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Evaluation of mgr. Magda Sara Szwabowicz Ph.D dissertation, *Hebrajskie czasopisma literackie jako reprezentacja hebrajskiego życia literackiego w Polsce międzywojennej*.

Let me begin by saying that Ms Szwabowicz's dissertation on Hebrew periodicals in interwar Poland is labor of love; it is a remarkable tribute to an important cultural phenomenon on the interwar Polish intellectual landscape which is no more. The consciousness of the tragic annihilation of the center of Modern Jewish literature on Polish soil is inescapable and cannot be ignored; nonetheless, Ms Szwabowicz successfully evaded the trap anachronistic of sentimental commemoration. In effect, she has produced an outstanding work of scholarship, which introduces the reader to the contemporaneous uniquely complex situation of Polish Hebrew writers. Whereas Zionist nationalism opposed vehemently the notion of the Diaspora [the negation of the Diaspora] and insisted that authentic Modern Hebrew literature can be produced only in the Land of Israel among speakers of Hebrew, Polish Jewish writers wished to assert the artistic viability and validity of Modern Hebrew literature created in the Polish diaspora.

Challenging prominent Israeli critics, such as Gershon Shaked, Ya'akov Shavit, and Zohar Shavit, who, in the spirit of the Zionist ideology claimed the organic ties of the Hebrew cultural center and the revival of the nation in its land, and who minimized the importance of Hebrew centers in Poland, Ms Szwabowicz proposes a differing perspective. She claims that the historical situation of the Partitions of Poland created a multicultural and multilingual climate which enabled the cultivation of Hebrew centers among other cultural minorities. Centers of Hebrew culture which existed not only in Warsaw, but also in cities, such as Vilnius, Cracow, and Lviv among others, drew upon traditions which extended back to the Haskalah period, long before the establishment of the center in Palestine, at the time when the nascent Hebrew language constituted only one of the linguistic modes in the Jewish community. In contrast with the dominating, practically uncontested position of the Hebrew culture in the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine, the Hebrew centers in the Diaspora co-existed with Yiddish and Polish cultural centers. This trilingual context created a complex reality whereby some of the writers contributed to each center in its particular language.

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The dissertation focuses on three main themes: Hebrew periodicals as signifiers of Hebrew culture, the readership of Modern Hebrew Literature, and the interpretation of the literary works in Hebrew. Each of the three parts is meticulously researched. I was impressed with the number of periodicals that Ms Szwabowicz thoroughly and attentively studies and describes in great detail. Her bibliography is extensive: it demonstrates a painstaking research of sources and of secondary literature both in Poland and in Israel. She shows excellent knowledge of Israeli critics in the original Hebrew. I commend the breadth of her investigation which frequently transforms her narrative into a lively story of the life of the members of the centers, their loves and hates, their competitive spirit and their friendships, but perhaps above all, their intellectual interests, ideological convictions, and sense of mission.

Thus she describes how writers, such as Peretz and Alterman (the father of the Hebrew poet, Nathan Alterman), held salons on alternate days where writers, such as Frishman, Cajtlin, Gnessin, and critics, such as Klauzner and Lachover used to meet. These legendary figures, some of whom immigrated later to Israel, established the Associations of Hebrew Writers, and the Hebrew PEN club; they lectured in Hebrew, taught courses and of course published in the Hebrew periodicals. They engaged in literature for children and in translations of great Western Literature into Hebrew. These activities were accompanied by perennial and assiduous search for funds, and constant attempts to reopen periodicals which would inevitably close. In her survey of Hebrew activities, Ms. Szwabowicz discusses dominating importance of Warsaw as a creative center and active publishing site; she describes Vilnius and the periodical *Ha-Zemanim*, dominated by *Ahad Ha-Am*; she includes Galicja, where the center in Cracow featured the great figure of *Ozjasz Thon*, an early Zionist, a man of letters and a leader of the Jewish community, and emphasizes the degree to which the center of Lviv cultivated Hebrew education and Hebrew youth groups.

The question of Hebrew education preoccupied the Hebrew writers, because it touched directly upon their readership. The graduates of the Tarbut schools were fluent in Hebrew, but unfortunately only few could afford to educate their children in this private educational system especially in the reality of the worsening financial crisis in the 1930s. The elites who had the means were mainly assimilated and leaned toward Polish public education system. At the same time, the orthodox segment of the Jewish population still considered Hebrew a Holy Tongue; while their children studied classical and biblical Hebrew, they could not be considered a prospective readership. Nonetheless, the dedicated lovers of Hebrew insisted on the presence of Hebrew *belles-lettres* in the Hebrew center, and so they engaged in importing Hebrew books from Palestine. As Ms Szwabowicz insightfully demonstrates, the writers' interest in Hebrew literature produced in Palestine was not diminished even though they were hurt by the lack of esteem of the Palestinian center for the diaspora Hebrew endeavors, and which adamantly cultivated the ideology of the "negation of the Diaspora." Only one Palestinian periodical, *Moznaim* was willing to cooperate with the Diaspora in creation of Hebrew culture. The author also astutely notes the ideological transformation of the writers who immigrated to Palestine. Very soon after their arrival in the Land of Israel, they were wont to lose interest in their previous literary milieu and sometimes even exhibited hostility toward diasporic Hebrew culture.

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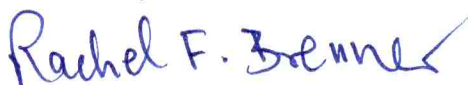
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The final part of the dissertation which examines the Hebrew literary works produced by Polish Jewish writers who remained in Poland is of great interest. Exposed to modernity, these highly educated multilingual writers/intellectuals engaged in fierce discussions about the form and the message of contemporary literature. Whereas some of them chose to abide by the genre of fiction, others found that shorter pieces, fractured narratives, and even a reportage reflected best the instability and the existential uncertainty of the increasing worsening political and economic situation in Europe.

Related to the question of form was the controversy over the role of literature and its social position: they pondered the question whether literary writing should be a voice of social realism, or rather a subjective individual expression. The former was a reflection of the Zionist ideology of the socialist collective which posited the writer as a guide and teacher of the nation. The latter rejected the positivism of the realistic genre in favor of the psychological emotional representation of the modern man. This literary perception engendered the figure of the “*talusz*,” a Hebrew derivative which signifies the “uprooted.” As Ms Szwabowicz correctly observes, the focus on the literary representation of the socially alienated individual reflects the difficult reality of the 1930s. Confronted with the worsening economic crisis, the growing precarious political situation, and the intensifying antisemitism, the writers felt increasingly threatened and insecure. Hence, the “*talusz*” is usually portrayed as a disoriented young man, the aimless *flâneur* who left the shtetl and became an expendable man in the big impersonal city. He becomes disillusioned, unable to go back to the former limited life of the Jewish community and Jewish family. At the same time, the option of emigration presented deep problems. Zionism evoked ambivalent feelings, especially for those writers who went to Palestine and came back disillusioned. While they never stopped loving Hebrew, many of the writers could not accept it exclusively as an organ of the Zionist idea. And while we will never know what would have this love produced had the destruction of European Jewry not taken place, their dedication to the Hebrew language as a language of literature, rather than ideology, indicates an understanding of the power of the Hebrew language that transcends nationalist postulations and decrees.

In conclusion, I have found Ms Szwabowicz’s dissertation a scholarly work of great value. It is not only well researched, but also well written. The passion that guided the author is evident and promises this doctoral candidate a very fruitful and constructive academic future.

Sincerely



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