Yes to a cultur

Prof. Zohar Shavit is a crusader for Hebrew-language supremacy. She favors legislation to ban English-language names in Israel, dub into Hebrew all TV programs, and obligate schoolchildren to memorize chapters of the Bible. Brush up your Hebrew!

By Avi Katzman

In January 1930, David Ben-Gurion, who was then secretary-general of the Histadrut labor federation, set out to find out all he could about every worker in the Yishuv — the pre-State Jewish community in Palestine. That this constituted a flagrant invasion of privacy did not seem to faze the energetic labor leader. He wanted all the facts — and more: not just figures regarding age, education, place of employment and salary, but also information about which political party the worker had belonged to before immigrating to Palestine, how he spent his money, what type of art he collected, what newspapers and books he read, how he spent his leisure time and what he wanted his children to be when they grew up. As far as can be ascertained, the exhaustive questionnaire that was drawn up never actually circulated among the workers; at any rate, there is nothing in the relevant archives to suggest that it was ever filled out.

Incredible as it may sound, until now, no comprehensive study has been undertaken of the Hebrew culture that emerged in pre-state Israel: What did people read and how did they relax? What did they eat, and how much did they drink? How did they converse and what did they fight about? We have no idea what chants they shouted in soccer fields in the 1930s: How did they cheer, and better yet, how did they curse?

Yet, in the two decades starting in the mid-1920s a whole culture sprang up in the Yishuv, with its own rules and codes, colors and tastes. A new body language emerged, as did new rites of courtship and a distinctive literary output, as the spirit of the age wafted through popular songs of the time and helped create the melting pot for the revival of the Hebrew language.

This week, the first attempt to sum up the Hebrew culture that emerged at this time is available in Israel's bookstores: "The Construction of Hebrew Culture in Eretz Yisrael," a 700-page compilation of essays edited by Professor Zohar Shavit and published jointly by the Israel Academy of Sciences and Mossad Bialik. The book is the fifth in a series entitled "The History of Eretz Yisrael."

The new volume, the product of 15 years of research, surveys the evolution of the Hebrew language, literature, theater, music, press, libraries, artists's organizations, pop songs, graphics, dance, the cinema and more. Shavit believes the book offers "the most reliable picture" of Hebrew culture ever produced, but admits that it has one big fault: "As a cultural profile, the book is the equivalent of the ground floor," she notes. "It does not contain the history of archaeology, science, radio, architecture, sport, hobbies — all the leisure activities that emerged here, in stark contrast to what was going on in the Diaspora." Also missing, she says, is "a basic description of how culture is constructed and identity created. For example, what people wore, what they ate, what they talked about and what they quarreled over."

Still, Shavit is satisfied with the overall result. "The study made me a Zionist," she says. "The Zionist enterprise succeeded in constructing a different nation through culture. But there were many other endeavors that were not completely successful and which planted the destructive seeds whose fruits now threaten society."

The great defender of Hebrew culture was born in 1951 in Tel Aviv, "the first Hebrew city." She grew up in a good socialist home with rigorous demands for excellence and for proper use of language. "Dad worshipped language in a way that made my life as a girl miserable," Shavit relates. Her father, Michael Feinberg (who Hebraicized his surname to Dror), a descendant of the Vilna Gaon, was born in Yalta. One of the tenants in the building where he grew up was Maxim Gorky, but the dominant personality in his home was his uncle, the children's poet Samuel Marshak. Her father, Shavit recalls, was from an assimilated family of wealthy merchants and "cheats." He became an ardent Zionist under the influence of Yosef Trumpeldor, was jailed in the Soviet Union for his Zionist activities and came to Palestine in 1925, where he joined the Labor Battalion. "He made a decision not to speak Russian, picked up one word of Hebrew after another, and within three months, he was speaking fluently."

At the time of Shavit's birth, her father had begun to compile a Hebrew-Russian dictionary. He decided that his gifted daughter should become a nuclear physicist. Instead, she received a Ph.D. in literature at the age of 27 — a terrible tragedy, her father railed, a complete waste of a brilliant mind. A byproduct of her work on the culture of the Yishuv was the deep affinity she now feels with the revolutionary in whose home she was raised.

Shavit eventually became an expert on children's literature and culture. She has written about 10 books and edited about 100 others, along with publishing dozens of articles and translating children's books. At her still rather young age, however, her main source of pride and joy is her grandson, Yonatan.

She and her husband, the historian Professor Yaakov Shavit, have three children. They met when Yaakov came to the Gymnasia Herzliya high school, where she was studying, to work as a substitute teacher. She was 16, a member of the left-wing Hashomer Hatza'ir youth movement and very opinionated. They have been together ever since. She is deeply anti-feminist, proud of her kitchen and still adores her husband, "but I have stopped working with him on books. I thought it wasn't a good idea for us to work together."

Yaakov Shavit has an article in the new book, as does Zohar herself. However, she is quick to point out, it was another professor who commissioned the article from her husband. She is currently stirring up a furor in German academic circles with her research on the denial of the past in German children's literature. Closer to home, she overcame her fear of speaking in public and played La Pasionaria to the students' revolt when she addressed a rally of striking students in Jerusalem's Safra Square. When she visited the offices of the Students' Union at Tel Aviv University during the strike to submit a petition of support from faculty members, police burst into the building, and she became an eye witness to their violence. She still believes that the students will prevail. "The good, the right, always win. The question is how long it takes."

Despite her belief that the just will finally triumph, she fears that the victory of the Hebrew language is far from certain. "We have lost the ideological fervor that drove the Hebrew enterprise, we have lost our faith in the project and are no longer capable of being fascinated by its scale. Instead, we are busy trying to find an alternative and dismantle what exists. If this were just a phase in a process of reaching national maturity, that would be acceptable. The problem is that we seem to have already lost the top floor and are now demolishing the supports and beginning to rip out the foundations."

Shavit cannot contain the radical temperament she imbibed at home. She believes passionately in her cause. "Perhaps you can explain to me why we stop teaching Hebrew in 10th grade, but not English? Why is the English matriculation exam worth five points, and the Hebrew exam is not? We are losing our language — and it will not be easy to restore. Many political, academic and educational leaders do not know Hebrew. The language is becoming impoverished. It is not by chance that we are becoming habituated to news, speeches, messages and ideologies that are the opposite of complex."

'All the most advanced countries have cultural legislation. Why should it be acceptable in France, Canada and Belgium, but taboo here?'

Nor is it by chance that Shavit has recently begun to study the culture of Hebrew speech-making, in particular speeches prepared for and delivered by Prime Minister Netanyahu. "We are still at a stage where the process can be halted. I think we have to stop feeling sorry for the children and the teachers when it comes to language. Legitimate demands can be made. If you have command of one rich, correct language, you are better able to master other languages. And in general, language comprehension is the basis for the comprehension of everything else, including the sciences."

She wants every schoolchild in Israel to know the rules of inserting vowels and vowel points (vocalization) and thinks every child should be obliged to memorize chapters of the Bible. She is pleased with the new law that requires at least half the songs played on Israeli radio stations to be in Hebrew, and she would like to see all foreign-language television programs dubbed into Hebrew: "The more we hear the language, the better chance we have of learning it properly." In addition, she proposes that all bibliographies for university students be translated into Hebrew, "as is the case in all normal countries."

We are sitting at the Link cafe in Jerusalem, and the name infuriates Shavit. "It starts with the signs — names confer identity at all levels. I think there should be a ban on non-Hebrew street signs. I am in favor of enacting legislation to force restaurants and cafes to have Hebrew names." Every official representative of Israel should Hebraicize his name, she insists, and parents should be prohibited from giving their children names like Joy or Roy. She finds this "falseness" abhorrent — a culture that bestows international names on its children is well on the way to losing its self-respect, in her view — "and the whole unisex thing should also be banned."

There is nothing extreme about her attitude, she maintains. "We had a self-confident culture, but today it is under threat because pluralism is becoming localized into sectors. We failed to convince large segments of the population of the necessity of the cultural enterprise. Yes, I am talking about a dictatorship of culture. In certain periods, culture has no choice but to operate by dictatorial fiat. That was the situation here in the 1920s and 1930s.

"We are currently speaking from a position where everything is taken for granted. We have the feeling that we can allow ourselves all sorts of things. But back then, if a group, no matter how small, decided not to become part of the cultural project, real damage could ensue. In Ireland and Wales they tried to establish similar [cultural] projects, but they failed completely. There was no other choice in the Yishuv at the time other than to exercise linguistic coercion. Unfortunately, it was not potent enough."

Shavit admits that she would not have liked to live the kind of "Spartan, austere" life that befell the creators of Hebrew language and culture — among them the writers Yosef Haim Brenner and S.Y. Agnon and the publisher Yisrael Zmura. But she is certainly in their thrall. "I tried not to fall in love with them," she says. "But I think that in addition to the tremendous empathy I developed for them, I have always admired them and been less critical of them. I was envious of their order of priorities, their fervor, their devotion to the act of culture."

The project of constructing the Hebrew culture, Shavit says, her eyes lighting up, "is like a classic children's book, with a terrific plot and positive heroes. It's a novel about youngsters fired with a sense of mission who arrive at a place which, from their perspective, is a void, and they want to form a new nation, on the European model, but most importantly, to construct a cultural foundation. It has a happy ending, too. In the meantime."

The ardent young people who came to this country, she says, were the products of "different cultural codes, and in order to forge a cohesive group they had to give up, overnight, the individual code they had brought and replace it with a common code. But that entailed a dramatic

al dictatorship

Photo by Yoav Roccas

Zohar Shavit: "I am not against pluralism — I am against atomization into 'sectors.'"

decision: 'If you are a Hebrew, speak Hebrew!' Obviously that group — I am talking about the second and third waves of immigration [1904-14, 1919-23] — barely needed coercing. But coercion was needed in the fourth and fifth waves [1924-28, 1929-39]. It had to be clear that there was a price for joining the project."

Initially it was sufficient to exercise "moderate coercion." But as time passed and the number of participants in the project increased, coercion had to be stepped up. "The process is encapsulated in the story of the library at Kibbutz Beit Hashita," Shavit notes. "The library of German books was shut down in order to force the members to read Hebrew. It is a tragedy, but there is no other way to do it.

"The 'real problem' was created when the veteran group, which had forged a new code, tried to force it on the masses of new immigrants who arrived after the state was established and who were much less of a partner in the building process. Once the state came into being, the leadership should have switched gears. This is where their failure lies — in not succeeded in persuading the newcomers of the project's necessity."

After 1948, Shavit explains, the leadership's "trappings of power were different from what they had been in the Yishuv period. The leadership was sovereign and had at its disposal a large number of institutions, through which it could plan and disseminate culture. The way to go about it was by setting norms through education, information campaigns and the intensive participation of the population. But instead of taking that road they stuck to the old methods and the result was a disaster. All the pent-up feelings — the bitterness and anger, the sense of deprivation, nostalgia for symbolic ethnicity — it all stems from the poor judgment shown by the leadership in not mobilizing people for the cultural enterprise."

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The current thrust for "symbolic ethnicity," in which various groups aim "to exchange Hebraism for ostensibly ethnic symbols of their group" is the direct result of "the failure of the elite to bestow identity on those groups as part of the Hebraicizing project."

Would Shavit then do away, for example, with the *Mimouna* — the holiday celebrated by the Moroccan community on the day after Passover, which in recent years has become a mass public event? "I don't want to cancel the *Mimouna*," she says. "In the vision of culture where Hebrew is hegemonic, it is obvious that the existence of ethnic groups does not interfere with that hegemony. I am not against pluralism — I am against atomization into 'sectors.' In pluralism there are no competing hegemonies — there is one hegemony."

Culture, Shavit notes, "must always be planned by someone and then implemented by someone, and that someone is always an elitist, who has the power to implement and to coerce. If the planners of culture desist from their work, others will take over in their place: there is never a vacuum." Coercion, she observes, "contains a normative aspect and an aspect of law, or strength. Today we need legislation simply to return to the norms that enable a national community to exist. If we don't try to relegate the source cultures to the margins, we will experience cultural disintegration."

Shavit finds nothing wrong with "legislation in the realm of culture. All the most advanced countries have cultural legislation. Why should it be acceptable in France, Canada and Belgium, but taboo here? How is it that in Germany you can only name your children from an official book of names? And in France and Iceland? A month ago in Norway, a mother of 14 children, a pious Christian, was sent to prison because she dared to give her son a Hebrew name, 'Gesher.' The court ordered her to change the name and pay a fine, or go to jail. Out of principle she preferred jail. The child's name was not changed and the battle is continuing."

No political party, she believes, should be permitted to hold its discussions in any language but Hebrew (though Arabic, as an official language, passes muster).

An exception, Shavit concedes, can be made for immigrant children from the former Soviet Union, for example, who speak Russian during recess time at school. "Children are another matter," she says, but adds immediately, "however, the enrichment groups in Russian are a terrible thing. And I would not overdo broadcasts in foreign languages, so that people understand that in Israel, cultural life is not possible without Hebrew."

The "Hebrew essence" of the culture she is talking about, Shavit explains in reply to a question, lies in its "holistic character. It is a culture that extends into all spheres" and encompasses every detail of life, large and small: "body language, the melodiousness of the public discourse, the unwritten rules of protocol in dress and in the house and the fact that we as a community have keys to decode them that others do not. This is what enables us to identify Israelis whom we encounter abroad as Israelis even at a distance, and this is what causes a group of Israelis who gather together to activate the code. We have common identity markers that run very deep, such as Israeli bluntness, the ability to say things less indirectly."

Shavit says that "this is the first time in the history of the Jewish people that a new, complete culture has been created, complete with rules for standing on line and behavior on the road. But another volume is needed," she says, "one that might bear the title, 'I Am Not a Sucker,' if one is correct in thinking that this statement lies at the heart of the code that is evolving these days, the code of the contemporary Israeli *populistika*."

All that remains now is to prepare the grand plan for the study of Hebrew culture. Zohar Shavit already has a plan for the future. ■