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STOWARZYSZENIE ŻYDOWSKI INSTYTUT HISTORYCZNY W POLSCE**

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# **KWARTALNIK HISTORII ŻYDÓW JEWISH HISTORY QUARTERLY**

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Academy. The article by Olga Vasilyeva (Department of Manuscripts, National Library of Russia), an distinguished expert on manuscript illuminations, deals with highly interesting cases of the influence of ornamental patterns in the early manuscripts from the Abraham Firkovich collection of Russian decorative art. Dagmara Budzioch (Jagiellonian University), describes an illustrated scroll of Esther from the collection of the Jewish Historical Institute, she also discusses the subject of decorative art in Hebrew manuscripts. The volume also includes an article by Magdalena Ruta (Jagiellonian University) on Yiddish literature in post-war Poland (1945-1968).

Zohar Shavit

## CENTERS OF HEBREW LITERATURE IN EASTERN EUROPE AT THE END OF THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AND THE BEGINNING OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup>

Historiographies of Hebrew literature maintain that centers of Hebrew literature began to develop in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland, toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were based on defined groups of writers, readers and several entrepreneurs in the book industry, who created, for the first time in the history of modern Hebrew literature, a solid literary center.

By "literary center" I refer here to a certain territory in which an institutionalized group of writers, sharing a common sentiment of a national identity, settled for a certain period of time in a certain territory, and produced belletristic texts regularly and continuously. With the help of several literary institutions, such as publishing houses and literary journals, they addressed these texts to a specific group of readers, who could support the literary activities of the centers, either materially or ideologically, or even both.

In this paper I maintain that such a description of the literary centers in Eastern Europe was the outcome not only of an illusion, but of an optical mistake as well. This, despite the fact that those years saw the birth of some of the most magnificent and important works of modern Hebrew literature. In those years, texts considered the pinnacle of Hebrew literature were written and published.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the centers of Hebrew literature in Eastern Europe seemed to be flourishing. The cultural entrepreneurs viewed those years as the period in which Modern Hebrew literature reached its climax. The vivid and potent character of the literary centers was discerned in three of their aspects:

- The emergence of quite a few Hebrew periodicals and Hebrew publishing houses.
- The enlargement of the community of Hebrew writers.
- The enormous and unprecedented growth in readership of Hebrew letters.

This prosperity of the literary centers was endorsed by the fact that, materially and economically, the centers of Hebrew literature in Eastern Europe had a strong technical, financial and cultural infrastructure.

In Poland, there were over sixty Jewish printing houses in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Friedberg 1950), thirty-three of them in Warsaw alone, and thirteen of them were devoted primarily to the printing of Hebrew books. Jews controlled 40% of all the printing houses in the Kingdom of Poland and, in some cities, like Lodz and Vilna, they

Some of these printing houses published books in Polish, but a considerable number of them printed Hebrew books as well. At first, these were mainly religious books, but their facilities and typefaces could easily serve for printing secular literature, and some of them did indeed make that shift.

In 1888, 5.7 million Jews (75% of world Jewry) lived in Eastern Europe. Several thousands of this huge community would suffice to create a readership for Hebrew literature and serve as its audience. The new group of writers of *Ha-Tehiyya* (Revival), which emerged in the 1880s, pronounced its intention to build in Eastern Europe a literary life like that of "normal nations of the world" and succeeded in creating, for the first time in the history of modern Hebrew literature, a large enough readership to sustain its existence.

Until the 1880s, the readership of Hebrew literature was rather limited, as is apparent from the number of subscribers to Hebrew journals, even if we take into account the fact that the number of active readers was a few times larger than the number of buyers. *Ha-Shachar* (1869, in Vienna, for Jews in Eastern Europe) had 1300 subscribers, and encountered financial difficulties, for one thing because they would not pay for their subscriptions (Klausner 1953, 5: 44-67). *Ha-Maggid* (1856, in Prussia, for Jews in Eastern Europe) had 1800 subscribers in its good days but, after *Ha-Karmel* had appeared in 1860 in Vilna and competed for readers, the number of its subscribers fell to 1000; *Ha-Karmel* had 800 subscribers (Sokolow 1934, 2: 27-28).

When published in St. Petersburg, the newspaper *Ha-Meliz* (1860, in Odessa) had 1200 subscribers, but when it moved to Odessa, it flourished with 2500 subscribers (Sokolow 1934, 2: 28). Its publisher, Alexander Tsederboim, was forced to support it by putting out a Yiddish supplement called *Kol Mevasser*, starting on October 23, 1862, which continued to appear (with breaks) for eleven years until November 27, 1873. Eight years later, on October 3, 1881, Tsederboim also founded a parallel weekly in Yiddish, *Jüdisches Volksblatt* (Shmeruk 1978: 262-265). *Ha-Zefirah* (1862, in Warsaw) had 1500 subscribers in 1880.

These journals centered on popular scientific information and news of what was happening in the world. Economically, they were based on the writer's own investment, or on a single patronage activity, but in general they were not self-supporting.

In the 1880s a significant change took place. Two literary centers of Hebrew literature arose. One of the centers was in Warsaw, and the other one in Odessa. These centers were characterized by an institutionalized system of a rich literary life: publishing houses, literary journals, newspapers and literary criticism, and a readership that provided partial financial support to these institutions.

In Warsaw, several writers gathered around the newspaper *Ha-Zefirah*, edited by Nachum Sokolow (1859-1936), the founding father of modern Hebrew journalism. This group included David Frischmann (1859-1922), Ben Avigdor [Abraham Leib Shalkovich] (1866/1868[?]-1921) and Isaac Leib Peretz (1851/1852?-1915).

In Odessa, we find the most prominent writers of the Hebrew Revival movement, such as Achad Ha-Am [Asher Hirsch Ginsberg] (1856-1927), Yehoshua Chana Rawnitzki (1859-1944), Hayyim Nachman Bialik (1873-1934), Saul Tchernichowsky (1875-1943), Mendele Mokher Sefarim [Shalom Jacob Abramowitsch] (1835-1917), Elchanan Leib Lewinsky (1857/1858?-1910), S. Ben-Zion [Simcha Ben-Zion Alter Gutman] (1870-1932), Judah Steinberg (1863-1908) and Jacob Fichmann (1881-1958).

In addition to a new daily newspaper, *Ha-Yom* (1886-1887), newspapers were re-established (*Ha-Zefirah* in 1886), semi-literary journals like *Ha-Asif* (1884) and *Ha-Zeman* (1890) were founded, as well as journals with a prominent literary orientation.

periodicals and publishing went through a process of differentiation and modernization and journals began to specialize in different areas.

Significant changes took place in book publishing, too. Within a short time, Hebrew publishing became modern publishing in the full sense of the term.

Mordecai (Marcus) Ehrenpreis, a scion of a traditional printer's family, who had witnessed the change taking place in traditional Hebrew publishing, left us an exceptional testimony concerning the changes in Hebrew publishing. He described the old method of selling books when peddlers (*Packenträger*) carried their merchandise while wandering between the Jewish villages:

I cite:

"[...] there were all kinds of prayer books, Bibles, holy books for women in Yiddish, story books, Hasidic legends and, to some extent, also literature of the new Haskalah, including stories, poems and essays in Hebrew" (Ehrenpreis 1953:17).

In the 1880s, a dramatic change took place in the structure of publishing, which Ehrenpreis describes as follows:

"Throughout the entire country, big Hebrew publishers started emerging who had access to considerable capital. My father's business, which was relatively modest, couldn't cope with the rising competition and started declining rapidly" (Ehrenpreis 1953: 21).

Indeed, in Warsaw, new publishing houses were set up one after the other. In 1891, Ben-Avigdor founded the union of publishers, called *Merkaz*. In 1893, *Merkaz* set up the publishing house *Achisefer* and published the collection *Netivot*. Ben-Avigdor was also involved in setting up in 1893 the publishing house *Achiasaf*. *Achiasaf* was established by the spiritual Zionist group, *Bnei Moshe* in order to:

"[...] supply [readers] with spiritual food healthy for their minds, in a pleasant and attractive form, which will be splendid teaching in a splendid vessel" (Kol ha-Koreh, published by the leaders of *Achiasaf*, quoted in Pogrebinski 1950-1951: 39).

In its early years, *Achiasaf* was supported by the Jewish tea dealer and patron Klonimus Zeev Wissotsky (1824-1904). Later, Ben-Avigdor established another publishing house, *Sifre Agora*, which aimed at publishing pocket books in Hebrew for a wider audience. After a conflict with *Achiasaf* in 1896, he founded *Tushiyyah*, which was modeled on the big Russian publishers, and published a series of books designed like chapbooks. In this framework *Tushiyyah* published no fewer than 300 titles!

Similarly, in Warsaw, in 1885, a publishing house, *Eked Sforim*, was founded to publish novels in bi-weekly installments. Smaller publishing houses followed suit.

The modernization of Hebrew publishing was expressed in a change of its structure, which was characterized by the stabilization of the market and by a distinction that began to emerge between the various components of publishing, as well as by the division of publishing functions – first and foremost the new distinction between the publisher and the writer, which was described by Ben-Kohelet as follows:

"What did Hebrew literature know in those days about publishers and other such

a place to print it. Sometimes he found a printer who would dare to print it at his own expense but, if he didn't find such a printer, he would have to risk his own money and then the book was published and sold by booksellers who went from city to city with their merchandise; a certain number of books was sold in this way and the rest remained; but literary publishing, the orderly publishing and selling of books, the appearance of issues at fixed times, that was a totally new contract" (My emphasis, Z.S; Ben-Kohelet 1916: 34).

The shift to modern publishing, based on the European model, and the division of labor between the publisher and the writer, resulted also in a change in the author's status.

Previously, it had not been customary to pay royalties, except in rare cases, and even then, only in barter – in copies of books, as indicated by Azriel Nathan Frank's story about a certain printer of books:

"That it is possible to pay the author or the translator in real money, and not in copies, for his work, never occurred to that honest man" (Frank 1916: 15.)

And further:

"Writers made a living whichever way they could: some by shop keeping, some by teaching, some by matchmaking, some in whatever they found. Whenever a writer was free from his business and his work, he'd grab a pen and write something. Whenever he needed financing, if the course of his business stopped suddenly or he had to marry off his daughter, he would take his book in his knapsack and go courting donors" (Frank 1916: 13).

This situation changed patently towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Hebrew writers began to receive royalties. Achad Ha-Am testified in a letter he wrote to Dr. Yehudah Leib Katzenelson in December 17, 1902:

"It has been the rule of *Ha-Shiloach* since the day of its founding to pay royalties to all those who contribute to it" (Achad Ha-Am 1918-1924,3: 90).

Gradually, an awareness developed that being a Hebrew writer meant being a member of a profession whose practitioners were able to support themselves by their writing. The extent of the change is clearly indicated by the fact that, in its early years, *Tushiyah* publishers paid the considerable sum of almost 20,000 (to be more exact 19,150) Rubles in royalties (*Ha-Meliz*, No. 178, 1900; See Frank 1916: 20). This was rather a considerable sum, as the sum of 300-500 Rubles a month was a modest but secure source of support for a family (Ruppin 1934-1935, 1,2: 145).

Yet, the most drastic change in Hebrew literary life in Europe during those years was the enormous increase in the size of the readership. It was described by Frank and Ben-Kohelet as follows:

"Now, a new generation of writers arose, a new form of literature emerged and a reading public was also created" (Frank 1916: 15).

From a book-buying public of a few hundred, the buying audience grew to a few

the first volume of *Ha-Asif* in 1884 and 12,000 for the second volume in 1885 [!:] (Sokolow 1934, 2: 29).

This change in the size of the readership led Sokolow to declare that "the new Hebrew literature was created in the years 1880-1885" (Sokolow 1934, 2: 27).

Even if we consider that Sokolow is perhaps exaggerating in his estimate of the number of subscribers, it is nevertheless clear that the readership did increase by a few hundred percent. This unprecedented increase in the size of the reading public greased the wheels of Hebrew literature in Eastern Europe. It expressed for the first time the idea that Hebrew texts could address a dedicated audience, that the written words might receive an enthusiastic response. Writing in Hebrew did not mean writing in a vacuum, as was the case until the 1880s. From the eighties Hebrew literature began to make contact with a large reading public – a distinguished and unmistakable audience, for whom it was worthwhile to write; an audience that might secure the existence of Hebrew literature and support the various institutions mandatory for its existence.

The change in the dimensions of the audience from a few hundred to many thousands contributed to a change in the self-image of contemporary men of letters. Great was the delight in it, and great were the expectations of it. Contemporary men of letters claimed that this was just the prologue. Become thou thousands of myriads was the song poets sang to their readers. The audience of thousands will grow bigger and bigger: The thousands will be followed by the myriad, and who can contemplate the future?

Undoubtedly, there were many reasons for this growth in readership, but two were decisive: one had to do with changes within Jewish society, particularly in the move toward secularization; the other was connected with the status Hebrew literature occupied in the national Revival, indicated by the name given to Hebrew literature: the literature of the *Tehiyah* – of the Revival.

The changes within Jewish society, especially the secularization process, contributed significantly to the enlargement of the readership, because for quite a few readers reading of Hebrew literature served as a corridor to the secular world.

This attitude toward Hebrew literature also explains the nature of the Hebrew journals and the Hebrew press in this period – most of them continued to publish informative and quasi-scientific articles in the field of natural sciences, social sciences and humanities.

The increase in the reading public was also an outcome of the new national sentiment among Jews. Hebrew literature was cherished not only because it was part of the national revival, but because it was esteemed as the body that simultaneously created the national movement and demonstrated its existence.

The new prestige of Hebrew literature was revealed first and foremost by the fact that many Jews identified with the national yearning by reading Hebrew literature. Because religious set of symbols could not serve the national goals at this stage, in the absence of any other set of symbols, and in the absence of almost any other tangible piece of evidence of national revival, Jews expressed their national sentiment by reading Hebrew literature.

The immense growth in the reading public generated euphoric emotions: Hebrew men of letters and Hebrew writers were sure of a promising future, and many began to enthusiastically take part in the literary enterprises of the time, between 1880 and 1890. Their high productivity contributed its part as well: Hebrew literature achieved substantial prominence. There can be no doubt that between the years 1880 and 1890 Hebrew literature indeed prospered in Eastern Europe.

However, no less than the expectations were the frustrations, when in quite a short time Hebrew men of letters were forced to face the unvarnished truth and to realize that their belief in the existence of a substantial and authentic Hebrew-reading public was

The decline in readership began already in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, after 1895, and accelerated after the First World War.

What were the reasons for the unanticipated drop in the readership? Two reasons seem decisive. The first had to do with the superiority of Yiddish over Hebrew; the other had to do with the stagnation of the readership and with the misinterpretation of its real nature by Hebrew men of letters.

Here I would like to argue for a different interpretation of the nature of the reading public and to claim that with regard to the high-brow literature, the increase in the reading public never happened, and hence, the alleged decline never occurred at all.

As an alternative explanation to the decline in the reading public, I maintain that the Hebrew readership became static, and that its stratification froze. This process had severe consequences for the future of Hebrew literature, because every dynamic literature is nourished by a dynamic structure of a readership and by a dynamic process of change in literary norms, a change that is usually directed toward the new and younger reading public. In Hebrew literature in Europe, such dynamics existed only among the writers. The readership, on the contrary, remained the same – for all practical purposes, a new generation of readers did not arise.

Part of the younger generation preferred Yiddish literature, and part preferred European literatures to which they have had access for the first time in modern Jewish history.

For some readers of Hebrew in the 1880s, especially those who lacked a Zionist motivation, reading Hebrew was no more than a gateway to secular culture and a way to get to know the non-religious world. The next generation did not need Hebrew literature as a mediator between itself and the secular world, primarily because its educational course had changed and the younger readers began to regularly read European literatures in the original. A large number of young people attained higher education. In 1910, there were 4,244 Jewish students in Russia, 10% of all the students in the universities! One may assume, that if it were not for the *numerus clausus*, their number would have been even larger (Scharfstein 1944: 39). Thus, Hebrew literature lost its function as a mediator to the secular world and as the only portal to the world of literature.

In addition to the competition with European literatures, there was also the competition with Yiddish literature (Knaani 1953: 475-476). (At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a considerable segment of the readership began to prefer Yiddish literature for several reasons. For most readers, Yiddish was their mother tongue and their spoken language and thus was more convenient to use. The resources of literature in Yiddish became much richer and the whole field of high literature began to develop and catered to most of the needs of the readers, even the most educated among them.

Thus, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Yiddish literature clearly had a much larger audience and, to a certain extent, supported Hebrew literature financially. Even the *Achiasaf* group decided in 1899 to publish a Yiddish newspaper, entitled *Der Jud*, which was edited by Rawnitzki, and was expected to finance the publication of *Ha-Shiloach*.

Various types of evidences indicate the preference for Yiddish over Hebrew. One example is the difficulties encountered by Bialik and Rawnitzki in their attempt to publish the writings of Mendele Mokher Sefarim in Hebrew, even when the publication of his collected writings in Yiddish was a fait accompli. On March 22 1907, Bialik wrote in a letter to Abramowitsch:

“We need the picture [...] for volume one, which is now being printed and will be completed in a few days

The supremacy of Yiddish literature in the competition between the two literatures is also indicated by the fact that, of the two pamphlets published by the *Achiasaf* group for the Zionist Congress, the Hebrew pamphlet sold only 3000 copies even though it was written by Benjamin Ze'ev Herzl himself, while the Yiddish pamphlet, written by Shalom Aleichem, sold 27,000 copies! (*Achad Ha-Am* 1918-1924, 2: 254).

The other reason for the fall in the number of Hebrew readers lay in the misinterpretation of the character of the reading public. When the list of successful books is analyzed, it is clear that the books that were most popular among Hebrew readers were not the texts highly praised by *Ha-Siloach*, but rather original or adapted novels that were similar in character to the *Volksbücher*, which were previously widely read in Yiddish by this readership.

It was novels like Avraham Mapu's *Love of Zion* or the Hebrew version of *Mystères de Paris* by Eugène Sue, that achieved wide distribution. Mapu, who envied the success of Kalman Shulman, the translator of *Mystères de Paris*, described the demand for Shulman's books in a letter to his brother Matityahu, written in January 1858, in the following manner:

“I too am happy that Shulman is redeemed by the folly of ignorant folks. 2000 copies [!] of the first part were already distributed among the Jews and will bring him 1000 Rubles and, as if that's not enough, from all sides and corners and from all the tents of Jacob, he is implored: »Take your full price, just bring us *Mystères de Paris* fast, and hurry and finish your work on the other parts so that the hungry and thirsty nation will see a spectacle its fathers and grandfathers never saw«” (Dinur 1970: 24).

*Mystères de Paris* was not the only novel Shulman adapted to Hebrew. He had previously published adaptations of *The Mores of Old* (Vilna 1914; revised, 1919) and *Shulamith* (Vilna 1916; 1919) and, after the success of *Mystères de Paris* (Vilna 1857-1860; Vilna 1870-1876), he published adaptations of Josephus's *The Jewish Wars* (translated from German and with an introduction, Vilna 1871-1873; 1913) and *Jewish Antiquities* (Vilna 1884; 1917).

In addition, similar books, adapted to the model of heroic literature and using a Jewish background and Jewish heroes, were published. The most successful were those by Meir Lehman, *The Gardener* (Vilna, 1872; 1877; 1881; adapted for youth, Warsaw, 1911); *Memorial or The King's Agent* (Warsaw 1890, 1892, 1897, 1900, 1913); Ludwig Philippson *Miriam the Hasmonean* (Vilna 1873), *Ezra the Scribe* (Vilna 1876; Leipzig 1901), *The Exiles of Israel* (Warsaw 1875), *Yaakov Tirado* (Vilna 1875; 1881; adapted for youth by Rabinovitz, Warsaw 1907), *Holy and Sublime* (Warsaw 1883), *A Tale of Spain and Jerusalem* (Warsaw 1887), *The Refugee from Jerusalem* (Przemysl 1888) and Herman Reckendorf's, *Memoirs of the Dynasty of David* (Warsaw 1893-1897; 1920). The last of these, first published in 1865, even achieved a kind of canonization when it was published by *Achiasaf* in the 1890's in the adaptation of Avraham Shalom Friedberg.

The number of novels published between 1870 and 1890 and the tremendous number of editions in which they were published, testify indeed to their success among the readers and to their wide readership.

As already mentioned, the nature of the reading public and its structure were misinterpreted by contemporary men of letters, who strove to find in this readership an audience for the kind of high literature they yearned to create. The Hebrew men of letters failed to notice that the increase in readership was linked to the reading of popular

for its readers; functions of popular reading that were previously fulfilled by Yiddish literature. This was the source of the optical illusion which, as already mentioned, made every reader of Hebrew literature appear to be a potential reader of high Hebrew literature.

This mistaken identification of the new reading public, resulted from the national function of Hebrew literature, which would not admit popular literature in Hebrew. Conceptually there was no room for popular literature in the framework of Hebrew literature. Light reading could not be a legitimate daughter of the Hebrew literature of the Revival and thus the emergence of a new group of readers was immediately and almost automatically wrongly interpreted. The growth in the reading public was not associated with a change in the structure of the system – with the fact that Hebrew literature had become more heterogeneous in nature.

This process, which might have led to a normalization of the Hebrew system, was much too premature for the cultural consciousness. Hebrew literature had to wait more than 60 years before it allowed for such stratification of the literary field in Eretz-Israel, and even then reluctantly allowed a popular literature to develop.

Thus, there was a lack of accord between the two processes that took place on two diametrically opposed axes: the writing of Hebrew literature – both high-brow and popular – increased, and the readership declined and became static. This discrepancy can be observed in the case of *Ha-Shiloach*.

*Ha-Shiloach* was considered the most prestigious organ of the literature of The Revival movement. Achad Ha-Am's introductory manifesto, "The Message of *Ha-Shiloach*", expressed his view that *Ha-Shiloach* should be the place for elitist literature, aspiring to the highest literary standards (Achad Ha-Am 1921: 2).

This assumption was soon proven wrong. The expectations for an audience of thousands of subscribers were not realized and *Ha-Shiloach* did not succeed in mobilizing more than 1000-1500. Achad Ha-Am sharply analyzed the reasons for this failure in a letter to the prominent Zionist leader, Menachem Mendle Ussishkin (written in July 7, 1897), claiming that apparently *Ha-Shiloach* was not suited for a broad readership:

"*Ha-Shiloach* is apparently a »luxury« for our readership, they are satisfied with the literature provided in [the newspapers], which does not lead them to despair... The subscribers for the second half have declined even more" (Achad Ha-Am 1918-1924, 1: 111-112).

Thus, despite the great prestige of *Ha-Shiloach*, it could not support itself, required donations and patronage and was in constant danger of being closed.

The same fate awaited *Ha-Dor* (also published by *Achiasaf*), a literary weekly, which strove to enlarge the Hebrew readership and to address a broader audience. *Ha-Dor* did not last for more than a year.

The closing of *Ha-Dor* led its editor, David Frischmann, to write the following bitter words:

"I talked to you day after day and I told you that we have no nation, no literature, no movement, and no revival, nothing at all. And you were reluctant to believe. Day after day I talked to you and told you that we have no writers, no subscribers, and no book-buyers, we have nothing but empty rhetoric, and all this big movement which you keep promising is nothing but your artificial creation" (Frischmann 1913-1914, 4: 82).

These words were written in 1902, only a few years after the great euphoria in Hebrew literary circles. The Jewish audience shrank and the Hebrew men of letters felt that all their efforts were in vain. The great believers in the vitality of the literary centers in Eastern Europe, Achad Ha-am the Zionist and Frischmann the non-Zionist, felt that the existence of Hebrew literature in Europe was hopeless and had no future.

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### Zohar Shavit – Centers of Hebrew Literature in Eastern Europe at the End of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>

Historiographies of Hebrew literature maintain that centers of Hebrew literature began to flourish in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were based on defined groups of writers, readers and several entrepreneurs in the book industry, who created, for the first time in the history of Modern Hebrew literature, a solid literary center.

In this paper I challenge this common view of the Hebrew literary centers in Eastern Europe by describing and analyzing the growth in the reading public which generated euphoric emotions among contemporary men of letters. I contend that the nature of the reading public and its structure were misinterpreted. The Hebrew men of letters failed to notice that the increase in readership resulted from the reading of popular literature and failed to grasp that Hebrew literature had begun to fulfill for its readers functions of popular reading that were previously fulfilled by Yiddish literature.

This mistaken understanding of the new reading public resulted from the high status attributed to Hebrew literature as the most significant manifestation of national yearnings and Revival. In this framework there was no room for popular literature. Light reading of Hebrew literature was inconceivable and thus the emergence of a new group of readers was immediately and almost automatically wrongly interpreted. The growth in the reading public was not associated with a change in the structure of the reading public and with the fact that Hebrew literature had become more heterogeneous in nature.

This process of stratification of the literary system, which might have led to a normalization of the Hebrew system, was much too premature for the cultural consciousness. Hebrew literature had to wait more than 60 years before it allowed for such stratification of the literary field in Eretz-Israel, and even then reluctantly allowed a popular literature to develop.

**Keywords:** Hebrew literature, the book market, literary centers, readership, high brow and popular literature

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### SHABBETAI BASS – AUTHOR, BIBLIOGRAPHER AND EDITOR

As the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century was approaching, Jews inhabiting the Polish Commonwealth found themselves in a very peculiar situation: in a country being “the demographic pillar of the entire European Jewish society in modern times”<sup>1</sup> there was not a single Hebrew printing house capable of satisfying the demand for Hebrew and Yiddish prints. It is assumed, that the population of Polish Jews numbered at that time ca 350 000. As a matter of comparison, in the German states they were 60 000; in Bohemia and Moravia – 50 000; in Italy – 30 000; in the Netherlands – 15 000; in France – 10 000, and about the same number in Hungary. Thus, Poland constituted the largest market for Jewish prints. Yet, the printing of the last Hebrew book in a printing house in Kraków was completed in 1672. This book was *Shulhan aruch, Hoshen ha-mishpat* by Joseph ben Ephraim Karo, without Isserles’s comments, but with a commentary by Joshua Falk (1555-1614), entitled *Sefer meirat einayim*. Indeed, the output of the Lublin printing house during its last years of activity was insignificant: in 1683 not a single work was published; in 1684 – one title; in 1685 – 3 titles; and in 1691, after a five year recess, was issued the last publication, a Passover Haggadah with the *Ketonet pasim* commentary by Joseph ben Moshe from Przemyśl.<sup>2</sup> Such output was irrelevant in such an enormous market as the Commonwealth’s. The huge demand Polish Jews for books had to be satisfied by foreign printing houses. Printers in the Netherlands took advantage of this situation faultlessly. Meanwhile, the first Jewish printer active in Amsterdam since 1627 – Menashe ben Israel – had already published books for the Polish market. His son Joseph even died in 1650 in Lublin during a business-related journey to Poland.<sup>3</sup>

Amsterdam’s Jewish population increased rapidly. Following a wave of Sephardic Jews settling there at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there was a sudden boost of the number of Jews arriving from Central and Eastern Europe. Beside the Sephardic congregation, the Ashkenazi established there a community in 1639, while between 1660 and 1673 even functioned an autonomous Polish congregation. Before long Amsterdam became the center of Jewish printing and the foremost supplier of Hebrew books for the Polish Commonwealth. Local printing shops employed typesetters and printers from Poland as well. And Shabbetai Bass among them.

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan I. Israel, *Żydzi europejscy w dobie merkantylizmu (1550-1750)*, Warszawa 2009, p. 294.

<sup>2</sup> Yeshayahu Vinograd, *Thesaurus of the Hebrew Book*, Jerusalem 1993, part 2, p. 363. Some attribute both this print and the book *Zemer nae u-meshubach*, (which, according to *Bibliography of the Hebrew Book 1473-1960* item. 0314175 was published in 1690) at 1685. See. Krzysztof Pilarczyk, *Leksykon drukarzy ksiąg hebrajskich w Polsce (XVI-XVIII wiek)*, Kraków 2004, p. 114.

<sup>3</sup> Leib Fuks, *Benete G. Fuks Mansfeld, Holograf...*