children, including children's literature, whose products ranged from children's songs to fairy tales; from the ceremonies in schools and kindergartens to schoolbooks; from poems to stories, novels, non-fiction prose, and so on.

Hebrew literature in Eretz-Israel addressed children who spoke Hebrew, sometimes as their first and only language, and gradually came to address a readership which had all its schooling in Hebrew. The change of the nature of the readership into a real and authentic one resulted in a new course of development, which culminated in Hebrew children's literature gaining an 'independent' status. Nevertheless, the process involving the decline of the ideological domination of the system in favour of commercial and educational factors probably only came to an end in the late 1960s.

In Eretz-Israel Hebrew children's literature was no longer part of a cultural enclave, but belonged to a single sovereign culture. Yet its history and tradition could neither be ignored, nor easily utilised. Because of its drastically different circumstances of development, the European Hebrew children's literature tradition could be used only partially. Unlike the case of Hebrew literature for adults, where the transfer to Eretz-Israel implied at least some degree of continuity, Hebrew children's literature, facing excessive new needs, had to repeat initial processes of development based on new and different motivations and legitimisations.

The needs of the children's system in Eretz-Israel were the principal determinants of the nature of its repertoire. The needs and demands of the educational system enjoyed first priority. The use of Hebrew as the natural language of education created an urgent need for books suitable for the first generation of Hebrew speakers. The scarcity of school books overshadowed any other deficiencies of the children's system. Given the necessity, however, of creating a children's culture from scratch, school texts also included original poems and stories. These texts can be seen as the first original texts of Hebrew children's literature in Eretz-Israel. Many of them answered the need for a curriculum for everyday life, as well as for festive days. From Hanukkah poems, to Tu Bi-Shevat and Passover songs, the curriculum urgently required texts suitable for the celebration of these festivals.

Behind this undertaking were some of the most prestigious writers for adults, who readily accepted the task of providing texts. They regarded writing for children as a national task, an indispensable component of the creation of the new nation. Such writers even included the national poet Bialik. For the first time in the history of Hebrew children's literature, texts for children were written in great quantities by writers known primarily as writers for adults. Simultaneously, quite a few books were written by teachers and educators within an educational framework. Thus at its outset, Hebrew children's literature had few, if any, writers who could be viewed as professional writers for children.

The discrepancy between prestigious writers for adults who wrote for children, and non-professional writers who wrote in the framework of their educational pursuits, was typical of the irregular situation of Hebrew children's literature at this stage of its development (though not exclusive to Hebrew literature alone; a similar situation pertained in Italy). As Hebrew children's literature in Eretz-Israel evolved and prospered, this gap was gradually filled; one aspect of the 'normalisation' was the creation of a specific group of writers who wrote solely or mostly for children. This process of differentiation was only fully manifested in the 1950s.

Urgent cultural demands on the one hand, and the inability of original writers to respond to them fully on the other, virtually forced many publishing houses to produce translations in large numbers. The motivation behind translating so many books was rooted both in ideology and the inability of original Hebrew writers to supply as many texts as were required. By translating into Hebrew, the editors of various publishing houses wished to prove that all a child's educational and cultural needs could indeed be supplied in Hebrew. This motivation, as well as the desire to fill up the system as quickly as possible and thus to approximate the

condition of European cultures, made the translation of the so-called children's 'classics' a priority mission. Thus in its early years, the Hebrew children's literature system in Eretz-Israel was filled by translations rather than original texts.

The process of liberating Hebrew children's literature from its formative stages and acquiring an 'independent' status was manifested primarily in the growth of a group of writers who wrote exclusively for children, as well as in the increase in the number of original texts written for children. Consequently the relations between, and the proportion of translated and original texts began to change: translations were still published in great quantities, but many original texts produced as literature *per se*, rather than on educational or didactic pretexts, were published.

Still the ideological grip on Hebrew children's literature in Eretz-Israel was very strong. In fact, during the 1940s and 1950s, the pre-State, or late Yishuv stage, children's literature was simply transformed to meet new ideological claims rooted in the ideology of the labour parties who subsidised almost all the big publishing houses. Publishing policy, determined by the labour parties, demanded that books comply with the ideological demands of the political parties; and this affected translated as well as original texts, especially in thematic and evaluative terms, but also in characterisation and illustration. Due to the strong link with the Soviet Union and Russian culture, most of the texts were translated from the Russian.

The entire attitude towards Hebrew children's literature was extremely earnest: it was children's books which were entrusted with the heavy burden of building new and healthier Hebrew children as opposed to the weak Jewish children of the *Gola* (Diaspora). The expectations of Hebrew children's literature were high, and so were the limitations imposed on it. As far as original books were concerned, it was almost taboo to write popular children's literature, such as detective stories.

Towards the end of the 1950s, for the first time in the history of Hebrew culture, Hebrew children's literature was no longer exclusively the result of the ideological yearnings of publishers and cultural agents. Not only did private publishing houses enter the field, but the publishing policy of the labour parties also gradually changed. Publishing policy was now put on a commercial foundation in its broadest sense. That is to say, books were chosen for publication either because they were believed to be valuable, or saleable, or both. Children's literature began to flourish, especially from the 1960s onward both in terms of the number of published books and the number of copies sold. It became central to the activity of the publishing houses; some original and translated books even became best-sellers in Israel. Most of the large publishing houses appointed editors specifically for children's literature, and children's libraries or book clubs were formed.

Since the 1960s, Hebrew children's literature has experienced a tremendous boom.

The system of children's literature managed to become a full system consisting both of popular and high literature. No fewer than 480 children's books were published in 1976, among them 194 new titles and 286 reprints. The number of books published more than doubled between 1965/6 and 1979/80, and almost tripled in the twenty years between 1965/6 and 1986.

Poetry for children was allotted enormous space. Prose writing developed as well. Gone was the almost exclusive focus on realistic fiction about the history and life of the people of Israel and the history of the Jewish people. The door was

opened to themes which had previously been banned, such as first love, friendship, childhood, children's adventures, as well as the Holocaust, death in war, the death of family members, divorce, and family crisis. The range of topics covered by children's literature has expanded greatly both as a result of the 'normalisation' of the system and because of its relationship with European children's literatures, which underwent a similar process. For instance, Raya Harnik's, *Achi Achi* [Oh My Brother] (1993), Uri Orlev's *Chayat Hachosech* [The Beast of Darkness] (1967) and Yaacov Shavit's *Nimrod Kelev Zayid* [Nimrod Hunting Dog] (1987) deal with a child's response to the death of a father or brother. Other writers depict conflicts between the individual and society, notably Gila Almagor (*Etz Ha-Domim Tafus* [Our Tree on the Top of the Hill] (1992)), Ofra Gelbart-Avni (*Kirot Shelo Roim* [Invisible Walls] (1992)), Roni Givati (*Mishalot Choref* [Winter Wishes] (1993)), Nira Harel (*Kova Chadash* [A New Hat] (1995)), Israel Lerman (*Ha-Yeled MiGdat Hanachal* [The Child from the Other Bank of the River] (1992)), Yona Tepper (*David Chatzi Chatzi* [David Half-and-Half] (1990)) and Nurit Zarchi (*Yaldat Chutz* [Outsider] (1978) and *Wolfinea Momi Blum* (1988)).

Much of the prose writing is devoted to original realistic fiction about the history and life of the Yishuv in the pre-State period, and the history of the Jewish people. Among the prominent authors to publish such works are Ehud Ben-Ezer (*Geda, Sipuro Shel Avraham Shapira* [Geda, the story of Avraham Shapira] (1993)), Sami Michael (*Pachohim Ve-Chalomot* [Shacks and Dreams] (1979)), Dorit Orgad (*Ha-Chatufim Li-Tzva Ha-Tzar* [Kidnapped by the Czar's Army] (1986)), Devorah Omer (*Pitom Be-Emtza Ha-Chayim* [Suddenly in the Midst of Living] (1984)), Gahila Ron-Feder (*Moshe Dayan: Hanaar Mi-Nahalal* [Moshe Dayan: The Boy From Nahalal] (1984)), Yael Roseman (*Ha-Roman Sheli Im Ben-Gurion Ve-Im Penina* [My Affair with Ben-Gurion and with Penina] (1986)), Esther Streit-Wortzel (*Ha-Bricha* [The Escape] 1969)) and Binyamin Tene (*Hechazter Ha-Shlishit* [The Third Courtyard] (1982)).

The silence about the Holocaust, previously characteristic of Israeli books for children, has been broken. In this connection, it is worth mentioning that the sudden and intense production of Holocaust writing is typical not only of the generation of survivors, but of the second generation as well. Such writers include: Tamar Bergman (*Ha-Yeled Mi-Sham* [The Boy from 'Over There'] (1983)), Ruth Ilan-Porath (*Kurt Achi* [Kurt, My Brother] (1983)), Rivka Keren (*Kaitz Atzuv, Kaitz Meushar* [Bittersweet Summer] (1986)), Irena Liebman (*Sus Etz U-Shmo Zariz* [A Wooden Horse called Zariz] (1988)). These books either describe the Holocaust very directly, or indirectly describe its consequences, as for instance in Gabriel Zoran's *Morad Hazami* [Nightingale Lane] (1986), which describes the life of a Jewish-German family who immigrated to Eretz-Israel.

Extensive development in picture books and books for the very young took place. In the pre-State period, and even during the first decades of the State of Israel, picture books were poorly produced. From the 1960s onward great improvements took place in the design and graphics of books for children, especially books for the very young. Israeli children's literature has been able to attain the very highest international standards of production.

Efforts to encourage writing for children by raising the status of children's authors bore fruit. The change in the status of the children's writer manifested

itself in the fact that by 1978 three authors had received the highly prestigious Israel Prize for their life's work in children's literature.

This change is also manifested by the fact that successful adult writers began writing for children as well. They include Ruth Almog (*Rakefey, Ahavati Ha-Rishona* [Rakefet, my First Love] (1992)), Yizhak Ben-Ner (*Beikvot Mavir Ha-Sadot* [On the Trail of the Field Firebug] (1980)), David Grossman (*Yesh Yeladim Zigzag* [The Zigzag Child] (1994)), Yoram Kaniuk (*Yiuv, Chaluk-Nachal Ve Ha-Pil* [Job, Pebble and the Elephant] (1993)), Shulamit Lapid (*Naarat Ha-Chalomot* [The Girl of Dreams] (1985)), Amos Oz (*Sumchi* (1977)), Meir Shalev (*Aba Ose Bushot* [Shame on You, Daddy] (1988)), Yaacov Shabtai (*Ha-Massa Ha-Mufla Shel Ha-Karpad* [The Wonderous Journey of the Toad] (1965)), and Dan Tsalka (*Mari Ben Amtel* (1992)).

Translations and re-translations of children's classics (most of them dating back to the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries) predominated. The most important of these appeared in the framework of the Kitri series, by the Keter publishing house, which published new translations of, among others, Spyri's *Heidi*, George Sand's *La Petite Fadette*, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Edmondo de Amicis's *Cuore*, and Waldemar Bonsels's *Die Biene Maja und Ihre Abenteuer*.

Hebrew children's literature has undergone tremendous changes over the last two hundred years. Starting as a literature with no natural reading public, it acquired a large and stable reading public. Although it was believed to serve as a tool for other purposes, it managed to liberate itself from ideological and didactic constraints to become a full and 'normal' system, having a 'normal' reading public and functioning on the same basis as any other national literature in the Western world. In an extremely short period of time, Hebrew children's literature has attained the highest possible standards of Western children's literature.

Further Reading

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