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Zohar Shavit

Hebrew Children's Literature

The history of Hebrew children's literature in Europe, in mandatory Palestine and then in the State of Israel is the history of an ideological project driven by two simultaneous motivations: to build a new literature, and to create its readers and writers.

The unique circumstances involved in the creation of Hebrew children's literature in Europe resulted from two anomalies: multilingualism—Hebrew was the language of high culture rather than the readers' native language—and multi-territorialism: it developed first in Western Europe, mainly Germany, later in Eastern Europe, and existed simultaneously in several countries.

In Palestine these two anomalies could be amended: a readership was created for whom Hebrew was the native language, often its sole language, and literature developed in one territory only. Already in the late 1890s, even before the literary center moved from Europe to Palestine—in the 1920s—Hebrew children's literature began to be written in Palestine. The first children's books were those used by the educational system: textbooks and readers. However, the relatively

small number of books did not meet the needs, particularly after the introduction of the Hebrew-in-Hebrew method, which made schools the primary agents for disseminating Hebrew as the language of the Jewish community in Palestine.

The existence of an authentic, native audience for Hebrew children's literature created an urgent need to establish, from scratch, a culture for Hebrew children, consisting of various components, among them literary texts for leisure time reading, children's poems and folk tales, stories and novels, as well as textbooks and texts designated for Jewish and national holidays and for ceremonies in the schools and kindergartens.

Quite a few books, mainly textbooks, were written in the 1920s by teachers in the Jaffa School for Girls and endeavored to represent the "authentic" native Hebrew child: the texts were full of dialogues in "natural language," and contained many descriptions of settlements and their landscapes in Palestine. They emphasized the difference between the diaspora child and the native child of Eretz Israel who was characterized as mischievous, self-confident, hiking all over his country while singing its songs, and strongly connected to it. The ties to the land were emphasized by interweaving past historical events with contemporary ones.

By the 1930s the project of setting the foundations of Hebrew children's culture had been successfully accomplished. This was also done by translating world classics into Hebrew, a project that continued to play an important role in filling the shelves of Hebrew children's literature until its significance began to decline in the 1950s.

The reader of children's literature in the 1930s was a child whose native language was Hebrew. Most of the children's writers were teachers and educators attached to the Labor movement, such as Eliezer Smoli, Zvi Livneh and Bracha Habas. They wrote about the making of the nation, and about the struggle of the *Yishuv*—the pre-state Jewish community—for independence. The books created national heroes, described the landscape of Eretz Israel, sanctified the values of self-sacrifice, love of the land and of agriculture, and life in collective settlement. These themes were typical even of lullabies, often describing the homeland.

Nevertheless, not all children's writers wrote ideological texts. Major poets for adults, such as Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Shaul Tchernichovsky, Zalman Schneur, Yaakov Fichman and Dvora Baron did not express ideological commitment. These poets, who enjoyed great prestige among the public, began to write for children because they considered it a national-cultural mission and an essential element for the creation of the new nation and its culture. The involvement of prestigious poets for adults continued to characterize writing for children in the 1930s and 1940s. The most noticeable among them were Avraham Shlonsky, Nathan Alterman and Lea Goldberg, whose books remain children's classics even in the 21st century.

At the same time, there emerged a group of writers who wrote mainly for children; they included Yemima Tchernovitz-Avidar, Yaakov Hurgin, Anda Amir-Pinkerfeld, Fanya Bergstein, Miriam Yellin-Stekelis and Aharon Zeev.

The narratives of 1940s children's literature were largely similar to those that preceded them: committed and with an ideological mission. Eretz Israel continued to serve as an antithesis to the diaspora, and much space was devoted to detailed descriptions of nature and the geography of the country, and to describing the holidays and festivals in Eretz Israel, which replaced the traditional holidays of the diaspora. There was a clear preference for the settlement movement over the city: the stories almost always took place on a kibbutz or a moshav, even when the protagonists were city children. These protagonists continued to be characterized as self-confident, independent, lovers of nature and native speakers of Hebrew. A special place was devoted to historical protagonists of the near and distant past, such as Judah Maccabee, Joseph Trumpeldor and Alexander Zeid, who were described as having similar traits: they were brave, motivated by love for the homeland, they worked the land, were honest and moral and willing to give up their lives to defend the people and its land. The Hebrew child was presented as connected primarily to the land, not to his parents. In many books, the children left home to fulfill pioneering missions and joined a collective group.

Two prominent changes began to emerge in the narratives of the 1940s. One was the replacing of the general socialist ideology

by a nationalist ideology; the other was in the attitude towards the Holocaust and the preparations for founding the state. As Yael Darr has demonstrated, three narratives developed as a result: the narrative of the connection with European Jewry in time of trouble (and later, that of the Holocaust), the narrative of enlistment to national missions, and the narrative of the lesson to be drawn from the Holocaust. The rejection of the diaspora, which had characterized children's literature in the 1930s, was replaced by the story of the European Jewish disaster and expressed concern for, and identification with its distress.

Darr's research revealed that children's books in the 1940s were the first to tell the story of the Holocaust, still not told elsewhere, and were colored with remorse over pre-World War II rejection of the diaspora. Other stories dealt with the immigration of refugee children to Palestine and described their journeys. The narrative of survivor children thus replaced the earlier tale of ideological immigration and attempted to change the reader's attitude towards it. From the end of 1942 on, the children in the stories came to the aid of those in the diaspora, and the stories presented a sense of common destiny; they also described the helplessness of the *Yishuv* and its inability to provide genuine assistance to diaspora Jews.

The enlistment narrative that developed in parallel described the youth (sometimes children) in Palestine who fought for their homeland. At its height, particularly during the years of the struggle against the British, it portrayed the children as daring fighters. A typical story centered around a group of children with exceptional abilities, described them as a military unit, who use their aptitude not as in Western literature—to solve a mystery—but to fight an enemy who threatens their homeland.

Towards the end of World War II the narrative of the "nationalist lesson" began to develop. It combined the enlistment and Holocaust narratives into a new tale about the revolt and revenge of Jewish diaspora children. At the same time, the story of the integration of refugee children into the community of the *Yishuv* began to be told. The typical hero of the story was an orphan who comes to Palestine physically and emotionally shattered, is adopted by a family or a collective—a group of children—and within a short time forgets

his traumatic past. This type of integration, presented as the correct and preferred method of healing and rehabilitation, was favored by many writers. Later, in the 1970s it further included the individual experiences of the refugees: at that point, it was no longer necessary to erase the terrible memories of the Holocaust and the traumatic past.

Starting in the 1950s, Hebrew children's literature increasingly resembled children's literature in Western Europe: a clear distinction was made between writers for adults and writers for children; children's literature became a publishing specialization and appointed special editors for children's books; age-groups became more distinct—infants, toddlers, kindergartners, elementary school, grades 3–6, junior high, and teenagers in high school.

From then on, and increasingly in the 1970s, original popular literature started to be published, involving a change also in the subjects, themes and language of the stories. *Hasamba* by Igal Moss-insohn, based on nationalist values, was the first popular series and was published for over three decades. Following it came adventure stories centered around the child's world. Smadar Shir's books and the *Gingi* series by Galila Ron-Feder became very popular. Like all popular literature, these books were based on a recurring format: portrayal of the hero, the setting, and plot development.

Popular literature heralded the appearance of different thematic values as well. Alongside Zionist and social values, there was a growing emphasis on psychological and esthetic aspects. As a result of growing interaction with American and European literature, the books also dealt with new topics, including some that had previously been considered taboo, such as divorce, death, and sex. Instead of realism dealing with Jewish history, the door was opened to such topics as first love, friendship, parent-child relationships, death in war, the death of relatives and crisis in the family. The setting expanded to include the city, and the characters included ethnic groups that were barely present in previous narratives. The authoritative point of view was often replaced by a child's perspective, or by several points of view. Even when the subject of the book was a group or a community, emphasis was placed on the child's point of view, his fears and desires (Raya Harnik, Uri Orlev). Other writers dealt with conflicts

between the individual and society (Nurit Zarchi, Uriya Shavit, Ofra Gilbert-Avni, Roni Givati, Israel Lerman, Yona Tepper).

Certain children's authors, however, still continued to write realistic fiction about the history of the *Yishuv* and the Jewish people. Some, like Devorah Omer, were very successful and contributed significantly to constructing the public image of the past. Research centers such as the Zalman Shazar Center and Yad Ben-Zvi initiated the publication of historical series that described chapters in Jewish history (Dorit Orgad, Ehud Ben-Ezer). These novels avoided the critical historical narrative, which was becoming common in novels and historiography for adults, and with the exception of Daniella Carmi, no attempt was made to illuminate the point of view of the "other," or to write critically about the Zionist enterprise. However, as opposed to historical novels written in the past (for example, Eliezer Smoli), the writers did not hesitate to present the protagonists' weaknesses, nor did they try to pass on the values of national heroism.

The narrative of the Holocaust also changed, and began to describe the second generation in addition to the first. These books described the horrors of the Holocaust and told stories of rescue and the difficulties of integration into the country. The narrative was documentary, realistic or fantastic in nature (Uri Orlev, Gila Almagor, Tamar Bergman, Ami Gedalia, Ruth Almog).

Poetry for children, and especially for young children, became prominent and increasingly focused on the child's point of view, his/her individual personality and emotional and cognitive needs (Yehuda Atlas, Adula, Datya Bat Dor, Hagit Benziman, Shlomit Cohen-Assif, Edna Kremer, Haya Shenhav, Mirik Snir, Rinat Hoffer). In addition, several types of poetry developed: lyrical poetry (Tirza Atar, Nurit Zarchi), satirical poetry (Ephraim Sidon), and philosophical poetry (Michal Snunit) for children.

Fiction for young children also became more varied. Some books were based on realism (Nira Harel, Miriam Roth), others on fantasy (Haya Shenhav, Yaacov Shavit, Shira Gefen), some were instructive (Alona Frankel) and several challenged social norms (Etgar Keret). Beginning in the 1980s there was an increasing number of leading writers for adults who started writing for children as well:

Meir Shalev, David Grossman, Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua, and comics for children developed as well (Uri Fink and Dudu Geva).

Non-Zionist ultra-Orthodox society could not ignore the developments in Hebrew children's literature, and various writers, mainly women, began to write for children. The most prominent among them was Yocheved Sachs. An attempt was also made to write special literature for settlers' children (Emuna Elon), apparently in an attempt to offer them a different narrative and a different value system.

The standards of book design also changed a great deal with the rise of a new generation of illustrators who came in the wake of Arye Navon and Nahum Gutman. Among the outstanding illustrators are Ora Eyal, Ora Eytan, Alona Frankel, Hila Havkin, Avner Katz, Danny Kerman, Michel Kichka, Rutu Modan, Yossi Abulafia and Ruth Zarfati. In the 1990s they were joined by others: Rinat Hoffer, Michal Bonano, David Polonsky, Batya Kolton, Ofra Amit and Yaara Eshet.

Clearly, Hebrew children's literature has undergone far-reaching changes during the past century: it has freed itself of ideological constraints and developed as a complete and multi-layered system, with a strong presence in the Hebrew book industry. It benefits from a large native readership, and functions in the same way as national literatures for children in the Western world.

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