

TEL-AVIV, THE FIRST CENTURY

VISIONS, DESIGNS, ACTUALITIES

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Tel-Aviv Language Police

Zohar Shavit

Tel-Aviv . . . Herzl St. boys and girls were pouring out of *Gymnasia Herzliya* at the end of the school day. Just then, two famous Yiddishists who were traveling around the country found themselves in front of the school. The greater of the two said to his companion: “The Zionists boast that Hebrew has become second nature to the children of Eretz-Israel. Now you’ll see that their boast is nothing but lies. I’ll tweak a child’s ear and I’m sure he won’t yell ‘*Imma!*’ [Mother!] in Hebrew, but rather ‘*Mamme!*’ in Yiddish.” He did as he said he would: he walked up behind a child and tweaked his ear; and the child immediately turned and yelled at him in Hebrew, “*Hamor!*” [What an ass!]. The famous Yiddishist turned to his companion and said, “I’m afraid they’re right . . .”

This anecdote, adduced by Alter Druyanov,¹ reflects the great pride of the Jewish Yishuv in Tel-Aviv’s children, whose Hebrew was natural and native. Speaking Hebrew became one of the symbols of the city of Tel-Aviv and was a point of pride for its leaders. The creation of Tel-Aviv as a Hebrew city symbolized its uniqueness and the great promise it held. The city’s leaders, teachers, and writers, as well as other public figures, joined in the constant struggle to maintain the city’s Hebrew character.

The Hebraization project, established to create a common language and culture for Jews who had immigrated to Eretz-Israel in order to build their national homeland, was seen as the emblem of the Zionist endeavor. It was believed that only a common Hebrew culture would make the transformation of a variety of groups with different languages, symbol systems, and cultural codes into a national society with a shared value system.

In February 1914, a few months before the outbreak of World War I, the “Language War” ended with the victory of the Hebrew camp. *Ezra* (Help), a German-Jewish philanthropic organization that established and fostered educational institutions in Eretz-Israel, agreed that Hebrew would be the language of instruction in physics and mathematics in the Technikum (later called the Technion), and that all the teachers and professors who did not have a command of the language would have to learn it within four years. In 1925, when the Hebrew University was established in Jerusalem, nearly all the courses were taught in Hebrew. During the British Mandate, Hebrew became established as the main spoken language of the Jews of Eretz-Israel.

In 1922, the Mandate authorities decreed that English, Arabic, and Hebrew would be the official languages, and that all governmental orders, official announcements, and official forms must be in Arabic and Hebrew. Joseph Klausner, in a front-page article in the daily *Ha'aretz*, had good reason to refer to the high commissioner's order as “a historic event” and “the bill of rights of our national language.”²

The Yishuv witnessed a surge of publications in Hebrew. Especially notable was a wide range of literature and newspapers. Cultural entrepreneurs and cultural agents made great efforts to introduce the Hebrew language into all spheres of life and to disseminate Hebrew culture. To this end they enlisted every possible verbal and non-verbal text. Starting in 1936, the programs of *Kol Yerushalayim* (the Voice of Jerusalem), the Eretz-Israel radio station, were also recruited for the promotion of Hebrew language and culture.

The Hebrew revival project bore fruit and came to be nationally recognized as a success story, perhaps one of the greatest achievements of the Zionist movement.

Hebrew and Other Languages

Despite recognizing that the Hebraization project was a success story, I contend that the project did not come to full fruition in many parts of the private sphere or in certain parts of the public sphere, even before the large waves of immigration of the Fourth and Fifth Aliya, and especially after. If not for the unrelenting, sometimes even violent, campaign that took place mostly in the first Hebrew city, the Hebrew language would

not have triumphed over other languages—mainly Yiddish—and would not have become the national language of the Yishuv or the official language of the State of Israel.

A considerable part of the first generation of immigrants to the country, and some of the second generation, continued to live a bilingual life in the private sphere and in parts of the public sphere; Hebrew served only some of their needs. Even the shining knight of the Hebrew language, the poet and translator Abraham Shlonsky, peppered his letters in the 1920s with Russian words written in Cyrillic letters (rather than in Hebrew transliteration).³ H. N. Bialik, national poet and glorious symbol of the revival of the Hebrew language, is said to have preferred to speak Yiddish in intimate situations. His conversations with Simon Rawidowicz contain many words in Yiddish, especially when Bialik was emotional—either angry or contemptuous: “*Vos vill er der kakker* [and he repeated this epithet about ten times]? *Vos veys er? Vos hot er gelernt?*” (“What does that *kakker* want? What does he know? What has he learned?”).⁴

The older generation remained loyal to its mother tongue out of convenience, nostalgia, a partial clinging to the “old” culture, lack of a sufficient knowledge of Hebrew, or sometimes even a total lack of knowledge of Hebrew. Many families continued to speak their mother tongue or spoke a mixture of their mother tongue and Hebrew, and this multilingualism was very common.

In the pamphlet “*Gdudenu*” (Our Battalions), the founders of the Hebrew Language Defense League (hereafter HLDL) described the state of the language in the first Hebrew city:

In the streets of Tel-Aviv you hear talking and singing in a variety of foreign languages. You might even think you were not in Eretz-Israel, but in the Diaspora. The situation has reached such a state that newspapers in jargon [Yiddish] have started appearing in Jerusalem, the capital; many announcements in the streets are spoken in jargon; at meetings, speeches are made in various languages; all we need is for foreign-language schools to open and then we will have a second Diaspora here.⁵

In an interview granted to Shimon Shor⁶ in 1997, the elderly Aharon Hoter-Yishai (formerly Chotoretzky) still lamented the linguistic situation in Tel-Aviv in 1923, when the HLDL was established, and particu-

larly the meager presence of Hebrew in the public sphere: “. . . the state of Hebrew was deplorable, really deplorable. Letters from municipal [hereafter TAM] institutions were written in other languages, not Hebrew. All the signs on shops [and] cafés were in other languages. Yiddish, Polish, English.”⁷

Tel-Aviv Fights for Hebrew

Against this background one can understand the emotional address by Mayor Meir Dizengoff to the citizens of Tel-Aviv, and particularly to the immigrants who had recently arrived, pleading with them to help preserve the Hebrew character of the city:

Because Tel-Aviv is not just a Levantine city with a hodgepodge of peoples and languages, but rather a cultured Hebrew city with only one language, the language of the Tanakh, and all the other foreign languages that have been brought from alien countries must make way for this language. . . . Because if every new immigrant brings his former language with him, what will become of us? We will create here a Tower of Babel and not a Hebrew homeland. Preserve the Hebrew spirit of this city, which is our pride and the pride of the entire Jewish people! Forsake your foreign idols and be Hebrew in your speech, in your names, in your signs, and throughout your daily lives.⁸

From Tel-Aviv's earliest days, and especially since the 1920s, the city's leaders and various public bodies acted out of concern for the Hebrew character of the city. Their actions to make Hebrew its dominant language included public relations efforts. In a letter to Tel-Aviv's culture committee, Haim Bograshov (later Haim Boger), the principal of the Herzliya Gymnasia (the first Hebrew school in the world), described these efforts as “propaganda for disseminating the Hebrew language in Tel-Aviv.”⁹ This process consisted of a never-ending struggle to make Hebrew the sole language of communication of both Jewish and non-Jewish groups, an attempt to impose Hebrew on people addressing the TAM, and an attempt to fight groups that conducted their activities, even partially, in languages other than Hebrew and to use various sanctions against them.

Some of Tel-Aviv's residents, including some anonymous figures, took part in the struggle to protect Hebrew. Thus, for example, A. Bena-

yahu of 39A Eliezer Ben-Yehuda St., wrote to the city's culture committee complaining about a shopkeeper who “hung on his store a *sign on which the Hebrew inscription is at the bottom* [emphasis in the original], below the English inscription.”¹⁰ Three days later Mayor Israel Rokách wrote to Mr. Max Cohen of the candy shop on Allenby St. asking him to change his sign.

We take the liberty of drawing his honor's attention to the bad impression on the public made by the defamation of the Hebrew language and we are certain that his honor will take into consideration the feelings of the public and will give the Hebrew language a more respectable place on his sign.¹¹

The Hebrew Language Defense League's Struggle for Hebrew in Tel-Aviv

Most of the activities for establishing the dominance of Hebrew were initiated by the HLDL,¹² however, which saw its role as “. . . defending Hebrew and making it totally dominant in our daily lives.”¹³ The HLDL was established in 1923 by a group of Herzliya Gymnasia students with the help of their teachers, especially Bograshov. Later, they were joined by students of the Levinsky Women Teachers' Seminary, students from the High School of Commerce, a group of workers and clerks, and dozens of young people from Tel-Aviv. According to a study by Shimon Shor, in its founding year the HLDL had 175 members, among them seventy-five students in the upper grades of the Gymnasium, forty workers, thirty students from the Levinsky Seminary, fifteen clerks, and fifteen students of the High School of Commerce.¹⁴

The HLDL initiated a series of public events. For example, three years after the death of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, “the reviver of the language,” they wanted “to decorate passersby on the streets of Tel-Aviv with ‘Ben-Yehuda’ ribbons” and also asked the city “to kindly decide to open a street named after Ben-Yehuda.”¹⁵ They also set up a teachers' department that taught Hebrew at no charge, initiated the establishment of a group of librarians that helped libraries of *Histadrut Ha'ovdim Ha'ivrim* (the Union of Hebrew Workers) and Barzilai Library, and built a reading tent on the seashore. In December 1924, the HLDL also organized the Hebrew Book Exhibition¹⁶ and evenings of popular opera.¹⁷ Members went out into the streets and handed out flyers promoting

Hebrew (Hoter-Yishai, in his old age, called them “stickers”): “A schism of languages—a schism of hearts,” “One language—one soul,” “Hebrew [person], speak Hebrew!”

Most of these activities initiated by the HLDL went far beyond public events and included snooping, which Haim Arlozoroff angrily referred to as “the language secret police.”¹⁸ His anger was sparked by a letter sent to him by the HLDL Jerusalem Branch, signed by M. Ish-Shalom and M. Carmeli.¹⁹ They complained about Arlozoroff’s use of letterhead paper on which his address appeared only in English and also about the fact that he was corresponding with Zionist institutions in English.

Arlozoroff argued that the HLDL had no right to interfere in what he considered a private matter. However, the HLDL believed that the correspondence of the head of the political department of the Jewish Agency was always a public matter and never “a personal and private matter.”²⁰ In a subsequent letter they compared the use of the language by public figures to questions relating to Hebrew labor and purchase of foreign products:

And just as we think that Ferdman’s hiring of foreign laborers *in his own orchard* [emphasis in the original] is not a private matter, and just as buying foreign products is not a private matter, and so on, so is it not a private matter when someone, and even more so when someone who is our political representative, shows contempt for Hebrew, even in his personal letters.²¹

When the HLDL learned that A. Lerner, a member of the city council, had participated in a meeting of the Association of Polish Immigrants “that was run in a foreign language” and “had given a speech in a foreign language,” they hastened to write a letter of complaint, which, however, did not get a sympathetic hearing from the TAM. The response was that “Tel-Aviv Municipality cannot oversee the doings and activities of a member of the city council outside the municipality and in matters that are not connected to it.”²²

The issue of the relations between the private sphere and the public sphere was on the HLDL’s agenda from its inception. It obviously had a very broad understanding of the boundaries of the public sphere, as is clear from letters it sent to several public figures. It did not hesitate to

interfere in the education of the children of Dr. Pochovsky, a member of the TAM council, who sent them to a non-Hebrew-speaking school. It is unclear from the correspondence which school it was, but most probably it was the Alliance School. The HLDL argued that it was “a school that attacks our language and culture and undermines the foundations of our school system throughout the country,” and therefore demanded that he send his children to a Hebrew-language school.²³

The fact that a man like him, one of the builders of the new Yishuv, sends his children to a school that is not one of ours, for whatever reasons, and thus forgets his obligation toward the nation—this fact requires not just one league of “defenders” but rather a whole public of “defenders.” . . . According to him, “educating one’s children is the parents’ business.” We are very, very surprised by this statement. As a doctor, his honor undoubtedly knows that if a well-known person comes down with a disease known to be contagious and for whatever reason is not willing to cure it, the public has the full right to force that person to submit to its orders, because the individual’s illness endangers everyone and is a threat to their lives.²⁴

Even Meir Dizengoff was not immune. When the younger HLDL members found out that a letter from his firm was printed on “English letterhead paper without a single Hebrew letter” (though the letter itself was written in Hebrew), they quickly demanded that the matter be set right.²⁵ TAM secretary Yehuda Nedivi responded a week later, “Since the letter itself is written in Hebrew, one should not make an issue of [something] that certainly does not show anyone’s intention to be contemptuous of our national language.”²⁶ In addition to acting as the “language secret police,” the HLDL set up a squad that walked through the streets of Tel-Aviv correcting all the mistakes on signs and putting up Hebrew signs to replace the non-Hebrew ones.

Besides sanctions, help was offered to those willing to adapt to Hebrew. For example, *Yedi’ot Tel-Aviv* proposed Hebrew names for businesses; for a shop selling various types of sewing items it proposed the name “*Caftor Vaferach*” (“knop and flower”); for a restaurant it proposed “*Bete’avon*” (“bon appetit”); for a messenger service it suggested “*Naph-tali*” (after one of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, whose emblem was a hind let loose), and for a vegetarian restaurant they proposed “*Yechi*” (“let them live”).²⁷

The posters on billboards of the TAM, in addition to the HLDL manifestos, suggest that some of the interactions of daily life were not carried out in Hebrew. The HLDL endeavored to change that and demanded of “the Hebrew public” that they communicate in Hebrew. Of the merchants they demanded, “Reply to your customers only in Hebrew! Keep your accounts only in Hebrew! Conduct every transaction and every sale only in Hebrew!” Of the customers they demanded, “Ask your questions only in Hebrew, and if they do not understand you, harden your heart [and] explain once or twice until you get what you need!”²⁸

The HLDL demanded that when using public transportation—in those days few people owned private cars—passengers force the drivers to speak Hebrew. They were asked to insist that Hebrew be the language of communication with the drivers and to comment publicly if they caught drivers conversing with other passengers in any language other than Hebrew:

Hebrew person, when you enter the coach and the car speak to the driver only in Hebrew! Do not answer the driver if he speaks any other language! If you hear the drivers talking or calling out in a foreign language while you are entering or getting out of the coach or the car, do not remain silent; address them and point out their wrongdoing.²⁹

They also demanded that the TAM Council, “when drawing up contracts with the automobile offices, demand assurances that they will forbid the drivers of their automobiles to continue showing contempt for the Hebrew language.”³⁰

In 1928, the HLDL complained that

In the casino on Tel-Aviv’s shore, owned by Tel-Aviv Municipality, a play was presented in a foreign language (German). We view this as a grave insult not only to ourselves, who are young and zealous, but also to all the citizens of Tel-Aviv, the first Hebrew city.³¹

Nahum Greenblatt, who had rented the casino, immediately responded and wrote to top TAM officials:

I hereby wish to express my sincere regret over this unintentional error. I assure you that from now on, as long as the casino is in my hands, such an event will never happen again. Please forgive me for the above.³²

In 1930, the HLDL protested against the screening of a Yiddish-language film, *Die Yiddische Mamme* (The Jewish Mother) to be screened at the Mugrabi Opera Cinema, after the owners of the Eden and Ophir cinemas had committed themselves not to show films in Yiddish on condition that all the other cinemas act accordingly. In a letter to Deputy Mayor Rokach, the HLDL claimed that “already in the early days of the Tel-Aviv Committee, a tradition was established that jargon would not be used in public in Tel-Aviv without permission. When the city gave the cinema as a concession, there was a special clause in the lease regarding the prohibition of renting the hall for plays in jargon.”³³

On the basis of this lease, the HLDL demanded that the owners of the Mugrabi Opera Cinema not screen the film. Nevertheless, the film was shown on 27 September, under the protection of the British Police. A riot broke out in the hall, and following the intervention of Deputy Mayor Rokach, a repeat screening was forbidden.³⁴

Violent Struggle

The struggle for the Hebrew language was characterized by a very passionate, almost obsessive devotion to the goal, and often involved violence. In 1914, when Chaim Zhitlowsky was invited to give a lecture in Yiddish in a Jaffa café about “the future of the Jewish people,” *Herzliya Gymnasia* students arrived with their principal, Dr. Bograshov, at the house where Zhitlowsky was staying and tried to persuade him not to lecture in Yiddish. When they failed to do so, Bograshov tore his collar, in a kind of *kria* (a ceremony of rending associated with Jewish mourning), and the students waiting outside tore their shirts and shouted to Zhitlowsky, “Over our dead bodies” (literally, “You will be treading on our bodies”), in an attempt to keep him from leaving for the lecture. In the *Book of the Second Aliya*, Mary Yatziv³⁵ writes that the house where Zhitlowsky was staying was stoned and gunshots were heard. Two weeks before, a stink bomb was thrown when Abraham Goldfaden’s operetta *Shulamis* was presented in Yiddish.

In their attempts to prevent lectures and plays in Yiddish from taking place, the HLDL did not hesitate to use force. They threatened the owners of theaters that they would cause damage wherever non-Hebrew events took place. They regularly bought tickets to plays and disrupted

them, caused an electrical short in a theater, and threw stink bombs.³⁶ Hoter-Yishai described their methods in the struggle against the use of foreign languages on shop signs—they offered to share the cost of changing the signs to Hebrew. After the owner of one café objected, Hoter-Yishai smashed his large display window.³⁷

On the eve of Simchat Torah (7 October 1928), HLDL members tried to disrupt a reception in honor of Jacob Zerubavel that *Poalei Zion Smol* (the Zionist-Marxist party) wanted to hold in a club in Tel-Aviv. Members of the *Betar* youth movement and HLDL members marched through the streets and then tried to break into the club; when they encountered resistance, they threw bricks and stones and ran off. This rampage generated a storm of controversy, led to the establishment of a committee of inquiry, and was denounced by the TAM council.

Jewish newspapers in the United States claimed that children were expelled from *Herzliya Gymnasia* as part of the battle against Yiddish. Thus, for example, it was reported that the children of the printer of *Das Yiddische Arbeiter* (The Jewish Worker) were suspended from the school until their father would commit himself to not publishing pamphlets in Yiddish.³⁸ Dr. Matmon-Cohen reportedly urged eight-year-olds “to battle Yiddish to the last drop of their blood” and also reportedly expelled a girl from school who replied that she was in favor of both Hebrew and Yiddish. Similarly, it was reported that Yiddishists were dismissed from their places of work.³⁹ However, it is not clear whether these events actually took place, or whether they were simply unsubstantiated rumors resulting from internal battles between the Zionists and the Yiddishists in the United States.

The City Officials' Struggle for Hebrew

It is apparent from correspondence in the TAM Archive that the city used to return letters addressed to it that were not written in Hebrew. In an internal memo, Nedivi wrote, “Please do not accept official letters written in any language other than Hebrew.”⁴⁰ High-ranking officials spent time sending back the non-Hebrew letters, adding a letter signed by the mayor or his deputy or the TAM secretary.

The accompanying laconic letters generally took the following form:

To:

Re: His honor's invoices of January 1, 1926, written in a foreign language

Dear Sir,

Enclosed we are returning the abovementioned invoices together with [his] letter. We believe that his honor is aware of the fact that the language of our municipality is Hebrew, and therefore we would be pleased if he wrote to us only in that language.

Respectfully,

D. Bloch

Deputy Mayor of Tel-Aviv⁴¹

Only rarely was a brief explanation given. A letter in German was returned to Mr. Nathan Coronel with the excuse that “we do not have anyone in our office who can translate this into Hebrew”;⁴² Mr. Eliezer Axelrod was told that his letter was returned “because it is not possible for us to conduct correspondence in a foreign language”;⁴³ Mr. Bloomstein, of a book shop on Allenby St., who had apparently sent an invoice to the city, received a warning letter: “Invoices and letters in languages other than Hebrew will be returned in future to his honor.”⁴⁴

Mr. Weintraub of the Bar Kochba Café received the following explanation: “We think that his honor knows that the language of our municipality is Hebrew and therefore we will be pleased if he will write to us only in that language.”⁴⁵ To Shlomo Feingold they wrote, “I see it as my duty to bring to his honor's attention the distressing fact that his honor finds it necessary to conduct all his written transactions with his municipality in a foreign language, even though he knows that the official language of the municipality, and especially with regard to its citizen-residents, is Hebrew.”⁴⁶

In later years, the style of the letters became even more laconic and less polite. Unlike the first letters, which politely stated, “Therefore we ask him to write to us only in the above language and we will not delay reading his request,”⁴⁷ subsequent letters stated, “Enclosed we are returning his honor's letter written in a foreign language. Please write to us in Hebrew.”⁴⁸ Letters to public institutions had a reproachful tone. Thus, for example, a letter to the Zionist leadership signed by Bloch, deputy mayor of Tel-Aviv, stated, “We regret that we need to remind you that the

language of Tel-Aviv Municipality is *Hebrew* [emphasis in the original] and that you must write to us only in that language.”⁴⁹ Usually, the language in which the letter had been written was referred to as a “foreign language”;⁵⁰ the few exceptions concerned letters written in German, Arabic, or Russian.⁵¹

Occasionally the recipients responded positively, as in the apologetic letter of Shlomo Feingold (which he signed “Yeffe Zahav”): “I applaud with thanks his comment, which is both polite and courteous. I assure him in the most serious and positive manner that from this day on I will correspond with his honorable office only in the language of the prophets.”⁵² Ms. Gertrude Samuel, too, sent Dizengoff an apologetic letter in which she explained why the invitation to the exhibition she had organized at Mrs. Rokach’s home was in English, and not in Hebrew: “I am sorry for this sad error of mine and I strongly feel a need to explain this matter to your honor and to promise that it will definitely not happen again.”⁵³

In a letter to the hotel owner Mrs. Frieda Moskowitz, Bloch rejected her request to continue keeping the guest book at her hotel in English. She argued that at the age of fifty she could not learn to write Hebrew and that she had neither the time nor the ability to do so.⁵⁴ Bloch demanded that the hotel guest book (which apparently was open to police inspection) “be written in Hebrew.” He explained that, “One must not require the municipal officials and policemen to know foreign languages used by perhaps a tiny minority of the city’s population.”⁵⁵

Dizengoff severely reproached Moshe Gopenko, the principal of the Shulamit School of Music, because a change in the evening program was announced in Russian: “First of all, you all need to know that the Shulamit Music School is a Hebrew school and that during official performances no one is permitted to speak to the audience from the stage in a foreign language.” Dizengoff added, “I heard that several teachers permit themselves to teach in the Russian language. I am informing his honor that this must be stopped and that every teacher must adapt to our language. His honor must make it clear that the language of instruction is Hebrew.”⁵⁶

The HLDL was on the lookout for every infraction, both major and minor, and spoke out whenever, in its view, the honor of the Hebrew language was besmirched. It protested that the inscriptions on the trucks

that cleaned the city, “the wagons that spray water in the streets,” did not grant Hebrew its rightful place because they “are written in English on the top and in Hebrew on the bottom.”⁵⁷ On the same day it received an answer signed by Nedivi, in the name of the mayor: “Even before we received your abovementioned letter, the order was given to change the inscription on the vehicle.”⁵⁸ In an internal memo, Nedivi wrote, “I saw that on the new water-spraying vehicles they had written the name of Tel-Aviv Municipality in English on top and in Hebrew on the bottom. Please inform me as to who decided this matter.”⁵⁹ He explained to the HLDL that, “This inscription was made abroad and the vehicle arrived here with the inscription [already] on it.”⁶⁰

In addition to city officials and members of the HLDL, the city’s residents were on the alert regarding the presence of Hebrew in the public sphere. They kept track of the “level of Hebraization,” pinpointed every infraction in the public sphere, and acted determinedly to correct it. Thus, for example, Bezalel Yaffe of the Geula Company wrote an angry letter to Dr. Benzion Mossensohn, chairman of TAM’s culture committee, complaining that the collector of the *varko* (*vergi* in Turkish—property tax) had not agreed to give him a receipt in Hebrew and had claimed that even the city was willing to receive receipts “written in Arabic or Turkish.” Yaffe demanded that “a regulation be enacted that would require every municipal official to respect our language and its right to exist. Every transaction with the local and central government would be only in Hebrew; the municipality [would be] forbidden to pay anyone unless they presented receipts in our language.”⁶¹

With regard to non-Jews, a directive was given in one of the internal memos to accept letters “only in one of the official languages,”⁶² but even in these cases the TAM tried to impose Hebrew on the officials of the British Mandate. For example, in a letter to Dr. Rankin, the chief physician of Jaffa District, Bloch called his attention to the difficulties caused by letters in English: “We allow ourselves to bring to his honor’s attention that all the letters to us from his office are not in Hebrew and that this makes our work very difficult.”⁶³ A year later, the Health Ministry official in charge of Tel-Aviv tried to persuade Dizengoff to add an English translation to letters in Hebrew. He explained his request on technical grounds: letters arriving on Friday afternoon would not be dealt with before Monday, because of the Jews’ and Christians’ Sabbaths.⁶⁴ Appar-

ently he did not receive a positive reply, because he sent a repeat request a month later.⁶⁵

This practice of sending repeat requests continued for years. Thus, for example, a complaint was sent to the district officer of Tel-Aviv to the effect that recently “letters have been received from his honor’s office only in the English language,” and included the request that “it be arranged that in future we receive his letters at least with a Hebrew translation attached.”⁶⁶ City officials continuously monitored the Hebrew version of the various forms used by the British Mandate. For example, a long correspondence was conducted concerning “the fractured Hebrew in form O.M. 41 with regard to extermination of pests,⁶⁷ and the officials were not satisfied until they were informed that there were new and corrected forms.⁶⁸

Hebrew in Tel-Aviv—Some Data

To what extent did the efforts to make Hebrew the dominant language in Tel-Aviv bear fruit? According to data of the Palestine office of the Zionist Organization, forty-three percent of Tel-Aviv’s residents spoke Hebrew in 1914;⁶⁹ slightly more than the percentage of Hebrew-speakers in the general Jewish population (forty percent), which at the time numbered 85,000.⁷⁰ According to the 1916–1918 census, seventy-five percent of the young people in the new towns and villages (Tel-Aviv and the colonies), stated that their language was Hebrew.⁷¹ In Jaffa, in Haifa, and in the rest of the country the proportion of Hebrew-speakers in the second generation was about half.⁷² In the parents’ generation the picture was different: slightly more than a third spoke Hebrew in Tel-Aviv; in the villages, in Jaffa, and in Haifa the proportion of Hebrew-speakers was only one-fifth.⁷³ The number of Hebrew-speakers continued to grow. According to a 1928 survey, sixty percent of Tel-Aviv residents could speak Hebrew.⁷⁴

According to a memo presented to David Ben-Gurion,⁷⁵ two-thirds of the 300,000 Jewish adults (some 200,000), knew Hebrew to some degree.⁷⁶ The author of the memo was concerned about the one-third of the adult population that did not know Hebrew, and held a pessimistic vision of the future: “In the absence of a national effort, in another five years the number of residents in the country whose language is Hebrew will be a negligible minority.”⁷⁷

Ben-Gurion was concerned about the place of Hebrew in the life of the Yishuv. Several years earlier (in 1930), in a questionnaire that he asked to have administered to members of the Histadrut (*The Questionnaire for Studying the Life-style of the Workers*) he included several questions concerning the degree of Hebrew knowledge among Histadrut members:⁷⁸

Are there books in the house, and in which languages?

Does he read Hebrew newspapers, non-Hebrew newspapers, and which ones? (Russian, Yiddish, German, etc., and give the names)

Does he know Hebrew? Does his wife know Hebrew?

The language he uses in speaking with his wife, the language he uses in speaking to his children.

In light of the surveys conducted in November 1948, six months after the declaration of the state, this concern seems unjustified. At that time, seventy-five percent of all the 700,000 Jewish residents of Israel stated that they use Hebrew as their sole or main language.⁷⁹ These data are indeed impressive, but one should view them in light of other data concerning the scope of knowledge of Hebrew. There is reason to believe that survey and census results often testify much more to the image of the language and its status than to the scope of its use and respondents’ depth of knowledge. It is reasonable to believe that the respondents to the surveys, aware of the place of the Hebrew language in the national revival, were unwilling to admit a lack of knowledge of the language. Thus, for example, a rather specious picture arises from the census carried out by the British Mandate in October 1922. Of 83,794 Jews who were counted, 80,396 declared that Hebrew was their spoken language, while only 1,946 declared it was Yiddish. Not even one of the 15,065 residents of Tel-Aviv declared Yiddish to be his language (as opposed to 999 of 5,639 residents of Jerusalem and 356 of 5,087 residents of Jaffa).⁸⁰

It seems plausible that the results of this census, carried out by a foreign government, was an expression of the desire to create an image of the Yishuv as a Hebrew entity rather than a reflection of the real situation. Roberto Bachi argues in his statistical analyses that one must read some of the census findings carefully because, according to him, they “were tainted to a great degree by inaccurate declarations that resulted from intentional political propaganda aimed at making all the Jews declare ‘Hebrew’ in response to the question about languages.”⁸¹

The understanding that these censuses ought to serve the Zionist propaganda effort is clear in Ahad Ha'am's angry letter to Mordechai Ben-Hillel Hacoheh, in which he reproached him for statistics published in the Russian-language Jewish journal *Razsvet* sent by Bezalel Yaffe.

According to that, forty-three percent of all the residents speak Hebrew, and thirty-five percent speak jargon. I am surprised at our Rabbi Bezalel, who has written something incorrect that can serve as ammunition for the Hebrew-haters. Because if even in Tel-Aviv most of the residents speak other languages, and jargon is almost as dominant as Hebrew, where is the revival of Hebrew? In order to give a correct idea of the situation as it really is, one should have broken down the figures—children only, men only, women only—and then the picture would have been totally different, and everyone would have seen that almost all the children speak Hebrew, and that most of the men do.⁸²

Ahad Ha'am was right. All the data indicate clearly the increase in the number of Hebrew-speaking children. Already in 1914 the percentage of children who used Hebrew as their sole or main language was 53.7 percent, as opposed to the percentage of adults, 25.6 percent.⁸³ In November 1948, 93.4 percent of children between the ages of two and fourteen used Hebrew as their sole language.⁸⁴ According to Bachi, from 1916 to 1918 Yiddish was spoken by about seventy percent of the parents of Ashkenazi origin and by about one-third of the second generation. In 1948, the percentage of Yiddish-speakers was still forty-seven percent.⁸⁵

It seems that the linguistic situation in the private sphere involved the use of the mother tongue or a macaronic language (a mixture of words from several languages in a single sentence). Sometimes there was a "division of labor" of languages among the speakers: the children spoke to their parents in Hebrew, and the parents spoke to the children in other languages.

In addition to examining the division of labor between the languages in the private and the public spheres with regard to the use of Hebrew, one should also examine the gap between active and passive knowledge of the language. The ability to speak Hebrew is hardly ever a guarantee of full command of the language; not everyone who declares himself a Hebrew-speaker knows how to read and write the language. An indication of this can be found in several sources, including surveys of the

extent of knowledge of the language, data regarding book loans from libraries, and the import of books to the country. The results of a survey conducted in 1947 among members of Kibbutz Beit Hashitta (founded in 1928) reveal the large gap between the ability to speak Hebrew and the ability to read and write it; ninety-five percent of the survey's participants responded that they are able to speak Hebrew, but only thirty-eight percent responded that they are also able to write it.⁸⁶

The data about book imports show a huge demand for non-Hebrew books, a demand that even grew during the time of the Yishuv. The import of books to Eretz-Israel grew more than 2.5 times between 1923 and 1929 (from 10,000 to 25,823 books); this growth rate was greater than that of the Jewish population, and certainly of the adult Jewish population (the 1922 census counted 83,790 Jews; in 1931, 174,606 Jews were counted).⁸⁷

An analysis of the languages of the libraries' books shows a clear preference for non-Hebrew books, despite the favoring of Hebrew books in the library's purchasing policy. This was especially true for libraries of *kibbutzim* and *moshavim*. In the libraries of Hakibbutz Hameuchad most of the budget was spent on buying Hebrew books: IL 4,794,389, in comparison to IL 335 for buying books in other languages.⁸⁸

In Tel-Aviv, where the number of Hebrew-speakers was especially large, the number of foreign-language books in the TAM library kept growing.⁸⁹ In 1934, the library's foreign-language books outnumbered Hebrew books by many thousands, and this was the case three years later as well. In the Hakibbutz Hameuchad libraries, where it was decided to earmark nearly the entire requisition budget for Hebrew books, one-third of the books were not in Hebrew. The large number foreign-language books shows that only part of the Yishuv in the 1930s and 1940s was either able or motivated to read books in Hebrew.

A survey of Tel-Aviv's Sha'arei Zion Municipal Library in 1925–26 shows that a large number of readers, mainly students, borrowed books in Hebrew, but many continued to borrow non-Hebrew books. Thus, for example, in the month of Tishrei, readers borrowed 1,456 Hebrew books, 400 in Russian, 111 in German, 99 in English, 85 in French, and 40 in Yiddish. In Adar, they borrowed 1,306 books in Hebrew, 460 in Russian, 102 in German, 89 in English, 67 in French, and 113 in Yiddish.⁹⁰ If we take into account the fact that a large part of the books' borrow-

ers comprised students who read only Hebrew, the proportion of adults who read Hebrew shrinks greatly. One may assume, therefore, that a large part of the public continued to read in its mother tongue or in the language of its country of origin. Even when most of the books in the library were in Hebrew, about one-tenth of the readers still read in other languages, and more than one-fifth of the readers read other languages in addition to Hebrew.

Hebrew culture and language were granted a special status and value in the construction of an autonomous Jewish national society in Eretz-Israel. Because of this great symbolic value, cultural entrepreneurs emphasized the differences between the role of Hebrew culture in the Diaspora and its role in Eretz-Israel. In the Diaspora, Jews—even Zionists and Hebrew-enthusiasts—consumed a considerable part of their culture in languages other than Hebrew. In Eretz-Israel they sought totality, exclusivity, and total dominance of Hebrew culture, both in the public sphere and in the private sphere. The official ideology demanded that one must live only in Hebrew and consume culture only in Hebrew: one must not only read Hebrew newspapers and Hebrew books and attend Hebrew theater, but also shout and steal in Hebrew. The national poet H. N. Bialik described his hopes of Hebrew in a conversation (in Yiddish) with Rawidowicz: “*Ich vill oz m’zol alles tun oif Hebraish . . . M’zol oich kakken oif Hebraish, schreien, ganeven, noifen oif Hebraish . . .*” (“I want everything to be done in Hebrew . . . One should shit in Hebrew, shout, steal, commit adultery in Hebrew.”)⁹¹

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Frameworks of non-Hebrew culture were also created in Eretz-Israel, but Hebrew culture succeeded in creating the image that it was dominant in all aspects of life. It seems that one of the great achievements of the Hebraization project was the image of the naturalness, authenticity, and totality of an entire public that lived every aspect of its life in Hebrew.

My study, whose initial findings are presented here, challenges the accuracy of this image. Its power was great, but in practice it appears that the renunciation of other languages and cultures took place only at the official level, as Nissan Torov declared in 1936: “Total ‘Hebrews’ are, for the moment, the exception.”⁹² A considerable portion of immigrants

were not totally cut off from their original cultures. Those cultures were imported to Eretz-Israel and existed in it alongside the official culture, but like illegitimate children, they were ignored and excluded.

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NOTES

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