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Warsaw in Hebrew Literature 1880–1920: New Perspectives

Abstract: The article gives a general overview of Hebrew literary life in Warsaw, and provides new perspectives on Hebrew fiction written in and about the city in the period of 1880–1920. The study results from the need to understand Hebrew literature within the inherently multilingual, transnational nature of the Jewish literary activity in the city and is based on a large corpus of Hebrew fictional texts that scholars did not consider earlier. It describes Hebrew literary life in Warsaw, as well as the different ways in which Warsaw's cityscape and the urban experience are represented in Hebrew stories and novels written between 1880 and 1920.

Keywords: Warsaw, literary life, Hebrew fiction, David Kna'any, urban experience

In May 1953, the Hebrew critic and essayist David Kna'any published an essay with the title "Warsaw in Hebrew Literature."¹ The essay was part of an Israeli (in fact worldwide) trend of writing memoirs and accounts of Jewish Warsaw, commemorating the community that was decimated in the Holocaust and the city that was ruined and changed forever in World War II. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Kna'any's essay was elegiac in tone, but it was also inquisitive, trying to assess and describe the role of Warsaw in Hebrew literature. In the essay, he probed Warsaw as an arena for Hebrew literary life, as well as the ways in which the urban space and the urban experience of Warsaw was depicted in Hebrew literature, mainly in Hebrew fiction.

Kna'any's main postulation was that "Warsaw has not been very lucky. In Hebrew, there are only two literary works that describe the city," and they were written years after the authors emigrated, in Mandatory

¹ David Kna'any, "Warsha ba-sifrut ha-ivrit," *Orlogin*, 8, May 1953, 3–15. Kna'any was born in Warsaw 1912 as David Hendelsman and immigrated to Palestine in 1934.

Palestine.² In his essay, he paid attention to the gap between Warsaw as a “mother and city in Israel” (with the largest Jewish community in Europe), and what he perceived as the lack of engagement with the city in Hebrew literature.

Kna’any’s assessment stands in contrast to Ya’acov Fichman, a Hebrew poet and essayist who moved from Odessa to Warsaw in 1903 and lived in the city for a number of years. Many years after, Fichman solidified the image of Odessa and Warsaw as the “two centers” of Hebrew literature at the turn of the twentieth century. In an essay he wrote and published in the early 1950s with the title *Nusah Polin* (“The Style of Poland”), Fichman portrayed a sharp dichotomy between “Odessa Style” and the “Warsaw Style” and between the “cold, rabbinic Odessa” and the “Hasidic, airy, musical, and liberating Warsaw”. He famously declared that “Odessa was encouraging and Warsaw was rebelling.”³

There are major problems both with Kna’any’s assessment of the minor place of Warsaw in Hebrew literature and with Fichman’s concept of Warsaw as one of the “two centers” of Hebrew literature. The primary problem is the obsession with “center” of Hebrew literature and culture that inflicted writers, critics and scholars for many years. There was much talk – both in the context of Hebrew and Yiddish literature – about where the center was, or where it should be. But in fact, in the early twentieth century, there was *no center*, only margins and enclaves of Hebrew (and Yiddish) literary activity. Warsaw was one of these enclaves, together with Odessa, Vilna (Vilnius), Homel, Lemberg (Lviv), Berlin, Vienna, London, New York, Tel-Aviv and other cities. Only in the 1930s, a “Hebrew Center” was solidified in Palestine. The rise of the Nazis, World War II and intense immigration decimated whatever was left in Europe (and to some extent America), leaving the newly established State of Israel as the chief, almost exclusive arena for Hebrew literature.

The other issue is the tendency to isolate Hebrew literary activity, without seeing it as part of a larger multilingual Jewish (and non-Jewish) context. This is especially true when it comes to “Hebrew Warsaw.” Here, we must turn to the work of Chone Shmeruk, who has characterized

² Kna’any referred to the late works of A.A. Kabak, *Be-tsel ‘ets ha-teliyah* [In the Shadow of Hanging Tree] (Tel Aviv, 1944) and Binyamin Tanen, *Temolim ‘al ha-saf* [Yesterdays on the Threshold] (Merḥavyah, 1947).

³ Ya’acov Fichman, *Ruhot menagnot: sofrei polin* (Jerusalem, 1952), 9–10.

Jewish literature and culture in Poland (especially in Warsaw) as a “trilingual (Hebrew, Yiddish, and Polish) Jewish culture,” with dynamically changing “spheres of influence” among its linguistic components.⁴ Shmeruk might have been the first scholar to realize how misguided is the predominant tendency to view and analyze Hebrew, Yiddish and Polish culture and literature as if they were totally separated from each other.

These two related problems have been especially acute in the case of Hebrew, because the Zionist narrative, to which figures like Kna'any and Fichman were committed, dictated the ways in which they came to understand the literary and cultural past (sometimes their own past) in light of the present in the State of Israel of the 1950s.⁵ Thus, in Fichman's case, he exaggerated and mythologized the role of Warsaw in Hebrew literature; in Kna'any's case, he minimized it. In more recent decades, scholars like Dan Miron, Shmuel Werses, Hannan Hever and David Weinfeld (the last two focused mostly on the interwar period) have revised and modified the picture, but the topic begs for a reexamination and reassessment.⁶

In order to approach Hebrew in Warsaw in a fresh way, we must turn away from the cherished, but ultimately flawed eulogies of Jewish Warsaw that were written in the 1950s. Instead, we must reexamine Hebrew in the context of the multilingual and transnational Jewish literary and cultural activity in the city, as well as the ways Hebrew texts written between 1880 and 1920 engaged with the urban space and experience in Warsaw. In order to do this, there is an urgent need to comb through the newspapers, magazines and books published in Warsaw (and elsewhere) and create a full corpus of literary texts dealing with Warsaw, something that was never done before in a systematic way. This survey article is my

⁴ Chone Shmeruk, “Hebrew-Yiddish-Polish: A Trilingual Jewish Culture,” in Yisrael Gutman, Ezra Mendelsohn, Jehuda Reinharz, Chone Shmeruk (eds.), *The Jews of Poland between Two World Wars* (Hannover and London, 1989), 285–311.

⁵ See also Ya'akov Shteinberg, *Dyokna'ot ve-'arahim* (Tel Aviv, 1979), 140–142.

⁶ Dan Miron, *Bodedim be-mo'adam* (Tel-Aviv, 1987), 365–381; Hannan Hever, “From Exile-without-Homeland to Homeland-without-Exile: A Guiding Principle of Hebrew Fiction in Interwar Poland,” in Israel Gutman, Ezra Mendelshon (eds.), *The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars* (Hanover, 1989), 334–367; Shmuel Werses, “Ha-sifrut ha-ivrit be-polin: tekufot ve-tsiyunei derekh,” in Israel Bartal, Israel Gutman (eds.), *Kiyum ve-shever*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 2001), 161–190. This article also corrects some of the errors and misconceptions in my own writing about Warsaw. See Shachar Pinsker, *Literary Passports: The Making of Modernist Hebrew Fiction in Europe* (Stanford, 2011), 39–53.

first iteration in this undertaking.⁷ While building upon existing scholarship, the following pages intend to provide, in a necessarily succinct way, new perspectives on “Hebrew Warsaw” based on the recognition of the inherently multilingual and transnational nature of the Jewish literary activity in the city, as well as on a larger corpus of fictional texts that previous scholars did not (or could not) consider.⁸

Hebrew literary life in Warsaw in late nineteenth century

In 1815, Warsaw became the capital of the new, truncated Kingdom of Poland with the Russian tsar as king. Its population grew rapidly from 81,250 in 1816 to 223,000 in 1864, and the number of Jews rose from 15,600 (19.2% of the population) to 72,800 (32.7%). Until 1862, Jews were not granted the status of citizenship, and most were banned from living on certain streets in the center of Warsaw. Nevertheless, during the nineteenth century Jewish immigration from Congress Poland and the Pale of Settlement into Warsaw grew, mostly of traditional Jews (both Hasidim and Mitnagdim), but a small circle of acculturated Jews and *maskilim* also developed slowly.⁹

Marking the beginning of an era with a specific date is always problematic and somewhat arbitrary. However, 1880 is an important date in European Jewish history, and it is also an important date in the development of Jewish and Hebrew literature in Warsaw. Already in 1862, Haim Zelig Słonimski (a *maskil* who settled in Warsaw in 1838), established and edited in Warsaw the first Hebrew newspaper in Poland, *Ha-tsefirah*, mainly as a way to disseminate articles of popular science to the Jewish masses. *Ha-tsefirah* was inspired both by previous Hebrew journals of maskilim in Central and Eastern Europe and by *Izraelita*, a Jewish weekly in the Polish language published by acculturated Jewish reformers since 1866. The weekly *Ha-tsefirah* was published intermittently, and moved to

⁷ My plan is to publish a longer study based on a full corpus of fictional texts that portray Warsaw. The future study will offer more extensive readings of texts that I cannot undertake in the present survey article.

⁸ Many of the texts that were published in Hebrew newspapers and journals of the period, to which access has been difficult or even impossible, are now fully accessible and searchable through the Historical Jewish Press project of the Jewish National Library and Tel-Aviv University (<http://web.nli.org.il/sites/JPress/>).

⁹ Antony Polonsky, “Warsaw,” in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Warsaw>.

Berlin and other places for some time. However, in 1880, it got a new lease of life with the arrival of the young Nahum Sokolow in Warsaw. Sokolow became the director of *Ha-tsefirah*'s editorial board (in the period of 1896-1904 he was also the editor-in-chief of the Polish-Jewish weekly *Izraelita*¹⁰). He wrote for *Ha-tsefirah* regularly, most notably a column entitled *Hatsofeh le-veit Yisrael* ("Watchman unto the House of Israel"). In 1884, Sokolow initiated and edited in Warsaw an almanac of Hebrew texts with the title *Ha-asif*, which was published annually from 1884-1889, and then again in 1894. The annual consisted mostly of articles in Jewish philosophy and history, but also prose fiction, poetry and literary criticism, written by figures like Yitshok Leybush Peretz, David Frishman, Yehuda Leib Gordon and many others from Warsaw, Poland, and in fact the entire Jewish world.¹¹

Following the example of *Ha-yom*, the first Hebrew daily paper that began to be published in Petersburg in January 1886, Sokolow decided to turn *Ha-tsefirah* into a daily publication. Sokolow worked hard to get permission from the Russian authorities for another daily Hebrew paper. When the permission was granted, *Ha-tsefirah* was officially coedited by Słomimski (who initially did not like the idea of a daily) and Sokolow, but the latter was the chief driving force. For the next 20 years, Sokolow became one of the most prominent, influential, and popular Hebrew journalists, and in his capacity as editor, he also served as a mentor for new literary and journalistic talent. From 1886 to 1906, when the *Ha-tsefirah* was published as a daily paper, it issued progressively more literary texts: feuilletons, short stories and poems, written in Hebrew or translations into Hebrew. This gave many young, aspiring writers who wrote in Yiddish, Russian, Polish or German, an opportunity to develop a voice in Hebrew, to reach a relatively large audience of readers (estimated between a few thousands and 10,000), and even to get paid well, something that could not be imagined in the earlier days of the Haskalah.¹²

In 1891, just a few years after the establishment of *Ha-tsefirah* as a daily paper, Avraham Leib Shalkovich – known better by his pen-name Ben-Avigdor – moved to Warsaw. He joined the *Benei Moshe* proto-Zionist

¹⁰ Shoshana Shtiftel, "Sokolow ve-ha-'Izraelita': perek alum bedarko ha-itonai't she ha-manhig ha-tsiyoni ha-yadu'a ve-'oreh Ha-tsefirah," *Kesher*, 17 (1995), 5–18.

¹¹ Menuha Gilboa, *Leksikon ha-'itonut ha-ivrit ba-me'ah ha-18 ve-ha-19* (Jerusalem, 1992), 301–304.

¹² *Ibid.*, 167–181; Ela Bauer, "The Race to Establish a Hebrew Daily: The Metamorphosis of 'Hatsfirah'," *Kesher*, 32, November 2002, 87–96.

movement and was appointed as the secretary of its Warsaw office. Soon after, he began to produce a series of inexpensive volumes of Hebrew fiction with the name *Sifrei agorah* (“Penny Books”). The idea for this endeavor came to him after he met Yitzhak Suvalsky, one of the older maskilim who was also the owner of a paper shop in Franciszkańska Street in Warsaw. In 1890–1891, Suvalsky edited and published four voluminous issues of a Hebrew almanac with the title *Keneset ha-gedolah* (“The Great Gathering”).¹³ Ben Avigdor wrote in a diary of his first Warsaw year, that (to his great surprise) Suvalsky told him that he hoped to earn 2000 rubles from the almanacs, and that he undertook this publishing endeavor “not for literary purposes, but simply as a business.”¹⁴ Ben Avigdor noted in his diary that these words made a bad impression on him, but apparently he soon realized that there was indeed a business opportunity in publishing Hebrew literature and that Warsaw was *the* place to do it. Two months after this incident with Suvalsky, Ben Avigdor wrote in his diary about a plan “to establish on his own a Hebrew publishing house”; its first initiative will be “to publish a series of small and cheap books of belles-lettres.”¹⁵

Ben Avigdor made contact with the Hebrew and Yiddish writer Yeohash (Solomon Blumgarten), as well as with Suvalsky about these plans. Both of them were sure he would go bankrupt (“we don’t have a reading public, and anyone who publishes Hebrew books puts his money on the ram’s horn”), but Ben Avigdor insisted that “the books would be sold in thousands and ten-thousands, and through them it would be possible to gradually create a reading public with good literary taste.”¹⁶

Soon after he laid out his plans, Ben-Avigdor published his first novella, and he appended to it a manifesto with the title *El hovevei sefat-ever ve-sifrutah* (To the Lovers of the Hebrew Language and its Literature, 1881), in which he declared: “I plan to publish *Sifrei agorah* (‘Penny Books’) for the sake of the people; cheap booklets that should

¹³ Gilboa, *Leksikon*, 353–356.

¹⁴ Ben Avigdor, “Mi-sefer zikhronotai,” *Ha-tsefirah*, 22 March 1917, 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, *Ha-tsefirah*, 3 May 1917, 6. Ben Avigdor’s diary, serialized in the renewed *Ha-tsefirah* as a weekly newspaper in 1917, is an invaluable source of knowledge about Jewish Warsaw (Hebrew and otherwise), in the early years of the 1890s, in spite of the fact that its authenticity as a real diary of this period is unclear, because it might have been rewritten in 1917.

be in high demand, even among the miserly Hebrew public because of (a): their cheap price, (b): their content which is both pleasant and utilitarian.” To the Hebrew writers and aspiring writers, he confirmed that: “they should know that I hate gifts, and I would never ask them to work for free, because I will pay them for their creations with full payment.”¹⁷

Ben Avigdor had good literary and business instincts. It took time and effort for *Sifrei agorah* to take off after its inauguration, but the success of this project heralded a radical rethinking of both Hebrew fiction and its modes of distribution. In fact, it initiated a genuine Hebrew book market that was centered in Warsaw, but reached the entire Jewish world in Europe and beyond – even as the number of readers remained modest compared to Yiddish, Russian and Polish. In 1895, this success enabled Ben Avigdor to establish in Warsaw another publishing imprint, *Tushiya*, the first privately owned, modern Jewish secular press. Ben Avigdor envisaged publishing books that would energize the development of modern Hebrew culture. Ben Avigdor was also the guiding spirit of *Luah Ahiasaf*, an almanac edited (by different editors every year) and published in Warsaw annually from 1893 to 1904. It was one of the chief publications of what became known as *Ha-mahalakh he-hadash* (“The New Wave”), advocating for naturalistic prose fiction different both from the prose of the Haskalah and the contemporary style of S.Y. Abramovitz’s Hebrew stories and auto-translated novels (the so-called Mendele nusah).¹⁸

The “New Wave” was not an exclusively Warsaw literary movement, despite the fact that the publishing activity and most writers were located in Warsaw. Its poetics was also quite eclectic. Jewish writers (many of them wrote in Yiddish and other languages) who tried their hand in writing Hebrew fiction became associated with the “New Wave” by the virtue of publishing in Ben-Avigdor’s venues. Some of these writers continued the poetics of the Haskalah. Others were influenced by the European romantic movement, especially when Peretz and David

¹⁷ Ben Avigdor, “El hovevei sefat-ever ve-sifruta,” in *Leah moheret ha-dagim* (Warsaw, 1891), I–IV.

¹⁸ Zeev Gries, “Avraham Leib Shalkovich (Ben Avigdor) ve-ha-mahapekha be-olam ha-sefarim ha-ivriyim be-reshit ha-me’ah ha-20,” in Yosef Goldstein (ed.), *Da’at: Mehkarim be-historiyah yehudit modernit* (Beer Sheva, 2010), 305–328. On the “New Wave” in Hebrew fiction, see Menuha Gilboa, *Ha-mahalakh he-hadash u-mi-hutsah lo* (Tel-Aviv, 1991).

Frishman settled in Warsaw,¹⁹ and began to write romantic and neo-romantic poetry and prose.

The eclecticism of this period in Hebrew literature can perhaps be best seen in Peretz's Hebrew almanac *Ha-hets* ("The Arrow" 1894), in which he attacked (under the pen-name *Ha-partzi*) the "time lag" of Hebrew literature: "The sun of realism has set over world literature, the sun of materialism [naturalism] already shines in its wake and the Decadents have unfurled their banners! ... However, for us, who are far away from the battlefield, 'Realism' is still a new and stirring motto."²⁰ Thus, Peretz called for a mixture of neo-romanticism, decadence and symbolism, which he himself practiced in some of his Yiddish and Hebrew writing in Warsaw.²¹ Similar criticism against the "New Wave" and Ben-Avigdor's activities was expressed by figures like Mikha Yosef Berdichevsky, who lived at the time in Berlin and Breslau.²² And yet, even twenty years later, Yosef Hayim Brenner remembered the great impression that these texts had made on him as a youth. He recalled that when he finished reading "the booklets of Ben Avigdor's publishing house (nicknamed "*benavigdorlekh*" in Yiddish), his thirst for reading "was intensely burning."²³

The success of Ben-Avigdor and his publishing ventures attracted other "literary entrepreneurs" to Warsaw. One of the most interesting but little-known figures is Shmuel Nahum Kahanovsky (1856–1921), who settled in Warsaw in the 1880s and attempted to establish a competition to *Sifrei agorah* with *Sifrei sha'ashuim* ("Books of Amusement"). As part of this imprint, he published in the early 1890's about fifteen books, mainly his own Hebrew writings. The fiction that Kahanovsky wrote and published seemed to emulate the so-called *shund* ("trash" or "low-brow") Yiddish literature written by Shomer (Nokhem Meyer

¹⁹ Frishman came to Warsaw in the mid-1880s; Peretz, in 1891, when he became a functionary of the Warsaw Jewish community council, the *gmina*, assigned to the department of burials.

²⁰ Yitshok Leybush Peretz [Ha-partzi], "Ha-sifrut ve-ha-hayim," *Ha-hets* (1894), 14.

²¹ Peretz had been a Hebrew writer since the 1870s and was known, until the 1890s, mostly as a Hebrew poet.

²² Eli Yoel Levin, *Luah Ahiasaf – monografiah le-shanim 1893–1899*, MA Thesis, Tel-Aviv University 2010, 18.

²³ Yosef Hayim Brenner, "Misdei ha-sifrut," in id., *Ketavim*, vol. 4 (Tel Aviv, 1985), 1306.

Shaykevitch). Most of this Hebrew fiction featured characters and plots that took place in Warsaw.²⁴

This brief account of the publishing activities of figures like Słonimski, Sokolow, Peretz, Suvalsky, Ben-Avigdor and Kahanovsky is only partial, but it is enough to explain much about Hebrew literary life of Warsaw at the end of the nineteenth century. Warsaw did not become “the center” of Hebrew literature, but it did become a major center of Jewish publishing and journalism in a number of languages. In this period, it was probably the most important publishing *market* in the Jewish world, led by figures active in Yiddish and Hebrew, as well as in Polish and Russian. This, more than anything else, explains the appeal of Warsaw to a new generation of Jewish prose writers, poets, journalists, editors and publishers who flocked to the city at the first years of the twentieth century, when Warsaw became the most densely populated Jewish city in the world (for a short time before New York City took the title), and a city full of promises to Jewish writers active in Hebrew and other languages.

Writing the cityscape: Warsaw in late nineteenth century Hebrew fiction

With all this Jewish literary activity taking place in Warsaw at the end of the nineteenth century, and a sizeable number of writers immigrating to the capital of Congress Poland, one should ask: what kind of engagement can we find in the literature written in Hebrew with the urban space and the experience of intense life in a big city? In order to answer the question, we must remember that during the Haskalah, much of Hebrew fiction did not deal with contemporary life. Even autobiographies and the first attempts of writing realistic stories and novels represented urban reality in a highly generalized, schematic (and often didactic) way. It is only towards the end of the nineteenth century that a handful of writers of Hebrew fiction (Abramovitz, Smolenskin, Braudes), attempted to create a representation of life in the city in their writing.²⁵ Some of this tendency is clearly seen in fiction written in and about Warsaw, especially in the nat-

²⁴ Werses, *Ha-sifrut ha-ivrit be-polin*, 173; Avner Holtzman, “Shalem ashalem lahem be-keseef male: al huladeta shel ha-sifrut ha-ivrit ke-ma’arehet kalkalit,” *Ot* 3 (2013), 36.

²⁵ On fictional representation of urban experience in Hebrew literature in Europe in the nineteenth century, see Oded Menda-Levy, *Likro ‘et ha-‘ir* (Tel-Aviv, 2010), 39–41; Pinsker, *Literary Passports*, 29–38.

uralist fictional texts that were published in the imprints associated with Ben Avigdor and the “New Wave” movement. Here we see descriptions of particular locations in the city that go hand-in hand with an emphasis on the social dynamics (the rise of Jewish middle-class in the city, socio-economic stratification etc.) that take place in the urban environment, as well as the movement of migration from the small towns to the emerging Polish metropolis.

This can be seen in David Frishman’s stories about Warsaw. In 1892, he published, in Ben-Avigdor’s *sifrei agora* imprint, a slim book with three short stories with the title *Otiyot porhot* (“Flying Letters”). Two of these stories (different from previous writings by Frishman himself), might be the first Hebrew texts in which the fictional space is explicitly identified as the cityscape of Warsaw.²⁶ “Ahan asher be-varshoy” (“The Varsovian Achan”) locates the characters and the events in specific and familiar urban sites: a bank on Senatorska Street, the poor neighborhood of Praga (across the river from the main part of the city), and the shop of a shoemaker on Franciszkańska Street in Warsaw. This story within story recounts the main events in the life of a rich banker named Meir from a meager background who, following a crisis of belief, abandoned the traditional Jewish world of Praga, and decided to “make it” in the big city. He runs away from his family, works as a shoemaker and then a baker-apprentice until he finds a position as a seller in a clothing department store and he starts earning decent salary. He then disappears, and it turns out that he traveled across the ocean to Chicago. After twenty years, Meir returns to Warsaw and opens a big bank with his new Americanized name “Max Frank.” This naturalistic story focuses on the upward mobility that became possible for some Jews in Warsaw, as well as the religious, cultural and social tensions that such mobility created within the urban Jewish community.

Frishman’s second story in this book, “Be-veyt ha-redaktsyah” (“In the Editorial House”) gives the readers a glimpse into the Jewish literary life in the city of Warsaw.²⁷ The first-person narrator begins the story with a scene in an Italian café-bakery near the Saxony Garden, where Jewish writers gather to talk, smoke and play chess. He meets there a mysterious man nicknamed “the editor,” whom no one really knows, and with whom he occasionally plays chess in silence. The narrator’s interest in

²⁶ David Frishman, *Otiyot porhot* (Warsaw, 1892), 5–22.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 23–32.

this man grows when he walks with him to his place on Pańska St. and finds a common ground with him as both are involved in Hebrew literary activity. Finally, they begin to talk and “the editor” invites the narrator to enter his apartment, where he finds a weekly Hebrew magazine with the title *Reshut ha-yahid* (“A Private Domain”), whose sole writer and reader is “the editor” himself (hence the ironic title: “In the Editorial House”). To his great surprise, the narrator finds out that “the editor” has written hundreds of Hebrew plays and stories, which were ready to be published, but never were, because no editor of a Hebrew publication found them suitable. The narrator begins to think that this “editor” is a madman, but quickly comes to a realization that this is not the case; the man is an eccentric, stranger, “original” character who did not find his place in the new “market” of late nineteenth century Jewish literature.

The story ends years later, when the narrator, who has not been in touch with “the editor,” comes to realize that he died, after seeing a funeral proceeding on Dzika St. towards the nearby Jewish Cemetery of Warsaw. This naturalistic story, which might have been based on some real Jewish writers and editors (perhaps Kahanovsky?), presents the complexity of Jewish life in Warsaw, moving between new and old institutions and modes of sociability (cafés, newspapers, publishing houses, gardens and cemeteries), as well as to the loneliness, alienation and eccentricity of some of the new players in creation of modern Jewish culture and market in the city.

Another important story about Jewish Warsaw from this period, in which social dynamics are very pronounced, was written by S.Y. Abramovitz (Mendele Moykher Sforim). Since 1881, Abramovitz lived in Odessa, but he made a few extended visits to Warsaw, most notably by the invitation of the Polish writer Klemens Junosza Szaniawski, the translator of his novel *Masoés Binyomin Hashlishi* (“The Travels of Benjamin the Third”), published in Polish in 1885 as *Don Kiszot żydowski* (“A Jewish Don Quixote”).²⁸ During the time Abramovitz became familiar with Warsaw, he also returned to writing Hebrew fiction after a long hiatus in which he has made a name for himself as a master Yiddish novelist. One of these Hebrew stories is “Bi-yeshivah shel ma’alah u vi-yeshivah shel mata” (“In the Heavenly Assembly and the Earthly One”), published in the Warsaw’s *Luah Ahiasaf* almanac of 1894–1895. The story portrays

²⁸ Shmuel Werses, “Bein yehudim le-polanim be-shenei sipurim shel Mendele Moykher Sforim,” *Gal-ed* 14 (1995), 137–163.

Warsaw during “the pogrom”: the wave of violence against Jews, which took place throughout the Russian Empire and Congress Poland in the early 1880s. The violence that erupted in Warsaw on Christmas Day of 1881, and the Jewish reaction to it are at the heart of Abramovitz’s story. Unlike Frishman and Ben-Avigdor, Abramovitz’s narrator does not call Warsaw by its name. Instead he calls the city by the biblical name Beer-Sheva (in the Negev)! This is typical of Abramovitz (and nineteenth century Hebrew fiction generally) who writes about real places but gives them playful fictional names. In this case, Beer-Sheva is the Hebraized version (in metathesis) of Warsaw.

The story begins with the first-person narrator, Mendele the bookseller, almost drowning in the Vistula River in Warsaw and searching for a place to hide. The reference to the pogrom and to the historical events is ironic, half-hidden, and is used by Abramovitz as a way to describe and criticize Warsaw’s Jewish community. Mendele climbs up from the river to some higher ground in a tiny attic, and there “where the crowd and the noise of the city sound like deep silence” he meets various local figures: Eliyahu the Hasid, Albert (Abraham) the maskil who has been acculturated into Polish culture, and Shimshon, the follower of the proto-national Hibbat Zion movement.²⁹ When Mendele begins chatting with them about current events, he understands well that Warsaw is divided and consumed by threefold enmity: “between Warsaw Jews and their brothers from Lithuania (i.e. the new immigrants from the Russian Pale of Settlement); between those Jews who are religiously observant and strong believers and their brothers who are not; and between Polish gentiles and all the above.”³⁰

While most of the story focuses on the response to violence and the divisions that plague the community, the reader also finds in it a fascinating portrait of the urban space of Warsaw and its Jewry. Thus, Mendele warns the reader that any Jew who visits Warsaw should “never walk in the crowded city without being attentive and fully aware of the danger...” This is because “Warsaw Jews are so abrupt in their business and everyday routines... that an innocent passerby might be hurt in an accident.” Mendele reports that even he (who came to know the city quite well) was “completely lost in the markets of Warsaw, in the narrow allies, crowded

²⁹ Shalom Ya’akov Abramovitz, *Kol kitvei Mendele Moykher Sforim* (Tel-Aviv, 1947), 420.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 421.

with Jews busy with business negotiation and commerce, walking to and fro with great enthusiasm and clamor.”³¹

The observation about Warsaw as an unparalleled center of Jewish commerce and the awareness of the religious, social and ideological divisions and tensions among different strata of the large urban Jewish community, make Abramovitz’s story a unique account of an insider/outsider with a wide perspective on Jewish modernity. Because Abramovitz has been, especially in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the chief figure that bridged Haskalah and post-Haskalah, Hebrew and Yiddish, his story is significant. While it is different from stories by “local” Jewish writers like Peretz, Ben-Avigdor and Frisham, there are similarities in the attempt to decipher the urban modernity of Warsaw, the rapid change that life in the big city generates for Jews, both as individuals and as a community trying to find a new order in radically new reality.

These themes are present in other Hebrew fictional texts published in the second half of the 1890s, mainly by writers who were associated with the naturalistic trend of the “New Wave.” A good example is found in some of the stories written by Ezra Goldin (1868–1915), who moved to Warsaw in 1886, and a year later published his first book, *Shirei no’ar* (“Poetry of Youth”). Goldin soon abandoned poetry and turned his attention to prose, publishing stories and articles in the Hebrew and Yiddish local press. In 1896, he was also the editor of the literary collection *Ha-zeman*, which featured a number of writers in Warsaw. Some of Goldin’s stories depict aspects of Jewish life in Warsaw and the urban experience and space. The story *Harata* (“Remorse”), for example, was published in the *Luah Ahiasaf* almanac of 1893–1894.³² Narrated by the third-person narrator, the story is told mostly from the female protagonist point of view. This young woman is similar to what became in Hebrew fiction of this period a familiar character – the immigrant from the small town in the Pale of Settlement to the large city of Warsaw. She used to live in a tiny room on Gešia Street, earning her living with great difficulty as a tailor assistant. However, at the present moment of the story, we see her as Dorothea Greenfeld, the twenty-four year-old wife of a rich Jewish merchant. On the one hand, it is a typical rags-to-riches story of an immigrant who makes it in the big city (something that was no-doubt the dream of many Jewish immigrants). However, this is not

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ezra Goldin, “Harata” [Remorse], *Luah Ahiasaf*, 1 (1893–1894), 26–31.

a happy story in any way. Dorothea looks back at her life and realizes that she actually paid a huge emotional toll in the quest to improve her financial situation. At the end of the story, Dorothea sees nothing but emptiness, a life devoid of love and satisfaction.

We can find similar focus on acculturated and upwardly mobile Jews in Warsaw in Avraham Singer's story "Mi-ma'ayney ha-yeshua" ("From the Springs of Salvation"), published in *Luah Ahiasaf* in 1896-7³³. It recounts the travails of a married Jewish couple from a small "Lithuanian town" who immigrated to Warsaw and made their way up the socio-economic ladder, to become a respectable, acculturated upper-middle class family. We encounter here Mordekhay Ben Baruch who changed his name to the Russified Mawriky Borisovitz Goldmacher and his wife, who has become Bella Yefimovna. Singer is poking fun at the family and their upper-class existence, the ennui (and the hypochondria) of the woman of the house, and the physician who is happy to give advice to the rich, which involves the occasional visits to the Karlsbad or other spas (hence the ironic name "Springs of Salvation") and health resorts popular among Jews from Eastern and Central Europe.³⁴

L. (Levy) Mekler's story "Yad ha-hekhray" ("The Force of Necessity"), published in the almanac *Ha-zeman* in 1896, deals with a different aspect of acculturation of Jews in Warsaw.³⁵ It recounts the story of two young brothers who immigrated to Warsaw from a small town in order to study at the University of Warsaw. This turned out to be more of a common reality for Jews who strived to receive higher education, provided that they knew enough Polish and pass the exams that enabled them to study in local universities (something that was almost impossible in the Pale of Settlement).³⁶ These two brothers live in a rented room at Leszno Street. There, they had an opportunity to observe the Tłomackie Synagogue, which had "Reform" service, and was used by the wealthy and middle class, as well as the Polish-Jewish intelligentsia. These stories about immigrants to the city and about economic and communal tensions, are typical of the naturalistic

³³ Avraham Singer, "Mi-ma'ayney ha-yeshua," *Luah Ahiasaf*, 4 (1896–1897), 161–174.

³⁴ On Jewish spa culture in this period, see Mirjam Zadoff, *Next Year in Marienbad: The Lost Worlds of Jewish Spa Culture* (Philadelphia, 2012).

³⁵ Levy Mekler, "Yad ha-hekhray," *Ha-zeman* (1896), 60–65.

³⁶ See Szymon Rudnicki, "From 'Numerus Clausus' to 'Numerus Nullus,'" *Polin* 2 (1987), 246–268.

trend of the “New Wave,” and Warsaw provided these writers with a perfect example of these processes of immigration, urbanization and social mobilization that were central to Jewish modernization in this period.³⁷

While less interesting from a literary point of view, the lowbrow novellas of Kahanovksy (who attempted to replicate Ben Avigdor’s success as a publisher and writer), are historically significant, and the representation of the city in his writing is substantial and indicative of the larger trends I am trying to follow. Kahanovsky’s novella *Beit mikve ha-soharim* (“The House of Hope for Traders”) serialized in *Ha-tsefirah* in 1896, deals with middle class Jews who are active in the Warsaw stock-exchange.³⁸ These traders are depicted from the point of view of Yehiel Yehezkel Davidovitz, an immigrant to Warsaw, who tries to strike it rich in the stock market, but since he lacks the required business acumen, he ends up losing his money. As Avner Holtzman claimed, this novel probably follows the popularity of Sholem Aleichem’s novel *Menakhem Mendl*, the first part of which was being published in the Yiddish press in 1892.³⁹ While Sholem Aleichem gave insights into Jewish modernity in Odessa and Kiev (later also Warsaw), in his famous Yiddish novel, Kahanovsky attempted to capture elements of Warsaw’s modernity in Hebrew.

Kahanovsky, who published a number of similar novellas, and was apparently very sensitive to what Jewish readers and writers in Warsaw (and elsewhere) were concerned with, might have felt the changes occurring both in Jewish Warsaw and in Hebrew literature around the turn of the century. Instead of writing about the Warsaw stock-exchange, he published in the first volume of the *Sefer ha-shanah* (The Hebrew Year Book, edited by Sokolow) a story entitled “Tsedaka” (“Righteousness”).⁴⁰ Here we find traces of a large-scale movement of migration of young Jews from Lithuania into the city of Warsaw, which Kahanovsky’s narrator calls “the Polish Sidon.” This new and ever growing wave of migration of young lonely men and women from the Pale of Settlement who left their families

³⁷ See also Avraham Singer, “Gever lo yitslah,” *Luah Ahiasaf* 5 (1897), 85–103; idem, “Yeush she-lo mi-da’at,” *Luah Ahiasaf*, 6 (1898), 198–205.

³⁸ The novella was printed in 14 installments in the daily *Ha-tsefirah* between 22 November 1896 and 22 December 1896.

³⁹ Holtzman, *Shalem ashalem*, 37.

⁴⁰ Shmuel N. Kahanovsky, “Tsedaka,” in Nahum Sokolow (ed.), *Sefer ha-shana* (Warsaw, 1900), 197–217.

in search of education, science, literature and politics was about to change the face of Jewish Warsaw, as well as its literary and cultural activity.

Hebrew literary life in early twentieth century Warsaw

If the last two decades of the nineteenth century marked the development of Warsaw as a major location for multilingual Jewish publishing, and the site of a mushrooming Hebrew literary life, the early years of the twentieth century were certainly the most significant and dynamic for Hebrew literature in Warsaw. It is not hard to understand why Jewish writers of the new generation – those young people, who were born in the 1880s in the small towns of the Pale of Settlement, Congress Poland and Galicia and received traditional education that included immersion in Hebrew texts – were engrossed with Warsaw, an emerging metropolis with the largest Jewish population in Europe (210,500 in 1897 and 337,000 in 1914). It is in this period that young writers such as Brenner, Gershon Shifman, Uri Nissan Gnessin, Hillel Zeitlin, Pinhas Lachower, Zalman Shneour, Ya'acov Fichman, Y.D. Berkovitz, Ya'akov Shteinberg, Sholem Asch, Avrom Reisen, Hersh Dovid Nomborg and many others moved to Warsaw for a short or an extended period.

In the early years of the twentieth century, Warsaw was the largest publishing market for literature in the two Jewish languages that was created by bilingual (or trilingual) writers, with readership that extended far into the rest of Europe and beyond.⁴¹ One small but significant example of relative flowering of Hebrew within the Jewish multilingual literary culture in this period can be seen in *Ha-tsefirah*, the Hebrew daily newspaper. On March 28, 1902, the paper published an obituary for a deceased Jewish writer, Avraham Shalom Friedberg (who was an important maskil author that became largely forgotten after his death).⁴² The obituary was signed by an impressive list of thirty-nine people; all of them were identified in *Ha-tsefirah* as “Hebrew writers in Warsaw.”

At first glance, the existence of many names on this list – people like Sholem Asch, Yankev Dinezon, Mordkhe Spektor, Avrom Reisen and

⁴¹ For a good account of Jewish readership in this period, using statistics from libraries and other sources, see Jeffrey Veidlinger, *Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire* (Bloomington, 2009), 67–113.

⁴² See Oded Menda-Levy's article about Friedberg in the YIVO Encyclopedia: http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Friedberg_Avraham_Shalom.

Sh.Y. Yatskan – is very surprising, because today they are known to us almost exclusively as Yiddish writers. Sholem Asch, to take one prominent example, became the most popular Yiddish writer in the world during the interwar period. Yatskan later became the publisher and editor of the most successful Yiddish newspaper in Warsaw. However, around 1902, writing and publishing in the two or three languages was the norm rather than the exception. All of these figures were identified as “Hebrew writers” because they wrote in Hebrew alongside Yiddish. The publication of the obituary in *Ha-tsefirah* is, of course, not coincidental. The very existence of an established and highly circulated Hebrew daily like *Ha-tsefirah* – alongside a new Warsaw Hebrew daily newspaper *Ha-tsofeh*, launched in 1902 – signaled the existence of a reading public. Both *Ha-tsefirah* and *Ha-tsofeh* (which established a competition for the best Hebrew story) gave Jewish writers in this period an opportunity to publish in Hebrew, as well as to be paid for their work.

The fact that Warsaw was the hub of Jewish commerce and the site of the largest Jewish publishing and journalistic industry in the world at the time meant that these young people could aspire to leave behind the despised traditional occupation of being a Hebrew tutor to the sons or daughters of rich families in the shtetl. Instead, they hoped to find in Warsaw literary mentors, steady work as editors or writers in a publishing house, a newspaper or journal. In the years before the 1905 revolution and the establishment of the daily Yiddish newspapers, there might have been more Hebrew publishing venues than Yiddish in Warsaw.⁴³ Only in 1903 the first Yiddish daily in Eastern Europe, *Der fraynd* (“The Friend”), was published, first in Saint Petersburg and later in Warsaw. It was followed by *Yidishes tageblat* (“Jewish Daily” 1906–1911) published by Yatskan, which then changed its name to *Haynt* (“Today” 1908) and *Der Moment* (“The Moment”, established in 1910).

Apart from Hebrew publishing houses like Tushiya and Ahiasaf, the two daily newspapers mentioned about, and almanacs like *Luah Ahiasaf*, there were also new publications like *Olam katan* (“Small world”), a Hebrew magazine for children’s literature edited by Shmuel Leib Gordon, which was a new and exciting phenomenon. In 1900, David

⁴³ Chone Shmeruk claimed that Yiddish newspapers were not published in Warsaw in this period because of the censorship, which was more open to Hebrew publications. See Chone Shmeruk, “Aspects of the History of Warsaw as a Yiddish Literary Center,” *Polin* 3 (1988), 140–155.

Frishman established and edited a weekly literary magazine with the name *Ha-dor* (“The Generation”). Although it lasted only two years, the fact that it existed signaled both the perception that Hebrew literature had a large reading audience that could sustain such a weekly magazine, as well as the significance of Warsaw as a focal point for Hebrew literary activities. The fact that *Ha-shiloah*, the most respected Hebrew periodical of the time, which was established by Ahad Ha-am and was firmly associated with Odessa (and what became known as “the Odessa Sages”), moved for a short time together with the new editors, Chaim Nachman Bialik and Yosef Klausner, from Odessa to Warsaw in 1903, was seen also as a signal of the importance of Warsaw for Hebrew cultural activity.

It is in this context that we need to understand many of the essays, memories, stories and poems that were written about the experience of early twentieth century Warsaw in Hebrew and in Yiddish. A good example is Brenner’s poignant essay about his good friend Gnessin (who died in Warsaw in 1913 at the age of 34). Brenner wrote about the elation he felt when he arrived in the Warsaw train station, rushing to 21 Dzielna St. to stay with Gnessin, who had come from Homel to Warsaw earlier that year when he was invited by Sokolow to work at the editorial office of the *Ha-tsefirah*.⁴⁴ Brenner would later describe the time he spent in Warsaw as a foundational experience in his career as a Hebrew-European writer, an apprenticeship at the epicenter of an emerging literary tradition:

There was a youthful inspiration, a longing for something, absorption of impressions with all the bliss and pleasure that comes along with this immersion. [We] met with Nomberg and with Reisin who had just published some literary collection in Yiddish; read some books and some critical essays. Uri Nissan [Gnessin] wrote a critical essay [...] and published it in *Ha-tsefirah* under a “pseudonym.” Pseudonym – even the very word had a strong appeal because of its novelty. In short, we were “entering” as if we were standing in the midst of Shacharit [“morning prayer”]. One evening [Gnessin] picked up from the street a new edition of *Luah Ahi’asaf* hot off the press [...] We sat at the dinner table and started to read [...] a poem by H.N. Bialik. And not too long after, when we finished our dinner, we already competed with one another to see who could best recite the poem by heart.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Yosef Hayim Brenner, “Uri Nissan” (1913), reprinted in idem, *Ketavim*, vol. 3 (Tel-Aviv, 1985), 155–162. Brenner took the trip mainly because his first book – a collection of short stories with the title *Me-emek ‘ahor* (“From the Desolate Valley”) – was about to be published in Warsaw by the publishing house Tushiya.

⁴⁵ Brenner, “Uri Nissan,” 115.

Indeed, Warsaw in 1900 was an exciting place for young people who were just beginning their careers as Hebrew and Yiddish modernist writers. Apart from all the journals, newspapers and publishing houses, writers like Gnessin and Brenner, Reisen and Nomberg could meet in simple cafés – the café of Yehezkel Kotik at 31 Nalewki St. or the “Zionist café” on Dzielna St. (right next to Gnessin’s room), where Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish and Russian newspapers were provided to the diverse clientele, described by its habitués as a mixture of Jewish workers, political activists, writers and intellectuals.⁴⁶

The young poet Ya’akov Fichman, who moved from Odessa to Warsaw in 1903, remembered that he did not know where he would go. “Peretz, Frishman and Sokolow were simultaneously dear and remote...” He wrote that he was not focused on specific personalities, but on the city itself, with its intense cultural activity and its “bohemian life”:

the city of the young Hebrew literature, the place of Tushiya, Ahasaf, *Ha-tsofeh* and *Ha-tsefirah*. The editorial office of *Olam katan* attracted me like a green island. On the very first day, I met Shteinberg and Shneour, who like me came from the south, attracted to the boisterous literary center. In a few days, I was a regular in the tiny and grubby café of [Yehezkel] Kotik. There we sat at a cup of coffee with Sholem Asch and Avrom Reisen. The bohemian life attracted all of us to the Polish metropolis.⁴⁷

The poet and prose writer Zalman Shneour remembered that when he arrived in Warsaw in 1902 at a very young age, he felt an intense attraction to the city and its literary activity which occurred, according to him, “between these two mountains”, namely “between the *beis midrash* [house of study] of Y.L. Peretz and that of David Frishman.” He recalled that “there was a jealousy between Peretz and Frishman, an attitude of two who fell in love with the same girl – literature be her name, and both of them did not appreciate the fact that I was going to the other to hear ‘Torah’.”⁴⁸ Shneour highlights the tensions and points of difference between Peretz and Frishman, but by using the image of “two mountains” (from Peretz’s famous story), he also points to the productivity of the literary rivalry between these men, who were also mentors to the

⁴⁶ On Kotik’s café and other coffeehouses in Warsaw of this period see Shachar Pinsker, “Ehad ha-sofrim akhal itriyot, ve ha-itryah nisharah teluah al safamo,” *Ha’aretz Literary Supplement*, May 7, 2008; Scott Ury, *Barricades and Banners: The Revolution of 1905 and the Transformation of Warsaw Jewry* (Stanford, 2012), 147–153.

⁴⁷ Fichman, *Ruhot menagnot*, 9–10.

⁴⁸ Zalman Shneour, *David Frishman ve-aherim* (Tel-Aviv, 1959), 69–74.

young writers arriving in Warsaw during these years and beginning their literary careers.

Y.D. Berkowitz, who arrived in Warsaw in 1904, described the city as “the city of magic to all the writers coming from the towns [in the Pale of Settlement].” He perceived Warsaw, with Peretz’s house as its literary and cultural center, as a productive multilingual environment:

These were days of brotherhood and pleasantness for the two languages of the Jewish renaissance. [...] The field of literature was one; the grass was the same shade of green, and was nourished by the two languages. [...] For us, the youngest of the herd, the question of Hebrew or Yiddish did not yet exist. Each and every one of us wrote in the language he was brought up in. And all of us as one relished in each and every new literary phenomenon, any new good work in either language, with great keenness, as children of one language.⁴⁹

The poet and prose writer Ya’akov Shteinberg, who moved to Warsaw in 1903, wrote that young writers like himself were attracted to Warsaw not just because of the flourishing literary activity, but also because they felt that only in this city there was a significant audience for Hebrew and Yiddish literature.⁵⁰ This is because of the presence of Jews who were brought up with Hebrew as part of their religious education, and yearned to read newspapers and literature in Jewish languages. Whether this was right or wrong (especially regarding Hebrew) is almost beside the point. The *perception* of identification between the Hebrew writers and their intended audience in this large urban Jewish community, coupled with the possibilities of making a living by writing/editing/translating (even if meager), was undeniably part of the appeal of Warsaw for these writers.

Some of the youthful sense of elation and optimism that characterized Jewish literary and cultural life in Warsaw in the early years of the twentieth century was shuttered in the crisis that followed the failed socialist revolution of 1905. As Scott Ury shows, this was a moment of deep confusion for Warsaw’s large Jewish community and it signaled a crisis of communal leadership and the rise of unknown forms of Jewish public sphere.⁵¹ The crisis of 1905 signaled the beginning of radical changes in Yiddish literature. Hebrew literary life after 1905 lost some of its vitality,

⁴⁹ Y.D. Berkowitz, *Unzere rishoynim* (Tel-Aviv, 1966), 57–58.

⁵⁰ Ya’akov Shteinberg, “Warsaw,” 140–142.

⁵¹ Ury, *Barricades and Banners*. See also Veidlinger, *Jewish Public Culture*, 15–23. On the impact of the revolution on Yiddish literature, see Mikhail Krutikov, *Yiddish Fiction and the Crisis of Modernity, 1905–1914* (Stanford, 2001).

and many authors and editors felt despair about the future of Hebrew, its modes of publication, its writers and readers. This was true elsewhere in Europe, and it was certainly the case in Warsaw.⁵² *Ha-tsefirah* stopped its publication altogether for a few years. Many of the young writers who lived and worked in Warsaw moved to other cities in Europe, North America or Palestine. Some writers like Sholem Asch and H.D. Nomberg began publishing almost exclusively in Yiddish, when Yiddish literary and journalistic endeavors gained strong momentum. Although Hebrew literary activity in Warsaw never returned to the heady period of 1900–1905, it was nevertheless renewed and reenergized as early as 1907–1908.

The industrious David Frishman established the almanac *Sifrut* (“Literature”) which was published in Warsaw in 1908 and 1909. Together with the young critic and editor Pinhas Lachower (who moved to Warsaw in 1907), Frishman edited a new Hebrew literary weekly magazine with the title *Reshafim*, which published 50 full issues in 1908–1909. In *Reshafim*, some of the new talent of Hebrew literature in Warsaw was discovered, for example, the young Eliezer Shteinman published his first story in 1909. In 1912, Ya‘akov Cahan edited and published the periodical *Ha-ivri he-hadash* (“The New Hebrew”) in Warsaw. Fishel Lachower published and edited the almanac *Netivot* (“Roads”) in 1913. *Netivot* encouraged new talent, and Lachower became a major force in Hebrew literature, when he launched the Sifrut and A□isefer publishing companies, issuing dozens of books, both original Hebrew compositions and translations. Through his activities as a publisher, editor, and literary critic, Lachower consciously nurtured modernist Hebrew literature with preference for the most innovative writers, such as Gnessin, who lived and wrote in Warsaw in the last few years of life.

These years also saw the development of a Hebrew education system that was new and innovative. Modern Hebrew schools existed in Warsaw in the early 1900. Shmuel Leib Gordon, the editor and publisher of *Olam katan*, established a modern Hebrew school for boys in 1901. Gordon also began a project of extensive commentary of the Bible for youth. In 1909, Yehiel Halperin established in Warsaw the first Hebrew kindergarten in the world. A year later, Yitshak Alterman established his own Hebrew kindergarten. Adjunct to the kindergarten, Alterman led a seminar that educated and trained Hebrew teachers following the

⁵² On the effects of the 1905 revolution and the years that followed it on Hebrew literary life, see Miron, *Bodedim*, 44–46.

revolutionary methods of Friedrich Froebel. The law in Warsaw enabled school education in the “native tongue” (rather than in Russian, the empire’s language), providing that parents spoke this language with their children. On November 4, 1910, *Ha-tsefirah* published an advertisement about the opening of Alterman’s “Hebrew Froebel School” for children aged 4-8, and on June 3, 1911 an announcement of the new seminar that offered “Froebelian courses” to prospective Hebrew teachers aged 16 and up who plan to open their own Hebrew kindergartens.⁵³

Between 1910 and 1914 Alterman’s house on Pawia Street began to function as a “salon.” It was part of an extensive network of private and public spaces (like the home of the Zeitlin family) of modern Jewish culture in Warsaw, in which Hebrew was an essential component.⁵⁴ More than anything else, what signaled the importance of Warsaw as a Hebrew enclave in this period was the fact that *Ha-tsefirah* renewed publication in 1910 as a daily newspaper. However, the publication of the paper, and much of the intense literary and cultural activity came to a halt with the onset of World War I. This was a difficult time not only in Warsaw, but everywhere else, cutting writers from modes of publications and from readers and, halting the activity of most Hebrew publishing houses, newspapers and magazines all over Europe.

Although the World War I period caused more writers and activists to leave Warsaw, Hebrew literary activities somewhat recovered after the war. *Ha-tsefirah* was republished as a weekly newspaper, and Pinhas Lachower initiated a literary supplement of the paper, which he edited in 1917–1918. Already in 1917, Ya’akov Cahan edited the journal *Ha-ogen* (“The Anchor”). Two years later, Lachower edited the journal *Arakhim* (“Values”, 1919). These were short-lived journals that struggled to survive. However, a much more stable publication endeavor was established in this period by Avraham Yosef Stybel who lived in Warsaw since 1904 and made wealth in the leather industry. Stybel became the most important Hebrew publishing after World War I. It was established in Moscow (where Stybel lived during the War), but was relocated in 1919 to Warsaw. Lachower was appointed as the director of Stybel. In Warsaw, Stybel published numerous books written originally in Hebrew or in translation. Stybel also established an ambitious, large-scale quar-

⁵³ Dan Laor, *Alterman: biography* (Tel-Aviv, 2013), 17–20; Dan Miron, *Parpar min ha-tola’at* (Tel-Aviv, 2001), 17–33.

⁵⁴ See Elhanan Zeitlin, *In a literarisher shtub* (Buenos Aires, 1946).

terly literary magazine with the name *Ha-tekufah* (“The Age”), edited by Frishman together with Cahan and Lachower. It attracted the best Hebrew writers around the world, as well as writers who returned to Warsaw after the War and the Bolshevik Revolution (like Eliezer Shteinman). *Ha-tekufah* was published in Warsaw until 1920, before moving to Berlin, New York City and Tel Aviv. This transition, along with the closing of *Ha-tsefirah* signaled the end of an era of flourishing Hebrew literary activity in Warsaw and the beginning of a new period, which is outside my discussion.⁵⁵

Warsaw in early twentieth century Hebrew fiction

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, numerous Hebrew short stories and novellas depicted the urban space and experience in Warsaw. These Hebrew texts of prose fiction were written mostly by the young bi-lingual writers who made Warsaw their home for a short or long period of time: Sholem Asch, Zalman Shneour, Ya’akov Shteinberg, Y.D. Berkovitz, H.D. Nomborg, Ya’akov Shteinman and other less known writers. These stories, sometimes written in Hebrew as well as in Yiddish, often focused on themes and characters that began to appear in the last decade of the nineteenth century: immigration to the big city and its travails, the economic life and struggles in the urban environment; the tensions between rich and poor, between acculturated Jews and newcomers from the Pale of Settlement; and between tradition and modernity. However, in the fiction written in 1900s and 1910s, one can discern a clear “psychological turn,” namely focusing on the inner life of individual characters and on their sexual and existential torments, rather than on the social and economic realm.

This shift was part of the transnational modernist writing about the city at the beginning of the twentieth century. Burton Pike articulates this shift as a double movement: from *statis* to flux, and from urban community as a representative of the city itself to the isolation of the individual within that urban space.⁵⁶ Thus, a great deal of urban literature is dedicated to “the crowd” in the modern city, and to the individual within it.

⁵⁵ On Hebrew literary life in the 1920s and 1930s, see Hannan Hever, “From Exile-without-Homeland”; Werses, “Ha-sifrut ha-ivrit be-polin,” and the article by Magda Sara Szwabowicz in this volume.

⁵⁶ Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (Princeton, 1981), 26.

One way of responding to the onslaught of the crowd, described by the sociologist Georg Simmel in his landmark essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903) is to become as indifferent to value as is the metropolis itself, which leads to the “narrower type of intellectual individuation of mental qualities.”⁵⁷ Another description of the response to the nervous stimuli of the city is analyzed in Walter Benjamin’s *flâneur*, who finds in the city streets a trigger for his own imagination and memory, and who makes urban life an object that is then internalized.⁵⁸ Writers in the early twentieth century embodied this move from an objective to a subjective view of the city, which is also the move from realism and naturalism and then to the variety of literary movements and practices we have come to know as modernism. In this process, the city as a physical place gave way to the city as a state of mind. Urban space became a subject of modernist reflection and assumed the role of a psychological landscape, on which inner states are projected and where an actual event and spatial reality is always a psychological one as well.⁵⁹

As I have shown in a previous study, in much of Hebrew fiction written in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, the city was a major factor in the turn from the “realism” and naturalism of the “New Wave” to modernism, marked by an eclectic mixture of symbolism, decadence, impressionism and expressionism.⁶⁰ This was the case also in Warsaw, the city that became a metropolis in the early years of the twentieth century (with a population reaching 885,000 by 1914). The cityscape of Warsaw became even more prominent in the stories and novellas (no novels were written in Hebrew in this period), but now it operated on a different level and served very different literary purposes, typical of the ways the urban experience is reflected in European and transnational modernist literature, including literature written in Jewish languages such as Hebrew and Yiddish.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York, 1950), 409–424.

⁵⁸ Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (New York, 1968), 155–200.

⁵⁹ Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1998), 71–76; Bart Keunen, “Living with Fragments: World Making in Modernist City Literature,” in Astradur Eysteinnsson, Vivian Liska (eds.), *Modernism* (Amsterdam, 2007), 271–290.

⁶⁰ Pinsker, *Literary Passports*. See also Menda-Levi, *Likro et ha-‘ir*, 117–123.

⁶¹ See *ibid.*

Sholem Asch's early Hebrew stories (published in *Ha-tsefirah*, *Ha-tsofeh*, *Ha-dor* and *Luah Ahiasaf*) exemplify this transition. Many of these stories take place in the city of Warsaw, but some are located in the small towns in the Pale of Settlement. One of Asch's first Hebrew stories entitled insert original title "From the Life of Jews in Russia-Poland" (1901), is divided along these lines.⁶² The first part of the story recounts the travails of the poor Reb Neta Woolf who turns to his God in search of relief from financial hardships and familial problems. The second part of the story turns to Neta's young and beloved daughter, Rochele who is a modern Jewish woman, educated and independent in spirit. With some education and knowledge of languages, she immigrates to Warsaw and finds work in a local café on Twarda Street. Following Rochele, the entire family moves to Warsaw, and tensions arise. As a woman-server, Rochele is exposed to the lusting eyes of the young men who gather around the café table and chat in a mixture of Yiddish, Polish and German. It seems that Rochele is enjoying this attention and is flirting with the young men. However, Rochele's father, who comes every evening to visit the café, is pained to see his daughter as a target of so much sexual attention. The short story reaches its open-ended conclusion with this double perspective – that of the older father and the young daughter – who view the same events in radically different ways.

In other Asch's stories, like "Bli bayit" ("Homeless") and "Ha-shakran" ("The Liar") that appeared in his collection *Sipurim* ("Stories," 1902), the fictional world is entirely in the city. These stories go further towards describing individuals and their psychological internalization of the urban experience and how they respond to the nervous stimuli of the city. "Ha-shakran" depicts the character of Goldman, a recent immigrant to Warsaw, who pathologically becomes entangled in a web of deceptions. It is the impossibility to decipher the new urban space and its complex social and economic system of the city that pushes him towards lying once and again about who he is. The narrator describes through the consciousness of Goldman, the Varsovian street with its high-rise buildings as "two long rows of houses that look as if they are rows of fortified wall" that close on him.⁶³ Goldman feels as if he is "swept with the crowd and run with them," in spite of the fact that he does not know where he is going. This sense of the onslaught of the crowd and the oppression of

⁶² Sholem Asch, *Ha-tsefirah*, 19 May 1901, 2–3.

⁶³ Sholem Asch, *Sipurim* (Warsaw, 1902), 88.

the physical urban space on his mental capacities pushes Goldman to lie again (without knowing why), and he is moving aimlessly from one house of a rich Jewish family to another. His only attempt to escape it is in his (solipsistic) erotic desire, and his fantasy of uniting with Deborah, the young woman who lives with her father the tailor on Franciszkańska Street. However, his desire for Deborah is doomed to fail because of his cycle of deceptions.

The most accomplished of Asch's Hebrew stories, is "Ma ihpat lo?" ("What Does He Care About?"), published in the *Luah Ahiasaf* (1903). It is a riveting psychological portrait of Meir Silbergberg, with the cityscape of Warsaw as the backdrop against which his life is unraveling. The story is told from the point of view of Meir, who used to be "a Yeshiva boy in his small town, and in the big city in which he lives now... [h]e is like a man walking in the fog: his path is clouded in front and behind, and he can't see anything but his immediate surroundings."⁶⁴ Here, the metropolis of Warsaw causes the individual to be alienated from society and from his self. Subjectivity is being threatened and is in a process of disintegration in the city. In this cloudy atmosphere, Meir observes his friends who became upwardly mobile by working for rich businessmen. They still meet in a Warsaw café, where he is obliged to ask for a small loan in order to pay for his food and drink. Gradually, Meir becomes resigned and feels oppressed by the walls of his small room on Smocza St., and even socializing at Maselman's café on Gęsia Street does not ease his inner burden.

The bulk of the narrative deals with Meir's inner turmoil and tormented mind. At nighttime, he imagines as if "the candle wick of his life has been extinguished in the middle of burning." During the winter, he contrasts the small town covered with snow, and the city's mighty buildings that "rise above the elements." Thus, the urban environment seems to shelter the protagonist and envelops him in a melancholic resignation. It is springtime that brings Meir closer to nature and to his erotic desire, which causes his breakdown. In one of Warsaw's urban parks, Meir is voyeuristically drawn to a loving couple, who arise his desire, and soon after to a young woman in a dark boulevard who seems to seduce him with her singing. The modern city is also represented through the new

⁶⁴ Id., "Ma ihpat lo?", *Luah Ahiasaf* 11 (1903), 141–151.

medium of photography, when Meir goes to an urban studio for a series of portraits, which enables him to view himself as an external object.

When Meir moves to a new apartment, he becomes sexually and emotionally entangled with Chana, the daughter of his landlord. As much as he is attracted to the young woman, he feels as an “actor” in a “comedy” that someone directs, which he cannot recognize. At the end of the story, he gets married, and after some time, he is called to the hospital where his wife gave birth to a baby boy. The last scene of the story is sharply drawn when Meir’s anxiousness turns into a total breakdown as he finds out that his new young wife is on the verge of death. Meir is entrusted with the baby, at whom the protagonist looks with real horror, “afraid that he might die just from the [baby’s] gaze.” This rude awakening leaves him with no solution to the alienation and disintegration of life in the modern city.

Other stories, written in and about Warsaw during these years, focus on young male or female protagonists who try to make sense of their life in the new urban environment. In Ya’akov Shteinberg’s story “Invalid” (“Disabled,” 1903), the first-person narrator who arrived recently in Warsaw goes for a walk in one of the urban parks. There, he meets an older acquaintance who lived in Warsaw for the last twenty years. While the narrator is excited about his life in the new city, his older friend tells him that he feels quite close to the disabled guardian of the park, whom he sees often, but does not really know: “for twenty years now, I am shriveling here...in spite of living for that long in the city, I am still a stranger here.”⁶⁵ The theme of estrangement and alienation in the city is prominent in this and many other stories, and Shteinberg is able to perfectly catch both the excitement and the anxiety of the young male figure who tries to make sense of the new urban environment, the alienation and disability (physical and metaphorical) that can be found even in Warsaw’s beautiful parks.

Zalman Shneur’s story, “Ye’ush” (“Despair”), published in 1905 in the monthly *Ha-zeman*, deals with two sisters – Masha and Sonya – who come from a small town to the big city of Warsaw to become “New women.”⁶⁶ Through the eyes of Masha we see the existence of educated,

⁶⁵ Ya’akov Shteinberg, “Invalid,” in idem, *Shirim, sipurim u-reshimot asher lo nikhlelu bekhoh ketavav* (Tel-Aviv, 1976), 89–91. See also the stories “Ba-se’arah” and “Ba-derekh el ha-ir ha-gedolah,” *ibid.*, 92–95.

⁶⁶ *Ha-zeman*, 1:4, April–June 1905, 36–47.

young, single Jewish women, who are engaged with politics, ideologies and social activism, but cannot find any occupation apart from being a nurse or a midwife. Thus, Masha is talking in Russian and Polish about “freedom,” “proletariat” and the “bourgeoisie.” At the same time, she and her girlfriends are preoccupied with fashion and alcohol, with contemporary Russian poetry and the theater, and most of all with attractive young men. In the process, traditional gender roles are being broken and Masha acts “like a man,” but this does not relieve Masha from the knowledge that her future seems bleak. Masha convinces her young sister, Sonya, to come to Warsaw as well, thinking that it will revitalize her life in the city. However, this attempt fails, and Sonya’s actions just make things worse for Masha.

While “Despair” focuses on the figure of young “New Jewish Woman” in Warsaw and her failure to realize a life of independence, other stories and novellas Shneour has written in this period put in the center the lonely young men who are unable to find love, satisfaction or anchor in the urban environment, with which they are nevertheless engrossed. *Ha-bayta: Shivrei reshimot shel ozer buhalter* (“Back Home: Fragments of a Bookkeeper Assistant”) from 1904 is a first-person narrative, told in the form of a fictional diary by a sensitive young man from a small town in Lithuania who immigrated to Warsaw.⁶⁷ He finds a job as an assistant in an accounting office, which he finds tedious and monotonous. He secretly writes a diary, and dreams about becoming a writer. It is the springtime that attracts him to go outside the stifling office into the urban parks and the streets of the city. It also arouses in him a sexual desire, and sends him to a futile search for love with women he encounters. When the bookkeeper who hired him fires him, he is hardly surprised, but then he realizes that he has nothing to live on. This causes him to travel “back home” to his small town. The story ends with the protagonist’s inability to find a home anywhere. He realizes how much the big city is already part of his personality and he misses Warsaw, but is unable to return without a clear prospect of occupation or making a living. The novella *Mavet: Reshimot shel me’abed atsmo la-da’at* (“Death: Sketches of a Suicidal Man”), recounts, also in a form of a fictional diary, the story of young man in the big city (the novella does not identify clearly the city,

⁶⁷ Zalman Shneour, *Ha-bayta: Shivrei reshimot shel ozer buhalter* was serialized in *Ha-zeman* in 1904 and republished in *Min ha-hayim ve-ha-mavet* (Warsaw, 1910), 219–238.

which might be Warsaw or Vilna), who carries a gun with him and lives a few months wondering if he should take his own life.⁶⁸

Hersh Dovid Nomberg, a bi-lingual writer who lived in Warsaw for most of his life, described the urban space of Warsaw from the point of view of lonely male characters in stories like “Yitshak Toybkof” and “Fligelman,” written and published almost simultaneously in Hebrew and Yiddish.⁶⁹ In “Yitshak Toybkof,” the narrator describes the eponymous anti-hero in a way that brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s *flâneur*, a wanderer in the city. Although Toybkof, who lives in Dzika Street, finds work in occasional jobs, he looks forward mostly to his free time. In this limited time of leisure, “he sits in a coffeehouse, reads newspapers, walks around the streets [and] visits his friends.” His wandering and visits in cafés and friends’ houses enables him to engage in intellectual debates and arguments, and being politically active in the revolutionary movements of the day. Toybkof is tormented by his sexual desire and futile attempts to have a meaningful relationship with Rachel, the beautiful young daughter of his current boss, the Jewish merchant Mr. Kiserovitz. He tries to find a way to Rachel’s heart through intellectual discourse, but this does not work because the father is determined not to let the relationship develop so her daughter will marry a certain business agent. The social and economic tensions (which are present in so many Warsaw stories) are mixed in this masterful short story with the sexual tension, and with Toybkof’s inner conflicts.

In the story “Fligelman” from 1903, the narrator tells of a young man who lives in Warsaw, an intellectual pessimist who is disheartened by contemporary Jewish life but incapable of taking decisive action to change his situation. For Fligelman, the hustle and bustle of the urban setting is both unsettling and attractive. In spite of the fact that he does not have any formal education, what attracts Fligelman to Warsaw is the sense of “enlightenment,” the ability to learn and be a “philosopher.” His process of learning is signified, amongst other things, through his use of the Russian and Polish languages and his ability to quote contemporary thought and literature. This knowledge differentiates Fligelman from his more traditional friend, Levantkovski,

⁶⁸ Zalman Shneour, *Mavet: Reshimot shel mea’bed atsmo la-da’at*, republished in *Min ha-hayim ve-ha-mavet*, 11–96.

⁶⁹ The first Hebrew version of “Fligelman” was published as “Keta’im mi-haye Fligelman,” *Ha-zeman* 1903, republished in Hersh Dovid Nomberg, *Sipurim* (Jerusalem, 1969), 133–149.

a poor Jew with six children and an unloved wife. Fligelman speaks down to Levantkovski about his philosophy of life and worldview and about how difficult it is to live in the world where one knows so much. In fact, Fligelman's existence stands between traditional Jews like Levantkovski and spirited, aggressive, and erotic female characters he is attracted to, but is unable to form any relationship. The psychologically powerful story ends with Fligelman standing on a bridge of the Vistula River looking at his shadow and attempting to commit suicide, from which he is saved by a local policeman.

The protagonist of this story, Fligelman, was designated by some critics (Brenner, Ba'al Makhsoves) as the archetype, a model for contemporary Hebrew literature in Warsaw and elsewhere. The fact that from 1908 on, Nomberg (like Sholem Asch) was one of the most active champions of Yiddishism, and dedicated most of his energies to Yiddish journalism and activism was seen by some observers as a sign of the decline of Hebrew and the attractiveness of writing Hebrew literature in Warsaw.⁷⁰ Given the rise of Yiddish in Warsaw, and the fact that Yiddish enjoyed a large audience of readers, there was some truth in this claim. However, as we have seen, although Hebrew literary activity was diminished in the 1910s, it did not stop.

With the renewal of Hebrew publications in Warsaw after World War I, one of the most extensive fictional texts that take place in the city, the unfinished novel *Sehor sehor* ("Around and Around"), was published in installments during the years 1918–1919 in the volumes of the journal *Ha-tekufah*.⁷¹ It was written by Eliezer Shteiman who began writing in Warsaw in 1909 and lived intermittently in Odessa and Warsaw until his emigration to Palestine in 1924.⁷² Shteiman's "Around and Around" is an ambitious attempt to write an expansive Hebrew novel. Within the fictional world of the novel, when the critic Berg gives a speech at a party of the Warsaw Hebrew association "Language and Culture," he says:

"Do we have, Ladies and Gentlemen, a Hebrew novel? – Where, I am asking, is the Hebrew novel? [...] Not a short story, a feuilleton, a hasty and jumbled sketch, but a novel, a real novel, gentlemen, one with events; one with a wide-ranging

⁷⁰ For a critical overview of Nomberg's fiction see Mati Meged, "Mavo," in Nomberg, *Sipurim*, 7–39.

⁷¹ Eliezer Shteiman, "Sehor Sehor", *Ha-tekufah* 1–5 (1918–1919).

⁷² Shteiman was the editor of the Hebrew Warsaw journal, *Kolot*, which was active in 1923–1924, and was one of the last attempts to renew Hebrew literary activity in Poland after World War I.

canvas, with expansive plot, with heroic events, with dramatic and tragic moments; give us a novel! (149).

This speech, which is surely modeled after real influential critics who bemoaned the lack of expansive Hebrew social novels at the beginning of the twentieth century, is also clearly ironic.⁷³ Shalit listens to Berg and sees nothing but bombastic, verbose declarations. This is, in fact, Shteinman's position, too. He might have shared the desire to move away from the short sketches, but he does *not* try to write a novel in the style of the nineteenth century. Instead, "Around and Around" is an ambitious attempt to write the great modernist urban Hebrew novel, one that both portrays the life of "Hebrew Warsaw" (Hebrew teachers, students, writers, editors, and critics), as well as minute descriptions of the inner life of the key characters, especially Pesah Shalit, the main protagonist. Ultimately, the experiment failed, and this is probably the reason why Shteinman did not complete the novel and published it in book form.⁷⁴ However, this experiment contains within its hundreds of pages, some gems, especially when it comes to the correlation between depictions of Shalit's inner experience and the cityscape of Warsaw.

For example, in chapter 12 of the novel, Shalit hardly wakes up after a tormented night of bad dreams. At a moment without much self-awareness, he jumps out of bed, puts on his clothes and makes his way to a café on Nalewki Street where a blonde waitress serves him a cup of tea with a graceful smile:

At once, like a lightning, joy overcame Shalit and he felt his entire body intoxicating. The cup of bitterness of yesterday, which was awaiting him when he woke up, was now gone. The dark mask that covered his face since he settled down in Warsaw, suddenly dissolved like breaking cobwebs, and he could not understand in any way the nature of the *élan*, the *spleen* that took hold of him like a pincer. The sense of melancholy moved away from him and he called the waitress softly as a sister, and all the other café habitués were like his brothers [...] Shalit left the café into the street, and all his brothers and sisters walked towards him in pairs or

⁷³ Ahad Ha'am and Yosef Klausner were bemoaning the lack of the great novel on the pages of *Ha-shiloah* and *Luah Ahiasaf*. Brenner in his well-known essay "Me-hirhurei sofer" (1907) defended the move away from the social novel. See the discussion in Pinsker, *Literary Passports*, 13–14.

⁷⁴ One could claim that this experiment, although it was unfinished by Shteinman, enabled him to write more coherent modernist novels in the 1920s and 1930s: Ester Hayot, *Zugot* and *Duda'im*. For discussion of these novels in the context of interwar urban Hebrew fiction, see Menda-Levy, *Likro et ha-ir*, 167–219.

groups, and he saw himself as a member of a densely populated family [...] This is how Shalit spoke to himself, walking happily on Nalewki St.⁷⁵

The quoted paragraph is part of an incredibly long description, a feat of modernist, urbane Hebrew prose, in which the description of the cityscape is in perfect correlation with the minutest change of disposition. It is worth paying attention to the way Shteinman is playing here with Hebrew and Polish. Of course, Nalewki Street, in which this scene takes place, was the most famous and important street in the Jewish area of Warsaw. Here, Shteinman's narrator is using a rare form to designate the name of the street in Hebrew רחוב הנלווקות: "the street of the *nalevkot* (the plural form of the word *nalewka*)."⁷⁶ The name of the street actually came from the Polish word *nalewka*, which has two meanings: 1. Water tank. 2. An alcohol-based tincture, a traditional Polish drink. The real etymology of the street name is the first meaning of the word, because there were many water tanks on this street. However, Shteinman is employing the second meaning of the word in order to convey the sense of intoxication that the mere act of walking in this famed street induces in Shalit. The description of the urban scene of Nalewki Street continues in a surprising, original way:

The *nalevkot* were carrying the waves of people going to and fro – those *nalevkot* that are simple and poor, in the narrow space and its hidden riches. The heart of the metropolis and of the entire country is a narrow strip. However, this strip is the one that dress up millions of people who live in the city and in many cities – near and far. This is the street that does business with nations, and its commerce reaches all the way to Shakhlain [a large Russian island in the North Pacific], but the street itself stands there plain and simple, apparently dresses in mundane clothes and full of mud, as if it is ashamed in its great wealth, and does not dare putting on ornaments.⁷⁶

The personification of the Nalewki Street in this passage, comparing it to a great and virtuous woman whose beauty can only be seen by the most attentive eyes, is a striking example of Shteinman's modernist style. But the narrator also likens the metropolis to a great forest, in which the multitude of people, trams and horses are part of a "city jungle." Pesah Shalit – an urban wanderer, a *flâneur* – finally understands why he is repulsed by, but at the same time also attracted to Warsaw. This fictional

⁷⁵ Eliezer Shteinman, "Sehor Sehor," *Ha-tekufah* 1 (1918), 125.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 125–126.

character – like Shteinman himself and so many other Jewish writers who lived and wrote about Warsaw in Hebrew – came to a realization that amidst the upheavals of the twentieth century, the sense of solitude he is searching for cannot be found in nature, in a real forest. He can find it, however tentatively, only in the “urban jungle” – a metropolis like Warsaw.

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