

SHOSHANA RONEN

**Retracing Literature and Dead Writers
At a Crossroads: Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew**

Abstract

This article portrays a journey of two Israeli literary critics and writers, Yoram Bronowski and Avner Holzman, who are traveling to Poland in order to find the traces of their favorite Jewish writers: Isaac Leib Peretz, Bolesław Leśmian and Uri Nissan Gnessin, who had written in three different languages: Polish, Hebrew and Yiddish.

Jewish writers in Poland at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries were, like the whole Jewish people, in a position in which they had to choose their identity, language being one of its elements. Jewish writers were in a specific position in which they had more than one native language, so they could choose between Polish, Yiddish and Hebrew. They could relinquish their Jewish identity, and assimilate totally in the Polish society, and write in Polish like Leśmian. However, they could also cling to their Jewish identity and not to assimilate in the non-Jewish world. The two main alternatives were either to support the Yiddish culture, as was the case of Peretz, or to seek a national solution for the Jewish people in Zionism and consequently, like Gnessin, to write in Hebrew.

From these two Jewish alternatives, Yiddish and Hebrew, the first was exterminated entirely in the Shoah, not only because the writers were murdered, but mainly because the potential readers perished too, in which case it means a total destruction of the whole culture. In the case of Hebrew literature, the traces lead, like in the case of Gnessin, not only to the cemetery in Warsaw, but also to Israel where it is, new vital and flourishing.

My purpose in that text is to portray several journeys of Israeli writers who are traveling to Poland in order to find traces of their favorite authors. By and large, those travelers retrace Jewish-Polish writers who had written in three different languages: Polish, Hebrew and Yiddish.

In my previous study¹, I was discussing a similar topic, namely journeys to Poland in contemporary Israeli literature, which I named: *In Pursuit of the Void*. It was about travelers to Poland who are looking for something that is not there anymore: either for the Jewish world that had been exterminated, or for their lost childhood, or some individual histories. Looking for the absence generates quite different reactions. Those reactions, however, stem from the same frame of mind, as if the narrator said: “because there is nothing out there I use that which is in here, namely, inside my mind”. If one is looking for the absence, which means tracing things that are not existing any more, it is quite clear that he is making a kind of inner journey. Of course, there are those who are satisfied with their similes and imagination, and would not like to change it, and whatever they encounter they use all external sights and events only to confirm the images they have already in their minds. However, there are also those who, although interested only in their own identity, or their inner life, are more open to what is out side, and the phenomena they come across can change the way they think, feel, identify themselves with, etc. They use the external world in order to shape their persona. At any rate, Poland in those journeys is only a tool or, in some cases, a trigger, but not a goal in itself.²

¹ Shoshana Ronen, *In Pursuit of the Void: Journeys to Poland in Contemporary Israeli Literature*, In: “Rocznik Orientalistyczny”, vol. LVI (1), 2003 pp. 47–58.

² A short summary of those journeys might help to illustrate the problem: Judith Hendel is so haunted by ghosts that actually she wants to run away from Poland as soon as she gets there; she is not really interested in what there is around her, but only in confirming her prejudices. Again and again she abandons her previous plans to visit different Polish towns and repeats constantly “what do I have to look for, there is nothing here”. Nurith Gertz is interested in inventing a story; her goal is to shape her own history. She is quite aware that each individual history is a story that has no truth-value but a mythological and founding value, whose role is to form the self. She is conscious of the fact that there is no absolute and impartial memory; memories are not true objective entities, but are in constant change. Therefore, when she and her mother are looking for the house where her mother was living before the war, but could not find it, she tries to convince her mother to accept another house as the right one. She does so, because deep down she knows that it doesn't really matter: memory deceives us in any case, any place is good as any other, and there is no real value in finding the “true” place (if it exists at all), but only to find a place that can serve as a starting point for triggering a memory, memory that tells a story, a story that creates an identity, which is a private history. Eleonora Lev wants to face her past as an adult, while being conscious of the changes that she had gone in 30 years. She wants to confront herself with the child she once had been, and to see in what way that child and herself in the present are one and the same person. And in the course of facing her past childhood as a grown woman, she wants on the one hand, to confirm flashes of memories, and on the other hand, to get rid of the old devils that have tormented her, to rid of the *dibbuk*, similarly to the process of psychoanalysis. Binyamin Shvili wants to lose himself, in order to start from the beginning, to sense and absorb the sights like a *tabula rasa*, like a newly born child. Poland is an entirely foreign place to him, so it looks like the perfect place for losing his way. Yet, for a Jew, that place cannot be absolutely unknown. Poland is alien and familiar at the same time. The narrator, confused and perplexed, hopes to find there an inspiration, or belief, or self-identity. Shvili wants to lose his way in order to be found, at times by himself and sometimes by a transcendent deity.

In this text, I would like to describe a different kind of travelers, travelers who are not seeking a void but a real thing, in this case – literature and dead writers. They trace texts and look for what is left behind their authors. I would like to suggest that what builds up the narrator's eagerness to go on a journey are words; texts that are a part of him and that are treasured by him. Therefore, the journey is not into oneself but it is a form of retracing and looking for perceptible things. In that respect the traveler goes beyond his consciousness to what is outside of him. He is breaking solipsism. Those concrete things that our travelers find are: a grave, a house, and a poem.

First, I would like to describe, only in a few words, the specific situation of Jewish writers in Eastern Europe and especially in Poland, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. Then I will portray briefly three main figures of Hebrew, Yiddish and Polish literature, and present more precisely the efforts of the travelers who are looking for traces of those writers in Poland. Although for the history of literature the three writers are more significant, yet in the story that I am going to portray the main figures are the travelers, the seekers, those who are retracing their favorite authors. Perhaps this is the right moment to emphasize that I am not going to discuss the writings of the writers of the past, but only the attitude of the contemporary writers and critics towards these authors, and the manner in which they are looking for them in Poland.

Since the 1880-ties the Hebrew literature has been related to the history of the Eastern European Jews. It developed in the territories of today Russia, Poland, Ukraine and Belorussia. Most of the Jews of Eastern Europe were polyglots: their main spoken language was Yiddish, the written language was mostly Hebrew. "And the national vernacular languages, such as Russian, Polish, German, and Ukrainian, served as the instruments of their communication with the surrounding society."³

The crucial starting point is the fact that at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century Jewish writers in Poland were familiar with at least three languages: Yiddish, Polish and Hebrew. In each case it is almost impossible to say which was their mother tongue. Those who were raised in orthodox families usually spoke Yiddish and Hebrew, and those who were born into assimilated families – Polish. In any case, those writers enjoyed a comfortable position in which a writer can consciously choose the language for his writings; by and large it was not a natural inclination to a mother tongue but a conscious decision, sometimes an ideological one. Some of the writers began writing in one language, for instance in Yiddish, but afterward turned to Hebrew, as a result of the "Haskalah" – the Hebrew enlightenment, and later on of Zionism the Jewish awakening national movement. Choosing a language was not just an aesthetic decision but also a political one. Hebrew meant taking part in a revolutionary and experimental process; Yiddish – remaining in the Jewish world of Eastern European Jews; and Polish meant the urge to assimilate and to create in the language of the majority. "In keeping with their general philosophy concerning the interpenetration of national and Jewish culture,

³ Gershon Shaked, *Modern Hebrew Fiction*, Indiana University Press, 2000, pp. 2–3.

the assimilationists ... favored writing in the vernacular. The Bundists and the Zionists, more oriented toward creation of specifically Jewish culture, emphasized Yiddish and Hebrew, respectively"⁴.

Needless to say, some writers wrote in two languages, like Bialik, the Jewish national bard who wrote both in Hebrew and Yiddish, or Isaac Leib Peretz, one of the writers I am describing below. Usually those who preferred Polish wrote exclusively in that language, because their decision was, in a way, to secede from the Jewish people, culturally if not historically.

The first of the discussed writers Isaac Leib Peretz, was one of the pioneers of the new revival (at the end of 19th century) of the Hebrew literature. He was born in Zamość in 1852 and died in Warsaw in 1915. Apart from the usual Yiddish and Hebrew, he learned German, Russian, and Polish. In 1889 he settled permanently in Warsaw, where he became a central figure of the Yiddish and Hebrew literary scene. Peretz was active in the Jewish socialist movement. He did not join the Zionist movement. He doubted whether an ancient tongue and an ancient country could be revived. He saw the future of the Jews in the Diaspora with Yiddish as their language.⁵

The shifts between languages are very important in the case of Peretz who began his literary career in 1874 by writing poetry in Polish.⁶ In 1875, however, he was writing fiction in Hebrew and Yiddish, and although after 1888 he became identified with Yiddish, he remained a bilingual writer. In the mid-1890-ties Peretz became attracted to the new currents in Western European art, e.g., neo-romanticism and symbolism and in fact served to enrich the inventory of both Yiddish and Hebrew fictional forms. He developed the epistolary novel and the travel tale.⁷ Peretz used Hasidic material and folktales and, adding his own experience to the material, shaped it into a new aesthetic expression. In the heart of poverty and dullness, he discovered beauty and splendor, as well as a mystical truth in the life of the naïve and poor believers. "Most of his protagonists are simple folk... (that)... stand as the antithesis of the airy intellectual type that was beginning to haunt not only Jewish literature but Jewish reality as well. For the most part, Peretz was more interested in general human conditions than in the individual... in presenting dramatic situations than exploring the human soul".⁸ Although Peretz has been much identified with Hasidic and folk tales, and with neo-romanticism, one should not overlook his more "revolutionary" feuilletons and comical and grotesque tales.⁹

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See: *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Keter Publishing House, Judaica Multimedia.

⁶ Ibid., p. 24.

⁷ "The epistolary form allowed the narrator-protagonist to depict his own situation in his own words while providing more oblique or indirect glimpses into the lives of the other characters". An example of an epistolary form is his tale "The Woman Mrs. Hannah" (1896), published both in Yiddish and Hebrew. Ibid., p. 25.

⁸ Ibid., p. 26.

⁹ Ibid.

The second writer to be discussed here is Bolesław Leśmian (1877–1937), a poet who was born in Warsaw into a Jewish assimilated family. Leśmian started to publish in 1896. His first poems were written in Russian and published in Moscow magazines. (Here we can see an interesting phenomenon: a Jewish writer wandering between two vernacular languages) Leśmian was nurtured on Symbolism and was fascinated by fantasy and folk tales of many cultures (like Peretz, who was fascinated by Jewish folk tales). His poetry is full of symbolic description and metaphysical reflection. One of the unique qualities of his verse is its integral mixture of melancholy and laughter, seriousness and humor with grotesque effects. His language was experimental and innovative. He believed that the language of poetry should differ from colloquial speech. During his lifetime he published three verse collections¹⁰. A fourth collection appeared posthumously.¹¹ He also translated poems by Edgar Allan Poe. Leśmian, who for most of his life was considered to be a provincial poet, began to be more widely recognized after 1933. He was a forerunner of Polish surrealists and his poetry became popular in the 60th. An essential fact for the present discussion is that Leśmian was a wanderer who was living in different places in Europe and for 13 years, from 1922, he lived in Zamość, the hometown of Peretz.

I leave out the third writer (Gnessin) for the time, and follow our travelers who are going to look for Peretz and Leśmian in Zamość.

In 1984 a group of lecturers from the Yiddish Department at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem went on a journey to Poland, accompanied by Yoram Bronowski. Bronowski, who died in 2001, was a well-known and important figure in the literary circles in Israel. He was a journalist, an essayist, and a brilliant translator from various languages, Polish included. Bronowski was born in Poland in 1948, and his family immigrated to Israel in 1957. Although on leaving Poland he was still a child, he never ceased to be interested in Polish literature, and for many years was involved in all Polish cultural events in Israel. There is no doubt that he was one of the most devoted advocates of Polish culture and literature in Israel. Bronowski is the narrator who reports to us that journey; the title of his story reads: “Between two mountains”¹².

The story begins in Zamość; which is in the town of Peretz and Leśmian the Israeli group. On the one hand, it is obvious that for the scholars from the Yiddish Department Zamość is first and foremost the town of Peretz and the “Haskalah” movement. On the other hand, for our narrator, there is no doubt that Zamość is, above all, the town of Leśmian. They have only few hours, maybe half a day, to spend in the city, and it is clear who is going to retrace whom: the whole group is going to look for the traces of Peretz, while Bronowski is seeking after Leśmian. The most

¹⁰ “Widespread Orchard” (1912), “Meadow” (1920), and “Shady Liquor” (1936).

¹¹ “Wood Fable” (1938). Leśmian published also two prose works: “Sesame narrative” (1913), and a children book “The Adventures of Sindbad the Sailor” (1915).

¹² Yoram Bronowski, *Mikhtavim Medumim* (“Imaginary Letters”), Carmel, Jerusalem, 2002, pp. 179–182 (Hebrew). This book was published posthumously and it includes essays, which Bronowski wrote in different places in the world, among them Poland.

intriguing of the entire group is prof. David *Weinfeld*. A great devotee of Yiddish and Hebrew literature and, at the same time, an outstanding translator of Polish Poetry into Hebrew (consequently, Polish poetry is very close to his heart). He is tormented with an irresolvable inner conflict *Weinfeld* hesitates and, in my opinion this is the most touching moment in the story: the necessity to choose between the two cultures, two literatures, two texts and two languages is too painful, but he cannot have them both. It resembles the situation of the Jewish intellectual elite in Poland, about a century ago, when they had to choose between their Polishness and Jewishness. Fortunately, *Weinfeld* had experienced that dilemma only for a moment. *Bronowski* describes *Weinfeld's* inner conflict as a struggle between seraphs and giants; it looks as if he was in a situation of a child who is forced to choose between his mother and father. *Weinfeld* decides to retrace *Leśmian*. *Leśmian* is portrayed in that text as the arch-Slavic poet with a delightful name that forest's rustle comes out of. [The sound of the name "Leśmian" derives from Polish *las* ('forest'), or: *w lesie* ('in the forest') *leśny* ('forestry')]. Needless to say, as our narrator declares, *Leśmian*, who penetrated the innermost of the Slavic soul and generated from his Polish language a pagan melody like the sound of ancient forests, was a Jew. And *Bronowski* adds with irony mixed with compassion, and maybe a touch of admiration: "Is it worth mentioning that his original name was Lesman and the poet added a tiny and genius line above the "S", and with the aid of this magical diacritical mark turned this ordinary Jewish name into a genuinely Polish one" (p. 179).

Still, the starting point for these two different searching paths (*Peretz* or *Leśmian*) is one and the same. The two searching groups are described by *Bronowski* with sarcasm: The first group, the larger one, made up of proud Jews, the Yiddish scholars, is retracing *Peretz*, and the smaller group (of three people), of the assimilated and frightened ones is retracing the poet who himself was small and frightened. Thus, the starting point is the public library in Zamość, which once was the town's synagogue. The building is in a poor state, but due to the Polish negligence of those times one can see traces of Hebrew inscriptions and ornaments. *Bronowski* comments on it as follows: "and again the two tragedies, the Polish and the Jewish-Polish, are bond together. And there is no way to know what is gloomier: the synagogue that is gone, or the library, which is actually not there either" (p. 180). We do not know whether the larger proud Jewish group was successful in its search because, together with *Bronowski*, we are following the assimilated, frightened, small one that tries to find traces of *Leśmian* in his beloved town. Did they find his spirit or his poetry there? No, nothing, apart from a commemorative plaque on the house wall in which he was living. There is no museum of *Leśmian* in Zamość, in the book stores no one had heard of him, passersby are embarrassed when they are asked about him; eavesdropping conversations in the streets is also disappointing, no one reveals any interest in *Leśmian's* poetry. In short: "*Leśmian* is forgotten in his town" (p. 180). *Bronowski* claims that it is surprising that this poet, whose verses are a glorification of Polishness, who was infatuated by Polish nature, fields, forests, meadows, raspberry bushes, blackberries, wild strawberries,

streams, rivers etc., was so Jewish in his folkloric paganism. As for Leśmian, the word “assimilation” has a physical meaning: it means a real act of absorbing himself, blending in the most fundamental elements of that Slavic language. His counterpart in prose, states Bronowski, is Bruno Schulz; but in his case, in order *not* to find his traces, one should go to Drohobycz (p. 181). Schulz was also a Jewish writer whose prose reached the highest peak in Polish literature and language. He is also an important figure, a literary one, in contemporary Israeli literature, but this topic is for another text.

Hence, Peretz and Leśmian symbolize two different paths of the Jewish existence in Poland at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, and it looks as if those two paths were parallel and could not meet, as if one excluded the other: on the one hand is the totally assimilatory route and, on the other, the utterly Jewish one in focus and language. The most likely those two writers never met, but Bronowski finds something in common. “Their oeuvres are full of the same folkloric spirit, and the same landscape revives them. Their world of legends and miracles is, at heart, the same world, which merely had chosen a different genre, and different language” (p. 181).¹³

Another day in Warsaw Bronowski is still haunted by Leśmian. The narrator was born in Poland, Polish is his native tongue, and though he left the country as a nine-year-old boy, he is very much attached to its language and literature. He is a great admirer of Polish eminent writers such as Wyspiański, Vincenz, Gombrowicz and Miłosz. Therefore, when he traveled to Poland back, in the eighties, when Poland was still under the communist regime and looked miserable, colorless and neglected, he was able to overcome that sad sight thanks to Polish literature.¹⁴ Poets and writers accompanied him in the streets of Warsaw, Wrocław or Cracow and helped him to bear the depressing scenes, to see the hidden beauty in them, or to provide him with various literary allusions that enabled him to look at it ironically. Therefore, in another story under the title: “In Poland, namely nowhere”, he tells us about his first night walk in the streets of Warsaw. The name of that piece referred, of course, to the play by Alfred Jarry *Ubu the King*, an allegory of totalitarianism which takes place in Poland, namely nowhere, while the writer had in mind, “in Poland namely everywhere”. Jarry was not mistaken, claims Bronowski: Poland of the early eighties was “nowhere, a utopia, the perfect realization of the socialist’s dream” (p. 170).

However, we are back in Warsaw, with the first narrator’s night walk in its streets. Bronowski emphasizes that the first impression is the most important one; it is the most accurate and essential, because it tells the whole story without falsification (p. 167). One might say that the first impression is unique and has a kind of purity and vitality, because it lacks reflection; however, that is the reason why the first impression is also emotional. In any case, the first night in the streets of Warsaw looks like a walk in Hades,

¹³ Another common fact is that both poets were jurists, Leśmian was a notary and Peretz a lawyer, and both ended their “business career” in bankruptcy.

¹⁴ It is worth mentioning that during the early eighties in Poland only few could read Gombrowicz and Miłosz (both were living abroad), because they were censured by the communist regime.

the abode of the dead. Bronowski is surprised by the silence. The streets are still and empty. From time to time he notices a figure, a woman alone, few couples, and in his eyes the very few people in the streets are like angels, since the way they look and their body language make them appear a-sexual. Angels from paradise, before the original sin, “they lack the curse of sexuality and, in consequence, they lack the joyfulness and impurity of sinful life, which is the only life that human kind was given.” (p.169). And with those impressions, and the feeling that he is in Hades, the first thing that comes to his mind is a rhyme by Leśmian: “A blind night didn’t know who is a man and who is a shadow”. It is taken from the brilliant poem *Dziewczyna* (“Girl”)¹⁵, which is about death, or about the notion that life is so fragile and death is a temptation, but if we break the wall that is supposed to separate life from death, if we are tempted by the call of afterlife, we discover that there is nothing there, or if there is something, it might be the presence of an absent deity.

Bronowski’s citation is not accurate. In the poem there are two lines that are similar: “A blind night didn’t know who is a man and who is a hammer”, and “a blind night didn’t know who is a shadow and who is a hammer?” The adaptation by Bronowski is completely free, and maybe this is a trick of memory which remembers what suits us at a particular moment. Bronowski is not interested in explaining Leśmian’s poem; he writes in Hebrew to the Israeli reader and his intention is not to analyze Polish poetry, but to demonstrate the feeling of silence, emptiness, fear and death by a variation, or improvisation based on a poem unknown for the Israeli reader. The blind night, like double darkness, serves as a symbol of total death, an empty Hades, or complete nothingness that cannot tell who is ghost and who is human being, because those who are alive, those few people in the streets, seemed to the narrator not human entities but angels; he could use the word ghosts as well, yet, being compassionate, he prefers angels.

In order to give the reader an idea about his first impression from the streets of Warsaw, he needs the help of poetry, Polish poetry, which, as he says, “is precise and deceitful at the same time” (p. 169), like Bronowski’s impressions, that are accurate and deceiving. He is not trying to conceal this. On the contrary: a careful reader should be aware that those impressions do not paint a realistic picture, but are entirely impressionist.

The last poet who helps Bronowski to draw his picture is Antoni Słonimski. Like Leśmian, Słonimski was a Polish writer from an assimilated family. In fact, his father converted to Catholicism, so most likely he didn’t experience the dilemma in what language to write. For him Polish was an obvious.

Antoni Słonimski was born in Warsaw in 1895. A poet, a journalist, and a critic, he began his literary career during World War I. From the early twenties he rose rapidly to become the leading personality in Poland’s literary and cultural life, a master of verse form and of a dramatic critic. During World War II he was in France and later moved to London. Słonimski returned to Poland for good in 1951. During 1956 and 1968 he was a target of anti-Semitic attacks by the Polish propaganda, government and media.

¹⁵ Bolesław Leśmian, *Poezje wybrane*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław, 1983, pp. 150–152.

He had a profound emotional regard for the Jewish people, which may be detected in poems such as *Elegy of the Shtetlakh* (Jewish little towns), which was dedicated to the Jewish world that had perished. He died in 1976 in Warsaw.

Back to the night walk in the streets of Warsaw: Bronowski recalls a poem by Słoniński, in which the latter portrayed his first return from London to ruined Warsaw after the war. He recognized this devastated city as his city by its screams and noise: the curse of the newspapers seller, the shouts of the concierge that recognizes one of the lodgers. Most likely, Bronowski had in mind the poem *Podróż* ("Journey") but, again, like in the case of Leśmian, Bronowski is not exact; the cursing person is a drunk in a hotel, and it is a waiter in restaurant that recognizes him.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Warsaw which Bronowski rediscovers, is like an ironical anti-thesis of this poem, because the city at the beginning of the eighties, or the years of the Martial Law, is a dead city; it is so still and empty that only an angel can recognize it. Again Bronowski repeats his observation that the inhabitants of Warsaw are not human beings of flesh and blood, but angels who know that they are angels, and for this reason are not surprised to hear his impressions. No wonder, adds Bronowski, the discussion with those angels was about purely theological questions (p. 169). Clearly, the narrator is interested not in portraying a real city and real people, but an atmosphere, his personal feelings, his nostalgia, melancholy, irony and loss. For this reason we, the readers, discover a "distilled" city that went through the filter of Polish poetry.

Unlike Weinfeld, Avner Holtzman, a specialist of Hebrew literature, doesn't hesitate. Like Bronowski, he knows precisely who he is going to look for. His journey to Poland, actual one but also metaphorical, is dedicated to retracing Hebrew writers like Berdyczewski, Brenner and Gnessin. I would like to portray the chronicle of Gnessin's gravestone.

Uri Nissan Gnessin (1881–1913), born in Starodub, Ukraine, at the age of 18 was invited to join the editorial staff of "Ha-Zefirah" (Hebrew literary periodical)¹⁷ in Warsaw: This marks the beginning of a productive period in his literary career. Gnessin published poems, literary criticism, stories, and translations. A small collection of short stories and sketches ("The Shadows of Life") appeared in 1904. At that time Gnessin started to wander from city to city, unable, or unwilling, to strike permanent roots. He spent time in Yekaterinoslav, Vilna, Kiev, London, and Palestine, where he was unable to adjust. In the summer of 1908 Gnessin returned to Russia. He died in Warsaw four years later.

Gnessin's work is characterized by modern literary techniques and devices which he introduced into Hebrew literature. "Through what came to be known in literary criticism as stream of consciousness, Gnessin presented the external world through the interior

¹⁶ "The poem is related to the first two-week Słoniński's visit in Poland after the war in 1945". Antoni Słoniński, *Poezje zebrane*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa, 1964, pp. 493, 579.

¹⁷ "Ha-Zefirah" was founded in 1862 by Hayyim Selig Słoniński (1810–1904), the grandfather of Antoni Słoniński. "The paper ceased publication after only a few months ... He (Słoniński) renewed publication of "Ha-Zefirah", first in Berlin and, from 1875, in Warsaw" (Encyclopedia Judaica).

emotional processes of the characters”¹⁸. In his writings, he tried to achieve what he called “the verbalization of the soul’s blurry shadows”¹⁹. One of his major themes was the struggle between Eros and Thanatos, i.e. the drive of living, or the strength of life, versus longing for death, or death wish. Usually, in his writings the death wish finally prevails.²⁰ Gnessin also portrayed the alienated and rootless Jew of the modern age. He powerfully described the dilemma of a Jew whose world viewpoint is ingrained in the values and atmosphere of the Jewish East European *Shtetl*, but who left it to become a man of the world. After years of wandering, the protagonist returns home to find that he became a foreigner in his own native soil.

Lets return to our narrator, Avner Holtzman who travels to Poland in search of three of the most significant writers, the founders of the Hebrew Literature: Berdyczewski, Brenner and Gnessin. Apart from this, he is also looking for his private history by re-examining the life story of his parents, born in small Polish towns (Belz and Swincian) at the end of the twenties of the previous century ²¹. We can realize from that combination that Holtzman believes that his individual story is composed of a mixture of biography and literature. The narrator admits that those three Hebrew classics are dear and close to his heart, and telling their story is also a part of a bigger drama of Hebrew literature in Warsaw. Warsaw is discovered again and again in all of the five stories in the book, three about Hebrew writers and two about his parents. All of them are part of one large story, the story of the Hebrew literary existence in Warsaw at the turn of the centuries, its decline after War World I, and at the same time its intensification in Palestine. The last part of the story is the total destruction of the European Jewry: of the remarkable Hebrew literary centers in Europe only cemeteries are left. The only very weak consolation is that Hebrew literature did not disappear, but survived to flourish in Israel (pp. 12–14).

As I have mentioned before, my aim is to portray Holtzman’s search of Gnessin’s tombstone. Holtzman’s journey began with a photograph of Gnessin’s gravestone in the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw. In the photo one can see an impressive gravestone and a candle that might indicate that the photo was taken during a memorial service. It is written also that the photo was taken in 1938, i.e. 25 years after Gnessin’s death (a detail that turned out to be not true). Holtzman declares that he always has felt there is no powerful and direct way to contact the past other than by intensely looking at photographs in which pieces of time and space were isolated and frozen for ever. The power of a photograph whether it was taken on purpose or by accident, Holtzman goes on, is hidden in the absolute knowledge that the object of it, was actually there at the moment it was being photographed (p. 9)²². A photo is like a gate into a story that

¹⁸ Shaked, p. 55.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 56.

²¹ Avner Holtzman, *Tmuna Leneged Enay* (“An Image Before My Eyes”), Am Oved, Tel-Aviv, 2002.

²² In that matter Holtzman is following the ideas of Roland Barth, as they were expressed in his book *Camera Lucida: Reflection on Photograph*, (trans. Richard Howard, New York, Hill and Wang, 1981).

is implanted in place and time, therefore the genre to which Holtzman's writings belong be defined as documentary story (pp. 10–11).

In story in question, Gnessin is presented in the last miserable months of his life, but the kernel of the story is the growing legend of him and its reflection in the odd and tragic circumstances in which his gravestone was erected (p. 12). When in the spring of 1912, Gnessin ended his novella *By*, his heart disease was getting worse. And perhaps it was from that particular state of mind, when one is aware of the coming death but, at the same time, willing to hold on to life, he decided to leave his parents' house in the small Ukraine town Pohep, and to go to Warsaw.

He arrived in Warsaw in September 1912. At the beginning, he stayed with his friend Yitzhak Alterman²³ in 3 Pawia St. During the first months in Warsaw he was busy doing translations and editorial jobs and, in order to make a living, he also had to teach Hebrew. People who knew him at that time recalled his appearance as noble and spiritual, but also bearing clear signs of physical decline (p. 100).

Four months after his arrival in Warsaw he became seriously ill, and after two months he died. The funeral took place the day after, on Friday at 2:00 pm; the hearse set off at 16 Ogrodowa St. – his last address in Warsaw, went up north through the Jewish streets of Warsaw, to the cemetery on the corner of Gęsia and Okopowa streets. Behind the hearse more and more people were gathering; hundreds of writers, devotees of Hebrew language and literature and literary critics were walking after the coffin into the cemetery (pp. 102–109).

For years the grave remained uncovered and exposed, without a gravestone: Gnessin's friends commemorated him by publishing his writings, but they did not have the means to place a tombstone at his grave which remained desolate (pp. 11–112). Holtzman tells us that a similar case was with Peretz's gravestone; although the latter had a very impressive and distinguished funeral, his grave had to wait ten years, until 1925, to gain a tombstone (p. 115). More than ten years after Gnessin's death, Hebrew writers and friends, also in Palestine, decided to collect money for the gravestone. This initiative took two years and was ineffectual (p. 116). Nevertheless, the cult around Gnessin's works was intensifying; young writers were gathering around his grave, and wrote poems about him, literary critics began to treat his prose appreciatively, if not purely academically. An interesting fact is that the first monographic book about Gnessin was written in 1934 by Ben Zion Ben Shalom, then a professor of Hebrew language and literature at Jagiellonian University in Cracow, who later on was the Rector of Tel-Aviv University (p. 118).

Gnessin's neglected grave became a theme for poets who wrote poems such as "Wreath of thorns" by Berl Pomerantz. That poem implied that the similarity between the sound of the writer's name, "Gnessin", and the street's name, Gęsia, was not accidental, since the most important landmark at the cemetery was Gnessin's grave.

²³ The father of the Hebrew poet Nathan Alterman.

And that deserted grave represented the narrator's solitude, banishment and exile in the Diaspora (p. 121).

Eventually, 26 years after Gnessin's death (in February 1939), with the initiative of Abraham Frank, a Yiddish and Hebrew writer, a gravestone was placed on the grave. There is no need to emphasize the tragic-ironical timing of that fact. Holtzman asserts that "The commemorative assembly, near Gnessin's gravestone, of the representatives of Hebrew culture in Poland seems to be, nowadays, a symbolic requiem for the presence of Hebrew literature in Poland; in 3–4 years most of those people were not alive anymore" (p. 124).

Until October 1941 the cemetery was part of the Ghetto. And it was functioning: in April 1941, for instance, there was a service at Peretz's grave to commemorate the 26 years of his death. The Germans destroyed and totally devastated the Jewish streets of Warsaw but, surprisingly, they did not ruin the cemetery. After the war the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw became, paradoxically, the only living remnant of the Jewish community in Warsaw. The journalist Mordechai Zanin, who visited Warsaw immediately after the war, and could not recognize the Jewish district, expressed his feelings when he entered the cemetery and finally felt that he was on a familiar territory: "After the frightful silence in the Ghetto, in the cemetery you feel, all of a sudden, like in a living world. Who could imagine that graves can be so full of life... In this place, Warsaw of the writers is still alive" (p. 129).

Whenever Holtzman comes to Warsaw, he visits that remnant of the Jewish life in the city. He knows perfectly well its paths and graves and he gives us a very detailed description of the way that leads to Gnessin's isolated tomb, the dearest and the most significant place for those who consider Hebrew literature not only a collection of texts, but also a spiritual world which has human heroic and tragic dimensions (p. 131). Holtzman perceives the story of Gnessin's gravestone not only as the story of Gnessin's presence in Hebrew literature, but also as a tale of the decline and eventually the annihilation of Hebrew culture in Poland (p. 132). For Holtzman, the only remnant of the magnificent and dynamic Hebrew culture in Poland is the grave of a writer. The fact that Hebrew culture did not cease to exist, because it had found an alternative center before the catastrophe, may serve as a solace for some, and for others only as not much of a consolation.

Some final reflections

As we have seen, the situation of Jewish writers in Poland at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries was very interesting situation. Like the whole of the Jewish people, they were in a position in which they had to choose their identity of which language was one of the elements. Jewish writers were in a specific position in which they had more than one native language, so they could choose between Polish, Yiddish and Hebrew. At that time, being a Jew was not a simple fact, because as the

consequences of emancipation, there were different ways of being a Jew. If we consider the Polish example, Jews could relinquish their Jewish identity, and assimilate totally in the Polish society. For writers, it meant, first and foremost, writing in Polish, as we saw on the example of *Leśmian*, and also touched briefly on the case of *Słoniński*. Nevertheless, Jews could also cling to their Jewish identity, and, in that case, could either stay closed up in a spiritual Ghetto as orthodox Jews or be receptive to influences from the outer world. For a modern Jew who had left the spiritual Ghetto, but who did not want to assimilate in the non-Jewish world, the two main alternatives were either to support the Yiddish culture, as was the case of Bundists, or to seek a national solution for the Jewish people in Zionism. The writers who were close to the Zionist ideology preferred to create in Hebrew.

From these two Jewish alternatives, Yiddish and Hebrew, the first was exterminated entirely in the Shoah, not only because the writers were murdered, but mainly because the potential readers perished too, which in this case means a total destruction of the entire culture. In the case of Hebrew literature, the traces lead, like in the case of *Gnessin*, not only to the cemetery in Warsaw, but also to Israel. Moreover, as far as Hebrew is concerned, writers, potential readers, critics, historians of literature, academic researches and, most importantly, young writers, all of them exist today; therefore, when it comes to Hebrew literature, contrary to Yiddish, it is vital and flourishing. However, we must bear in mind that Modern Hebrew literature stemmed from East Europe, and Israeli writers shouldn't forget that their roots, at least in part, are there. *Holtzman*, our traveler, is much aware of that fact, and he is not alone among the Hebrew literary experts.

Furthermore, we have seen that Polish literature is very vivid and dear for Israelis who were born in Poland. *Bronowski* and *Weinfeld* are good examples of these intellectuals who deal with literature in general, but constantly refer to Polish literature and translate it into Hebrew. Thanks to them, Polish poetry is known, loved and seen as an inspiration in the literary circles in Israel today.