

## **“I stopped liking the country I was born in – the motherland”: Nostalgia and Anti-nostalgia in the Israeli Works of Kalman Segal**

**Abstract:** The subject of reflection in this article is the Israeli period in the work of Polish-Yiddish writer Kalman Segal (1917–1980), who decided to emigrate to Israel after the antisemitic campaign inspired in 1968 by Poland’s Communist authorities. Referring to Przemysław Czapliński’s definition of “nostalgia” (“a narrative manifestation of the [longed for] past, an effort to meticulously reconstruct personal experiences, spaces, people and customs preserved only in memory”), the author analyzes literary texts in which the writer, already a citizen of Israel, continues his life-long mission of nostalgically remembering the “Murdered Shtetl” (as the author calls it), a symbol of Jewish civilization in the Polish lands, and commemorating its Jewish inhabitants murdered in the Holocaust. At the same time, using Jora Vaso’s definition of “anti-nostalgia” (“the emotions of a modern exile who has left his ‘backward’ homeland to live in the modern world, being aware of its shortcomings, as a result of which it becomes an object of recollection, which arouses his harsh criticism and roots him in the past, making obsessive thinking about his former homeland his main preoccupation”), the author tries to show Segal’s difficult process of adaptation to the Israeli reality that was alien to him and how he was disturbed by the suffering and longing accompanying the decision to leave his former homeland. Over time, one can see in Segal’s work a growing acceptance of the new situation and commitment to the new reality. This can be read as overcoming both nostalgia and anti-nostalgia towards Poland. Life experiences lead Segal to believe that being in exile is a universal experience and an existential condition of the Jewish people.

**Keywords:** nostalgia; anti-nostalgia; Kalman Segal; motherland; Polish-Jewish literature; Yiddish literature; antisemitism; Israel; Poland; March 1968.

**Słowa kluczowe:** nostalgia; antynostalgia; Kalman Segal; ojczyzna; literatura polsko-żydowska; literatura jidysz; antysemityzm; Izrael; Polska; Marzec 1968.

The life of the Polish-Yiddish writer Kalman Segal (1917–1980)<sup>1</sup> was marked by the recurrent experience of loss of home and homeland. First, during his stay in the USSR, where he was a refugee in exile in the years 1939–1946, he experienced a life of wandering and imprisonment in a Soviet forced labor camp, where he began longing for Poland and dreaming of a happy return home. Second, during his stay in Austria in the postwar years, having fled from Poland following the Kielce pogrom, he worked as a teacher at a Jewish orphanage and stayed in a DP camp. The greatest feeling of loss, however, was not caused by distance or the passage of time, but by the Holocaust. Segal made it his life-long mission as a writer to immortalize the image of Sanok, his hometown, depicted as an archetypal little homeland of Polish Jews, and to bewail its residents. Another experience of loss affected him in 1969, almost at the threshold of old age, when he permanently left Poland to settle in Israel as a result of an anti-Zionist campaign unleashed by the Communist authorities. In his new homeland, he published two collections of short stories in Yiddish: *Aleykeyt* [Loneliness] (1977) and *Vu shmeterlingn shvebn* [Where butterflies fly] (1981), as well as a volume of poetry *Gezegnung* [Farewell] (1979)<sup>2</sup>;

<sup>1</sup> Kalman Segal (born in Sanok in 1917, died in Jerusalem in 1980) was born into a traditional family of rural Jews working on the land. In 1931, he graduated from a Polish common school and dropped out from a secondary school in Sanok for financial reasons. He worked as a farm hand at his father's farm, a vinegar factory worker, a construction worker, a travelling salesman and a private tutor in Vilnius. In that period, he was associated with the youth Communist movement. After the outbreak of WWII, he fled to the USSR by crossing the border on the river San and was subsequently arrested for refusing to accept Soviet citizenship and exiled to a forced-labor camp in Siberia. His parents also lived in exile at the time, and his father lost his life there. Segal returned to Poland with his mother in the first half of 1946. In the years 1946–1948, he lived in a refugee camp in Linz, and it was there that he made his literary debut by publishing his texts in two Yiddish magazines: *Oyfgang* and *Untervegns*. After his mother's death, he returned to Poland and already by the autumn of 1948 tried to illegally cross the border, hoping to emigrate to Israel. Arrested, he eventually settled in Poland. At first, he worked as an accountant, and then, from 1952 onward, as a journalist for Polish Radio Katowice. In 1969, he finally emigrated to Israel where he initially settled in Haifa and later moved to Jerusalem. From 1970 onward, he worked in the Yiddish section of Kol Israel Radio. In 1952, his first volume of verse in Yiddish came out and, in 1956, he published a collection of short stories in Polish. While living in Israel, published primarily in Yiddish, occasionally also writing in Polish for the Polish-language Israeli press; his last novel, which was not published in his lifetime, was written in Polish as well. He published four poetry books, and six volumes of prose works in Yiddish, along with eighteen books of prose in Polish; moreover, his novel and two collections of short stories were translated into Hebrew and published in Israel. For more, see Magdalena Ruta, *Pomiędzy dwoma światami. O Kalmanie Segalu* (Kraków, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Kalman Segal, *Aleykeyt* (Yerusholaim, 1977); id., *Gezegnung* (Yerusholaim, 1979); id., *Vu shmeterlingn shvebn* (Tel Aviv, 1981).

he also wrote a novel in Polish, *Jeszcze żyjemy* [Staying alive], which was posthumously published in Poland forty years after the author's death (2020).<sup>3</sup> In all these works, there is a number of reoccurring old motifs such as images of life in a small, prewar Galician town, scenes from the beginning of WWII, and stories about the Jewish extermination. The new themes include glimpses of life in exile and in a Soviet forced labor camp during WWII, first-person narrator's ruminations about his own identity, reflections on Israel's reality, and comments on the bonds between Poland and himself.

In the present paper, I would like to examine Segal's Israeli writings that, considering the autobiographical character of his entire literary output, I interpret as a recapitulation of his oeuvre and a testimony to his struggles with post-immigration trauma. While doing this, I shall be using the categories of nostalgia and anti-nostalgia. Specifically, I shall use the definition of the term "nostalgia" proposed by Przemysław Czapliński in his book *Wzniosłe tęsknoty. Nostalgie w prozie lat dziewięćdziesiątych* [Sublime Yearnings: Nostalgia in the Fiction of the 1990s],<sup>4</sup> and, to define the concept of anti-nostalgia, I shall use the findings of Jora Vaso presented in her article *The Unprivileged Exile: From Nostalgia to Antinostalgia and Beyond*.<sup>5</sup> I shall refer to these findings respectively at the appropriate point in my analysis.

### Nostalgia for the "Murdered Shtetl"

It is worth mentioning that, in his works, Segal refers to his native Sanok as the "Murdered Shtetl," renouncing its real name and, by doing so, transforming it into a symbol of the experience of the Holocaust, shared by all Polish Jews.<sup>6</sup> In his early short stories from the late 1950s, which are influenced by socialist schematism, the shtetl is depicted in an ambivalent way: as an ugly, impoverished place inhabited by benighted people,

<sup>3</sup> Written in Israel, the novel—the writer's 600-page *magnum opus*—remained untitled until it was given a title by the publisher (in cooperation with the author's daughter Ita Segal) and published in 2020 by the Austeria Publishing House.

<sup>4</sup> See Przemysław Czapliński, *Wzniosłe tęsknoty. Nostalgie w prozie lat dziewięćdziesiątych* (Kraków, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Jora Vaso, "The Unprivileged Exile: From Nostalgia to Antinostalgia and Beyond," *Archiwum Emigracji* 28 (2020), 219–240.

<sup>6</sup> See Kalman Segal, *Opowiadania z zabitego miasteczka* (Warsaw, 1956).

yet still—a place most beloved.<sup>7</sup> With the passing of time, this portrait changes as the writer sets the town against the backdrop of the beautiful Carpathian landscape, passing over the unpleasant details of the shabby neighborhood.<sup>8</sup> It is at that point that nostalgia is voiced, defined, in Czapliński's terms, as “a narrative manifestation of the past” that one is longing for, the effort of meticulously reconstructing that which has been preserved only in one's memory—personal experiences, but also spaces, people and customs.<sup>9</sup> The story of “our preposterous and wonderful shtetl”<sup>10</sup> is told in Segal's poems through scenes from the lives of his ancestors—the poor, hardworking rural Jews tilling the soil, attached to their land and their domestic animals,<sup>11</sup> as well as in his fiction through images of the breathtaking Carpathian landscape and multicultural borderland, stories of first loves, about initiation into Communism, “international” (Polish-Jewish-Ukrainian) friendships, and naïve dreams about a better world. It is also a picturesque yarn about the Jewish residents of a shtetl whom the narrator presents as likeable characters. The earlier ambivalence has disappeared, although humor tinged with delicate irony is still present as a testimony to the author's self-mocking distance.<sup>12</sup> In that period (1960s), the image of the shtetl undergoes exoticization and mythologization.<sup>13</sup> The writer resorts to literary means of recovering the past that are typical of nostalgic narratives, such as evocation of mood, epiphanies, repetitions, enumeration, “slowdown strategy” (through the use of digressions, delays, description), present tense and frequentative verbs, thanks to which a nostalgic story is brought closer to myth, and

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, and Kalman Segal, *Nad dziwną rzeką Sambation* (Warsaw, 1957).

<sup>8</sup> See Kalman Segal, *Kochankowie w Sodomie* (Katowice, 1966) and the autotranslation of the novel into Yiddish *Der teyvl in shtetl* (Varshe, 1967); as well as short stories in the following volumes in Polish: *Miłość o zmierzchu* (Katowice, 1962); *Dolina zielonej pszenicy* (Katowice, 1964); *Przygoda w miasteczku* (Warsaw, 1965); *Śmierć archiwariusza* (Warsaw, 1967); and in Yiddish: *Sheyd-vegn* (Varshe, 1962); *A shtetl baym Son* (Varshe, 1965).

<sup>9</sup> Czapliński, *Wzniosłe tęsknoty*, 165–166.

<sup>10</sup> Segal, *Kochankowie w Sodomie*, 47.

<sup>11</sup> See collections of poetry Kalman Segal, *Lider* (Varshe, 1952); *Tsu mayn nayer heym* (Varshe, 1953); and *Friling bay mayn tir* (Varshe, 1955).

<sup>12</sup> See Segal's novels *Kochankowie w Sodomie / Der teyvl in shtetl* or *Śmierć archiwariusza*, as well as numerous short stories from the volumes mentioned in note 8.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the image of the shtetl in Segal's prose works, see: Magdalena Ruta, “A Tale of Murdered Shtetl: The Image of the Shtetl in Yiddish Literature in Post-war Poland,” *European Judaism* 42 (2009), 2:129–144; ead., “Tu jest nasza Jerozolima – Jerozolima obłąkanych. O pisarstwie Kalmana Segala,” in Alina Molisak, Sławomir Buryła (eds.), *Ślady obecności* (Kraków, 2010), 187–212; and ead., *Without Jews? Yiddish Literature in the People's Republic of Poland on the Holocaust, Poland and Communism* (Kraków, 2017).

the commemorated life—to eternity.<sup>14</sup> In the closing part of the novel *Kochankowie w Sodomie* [Lovers in Sodom] (in Polish) / *Der teyvl in shtetl* [Devil in the Small Town] (in Yiddish), Segal signals that this is a story about the last moments of a small town and its residents who will soon perish in the Holocaust. Thus, he intentionally creates the myth of a shtetl, perpetuating a particular image thereof, permeated with the atmosphere of Sabbath mysticism in the everlasting “now” of memory:

Rest is the coping stone of any work, everything has its end, and Saturday is the culmination of a busy week.

Saturday morning belongs to God. Before noon people pray. After midday God takes a nap after a sumptuous meal, therefore the afternoon may belong to the people. . . .

On a Saturday afternoon the world is serenely breathing in pure joy, the sweetness of rest, trusting in divine providence . . .

And so, between God and the people, between piety and sin, and between heaven and earth, everyone tried their best to enjoy that Saturday afternoon which closes our little tale about one of the many Shtetls [sic] and some of its residents.<sup>15</sup>

### Returning to the past

The shtetl is also present in the Israeli novel *Jeszcze żyjemy* and in some short stories from both collections in Yiddish. It manifests itself in the nostalgic evocations of the author’s native Sanok, referred to as “My Mother’s Town” in the novel, and in the story of the fate of Jewish Borysław (now Boryslav in Ukraine)—the central theme of its first part. Borysław, despite its size in reality, is yet another incarnation of the archetypal shtetl. Its image, although created in accordance with topographical details and historical facts, is painted in the same manner as the image of Sanok earlier on. Segal revisits the imaginary shtetl of his youth following three different paths.<sup>16</sup> First, he mentions the real, physical returns that bring a confrontation with the passage of time and a reflection on lost youth. They also cause pain, as the narrator realizes that his mother is no longer there for him. Arrivals in the shtetl were like “a pilgrimage to one of the holy—yet infernal—places, to shrines razed to the ground.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> See Czapliński, *Wzniosłe tęsknoty*, 30–32, 188.

<sup>15</sup> Segal, *Kochankowie w Sodomie*, 197–202.

<sup>16</sup> See Czapliński, *Wzniosłe tęsknoty*, 163–191.

<sup>17</sup> Segal, *Jeszcze żyjemy*, 175.

And now, every time I go there for a couple of hours, it seems to me I am dreaming. I roam the backstreets and see many things and people that are no longer there and have been gone for a long time. . . . Sometimes I revisit. I return to My Mother's Town. And then I run away because she is not there, she is nowhere to be found. . . . Occasionally I would encounter some old, aged acquaintances, . . . young girls who have transformed into old, withered women. Ghastly old hags, burdened with troubles, poverty, and a tragic past. Upon seeing them, I look away and ask myself the preposterous question: where has our youth gone, their youth and my youth, where was it lost.<sup>18</sup>

The second kind of return takes place in the narrator's memory. It occurs following a certain trigger, for example, the tune of a religious hymn remembered from childhood and associated with his father,<sup>19</sup> or a random man resembling him:

I enter a small synagogue. . . . A Jew wearing my father's glasses, with my father's dark beard—is quiet, looks at me questioningly, expectantly. He hasn't recognized me yet. . . . I peer into this face as if it were a mirror. Will I look like this one day? Do I already look like this? I whisper: . . . tell me who you are, tell me that you are the one I'm looking for—tell me you are my father. . . . I will believe that you are my father, although I know well enough, although I remember all too well that you will forever stay there, among the icy rocks of Siberia.<sup>20</sup>

The reaction can also be triggered by a sign referring to the idealized past, e.g., the emblem of the Austro-Hungarian postal service encountered in Jerusalem, which brings back memories of the narrator's grandfather and the era of the mythical Austro-Hungarian monarchy (*Austria Felix*).<sup>21</sup> And even though such reminiscing is very painful, the author does not want to renounce it because it gives him the opportunity to keep returning to his departed relatives.<sup>22</sup> Evocation of the past in his recollections is also performed through deliberate work of his memory focused on recovering from its depth every single crumb that would enable the author to immortalize persons who have already passed away. By this gesture, the writer intends to compensate his dead relatives for the fact that he has

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 179–182.

<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.*, 416–419.

<sup>20</sup> Kalman Segal, "Dos gesl," in *id.*, *Vu shmeterlingn shvebn*, 252.

<sup>21</sup> See Segal, *Jeszcze żyjemy*, 239. For more on the subject of the nostalgia-driven myth of Galicia in Polish literature, see Ewa Wiegandt, "Mit Galicji w polskiej prozie współczesnej (rekonesans tematologiczny)," *Teksty* (1979), 5:52–62.

<sup>22</sup> See Segal, *Jeszcze żyjemy*, 419.

outlived them.<sup>23</sup> This kind of return is possible thanks to the love and admiration he cherishes for the shtetl community and for Carpathian nature, which, after all these years, allows him to talk about them with affection and reverence.<sup>24</sup>

The third form of returning to the past is the imagined return. Segal sets on an imaginary journey to Borysław, a town he knew from survivors' accounts and possibly also from his historical and topographical studies. Its geographical location was, similar to Sanok, in the Carpathian foothills; in terms of cultural identification, both towns belonged to the same region, i.e., eastern Galicia, which constituted a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It is not only by the use of the aforementioned stylistic devices that the manifestation of the imagined Borysław's past is executed. The author incorporates its myth into the larger myth of "Austria Felix," a monarchy ruled by the good Emperor Franz Joseph, who had a liking for Jews and always remained close to all his subjects.<sup>25</sup> Under his rule, Borysław was a town of good and righteous people,<sup>26</sup> an Arcadian place, a source of trust, peace, and joy:

Once again that town, filled with the smell of paraffin: one does not have to be Shakespeare to feel the charm of the warm, summer night. It is enough to walk into the fields, to stand on the balk among patches of flowering rye, to listen intently to the symphony of crickets and frogs whose monotony may be more pleasing to a man than the sweet sound of a pipe playing in the distance, two or three villages away. . . . Put your back against the silver bark of a birch tree, embrace its cool trunk with your arms, press your cheek against it and close your eyes for a while. Can you feel the mysterious communion with the world? . . . Here is the great order, the harmony of interconnections and unity, wonderful and neutral—the source of trust and peace, and a quiet joy which may only be expressed in a whisper.<sup>27</sup>

The rootedness of Segal's literary imagination in the mythical times of "Austria Felix" is also clearly emphasized in his attempt to build the myth of his own family's genealogy by telling the story of his grandfather, a rural Jew from Subcarpathia who went to Vienna, where he befriended the good emperor himself and then, having rejected the high-ranking office

<sup>23</sup> See "Rodzina Manelbaumów," in Segal, *Miłość o zmięczeniu*, 70 / "Mishpokhe Mandelbojm," in Segal, *Shtetl baym Son*, 41.

<sup>24</sup> See Segal, *Jeszcze żyjemy*, 25–26, 153.

<sup>25</sup> See *ibid.*, 100–103.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 125–130.

<sup>27</sup> See *ibid.*, 161–162.

he had been offered, “returned to Dolna Wolanka where he remained a pauper for the rest of his life, forever boasting about his friendship with Franz Joseph.”<sup>28</sup>

In the novel *Jeszcze żyjemy*, Segal’s nostalgic prose about the shtetl delaminates into two narrative planes—the evocative time and the equally important time of reminiscing; the split “self” results, as Czapliński proves, from “the narrator’s reflective activity, from the questions and doubts which pertain to the accessibility of bygone days.”<sup>29</sup> Segal often comments on his own writing, stressing the work of imagination and the hypothetical nature of the image of the past constructed both from historical facts and geographical data and from the author’s guesswork and wishful thinking.<sup>30</sup> He points out that the author’s imagination—the source of fiction—is shaped by the past and by everything he has experienced himself.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the narrative about Borysław has a double status: it is both a work of fiction and of non-fiction. Along with the earlier narratives about the shtetl, it becomes a story about a twice-lost past: a past lost in the depths of time and in the Holocaust, perpetually thought over by the author. It is a requiem of sorts, the writing of which fills every single moment of the writer’s present:

And currently I am writing this novel, a requiem for the Town, and at the same time travelling, meeting all sorts of people, acquaintances and strangers, working to get my monthly salary, while I am really living, indeed, living and dying in the past, I am writing a book full of digressions and asides, this is why I need all those identifications with the people I knew and with those whose lives and deaths have been narrated to me, and with those about whom nobody has told me, maybe they never even existed. Thus, I am writing this novel, listening intently to the sounds and gazing into the images which have passed away, into the lives which have been snuffed out, and onto those sketches, sometimes completely faded, highlighted by fiction, complemented by imagination, other issues and incidents of lesser significance but topical, contemporary ones, are overlaid.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 103. Cf. also Segal’s short story “Der kayser un mayn zeyde,” in Segal, *Vu shmeterlingn shvebn*, 17–30.

<sup>29</sup> Przemysław Czapliński, „Wznoszenie biografii. Proza polska lat dziewięćdziesiątych w poszukiwaniu utraconego czasu,” *Teksty Drugie* (1999), 3:56.

<sup>30</sup> See Segal, *Jeszcze żyjemy*, 29–34.

<sup>31</sup> See *ibid.*, 37–38.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.



### Vicarious witnessing of the Holocaust

The Holocaust of the archetypal “Murdered Shtetl’s” residents, not witnessed by Segal directly, is the second most important theme present in his whole writing. It is also one of the major themes that predominate throughout the novel *Jeszcze żyjemy* and in several short stories from the *Vu shmeterlingn shvebn* collection. In the novel, the author presents the fate of many nonfictional characters by impersonating them and speaking on their behalf. By doing this, he consistently blurs the boundaries between the voice of his own “self” as the author and the voice of the “other.” Segal the narrator openly admits that he uses his prerogatives as a writer to make the sketchy stories richer by adding fictional details to save the faceless victims from oblivion and to come as close as possible to the truth about what really happened during the Holocaust.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, the works of Polish-Jewish authors who, like Segal, survived the war in the USSR contain echoes of imaginal co-experiencing of the suffering endured by victims of the Holocaust. This work of their empathetic imagination arose from the need to accompany one’s close ones in the last moments of their lives and could have been a form of atonement for one’s physical absence and survival. To address this attitude, in my book *Without Jews?*, I have used the term *vicarious witnessing*.<sup>34</sup> So, Segal is not the only author writing about something he has not experienced himself, or about imaginary places he was absent from at wartime. Even if Segal was, indeed, commissioned to write the story about the prewar town of Borysław and the wartime fate of its residents (which has been mentioned by the writer’s friend, Anna Ćwiakowska<sup>35</sup>), he spins his tale about Borysław so skillfully as if he were talking about his own hometown

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 441.

<sup>34</sup> See Ruta, *Without Jews?*, 32–42. The category of *vicarious witnessing*—or testifying to the martyrdom and death of the Jewish nation, most frequently one’s relatives or residents of one’s hometown, in the literary works written during the Holocaust or shortly thereafter by authors who had saved themselves from the clutches of Hitler in the USSR, i.e., those who were not the direct participants of the events they described but, rather, who “witnessed” the Holocaust from a certain distance—is slightly different from the category of *vicarious past* discussed by James E. Young, which pertains to “second-generation survivors” (those born *after* the Holocaust) who had been passed on the knowledge about the Holocaust and the memory thereof by the direct witnesses, i.e., their parents and relatives. Cf. James E. Young, “The Holocaust as Vicarious Past: Art Spiegelman’s ‘Maus’ and the Afterimages of History,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (1998), 3:666–699.

<sup>35</sup> Anna Ćwiakowska, an Israeli Polish-Jewish author and Segal’s friend, claims that the novel had been commissioned by the community of Borysław-born Jews who were

and himself, oscillating between individual experience and collective experience. We could interpret this trick as a repetition of the strategy Segal used in his early writing, i.e., transforming the story about his hometown into a universal tale about an imaginary place that stands for every shtetl.<sup>36</sup> However, this time the strategy is reversed: the countless stories of anonymous victims become the personal, self-reflective story of the author's own "self," and the consciousness of the writer and his characters overlap, becoming one. Thanks to his compassionate imagination, the narrator accepts the role of representing all Holocaust victims. The knowledge about the tragic end experienced by the residents of Sanok or Borysław adds the dimension of grief to the writer's nostalgic look and transforms the act of nostalgic recovering of the bygone time into a kind of incessant, contemplative prayer.

### After leaving Poland

After leaving Poland in the autumn of 1969, Segal went to Rome, where he spent several months trying to make further travel arrangements to get to New York, which, back then, was the largest center of Yiddish culture and literature. He hoped to continue his writing career in that language there, but was denied an American visa as his connections with a propaganda radio station in a Communist country aroused suspicion. It was a heavy blow that led him to a nervous breakdown.<sup>37</sup> In March 1970, he arrived in Israel in a state of deep depression. He settled permanently in Jerusalem. The fact that it was a difficult period in his life is documented in his correspondence with friends and editors of the Polish emigration press as well as in his literary writings.<sup>38</sup> For him, leaving Poland meant parting with his

Holocaust survivors. See Anna Cwiakowska, "Wyjście z zabitego miasteczka," in ead., *Nieobecni* (Łódź, 2004), 78–87.

<sup>36</sup> See note 8.

<sup>37</sup> See JDC Archives, files Segal, Kalman 1969 V.1.1969–75.27a-c1 and Segal, Kalman 1969 R.1.1969–1973.6a.

<sup>38</sup> See Kalman Segal's correspondence with a friend from his youth, writer Marian Pankowski: National Library in Warsaw, Marian Pankowski's Archive, collection no. acc. 019442, file no. 54; with Jerzy Giedroyc, editor-in-chief of the Paris-based *Kultura* journal: Archive of the "Kultura" Literary Institute, *Kultura* journal [Letters to the editor] / From Kalman Segal, in: Correspondence with the Editors, file 715; and with the editorial staff of the London-based *Wiadomości* journal: Archives of Polish Emigration. Nicolaus Copernicus University Library in Toruń, Archive of the *Wiadomości* journal, sign. AE/AW/CCLXXXIII. For more on the subject of Segal's correspondence with Pankowski, see: Tomasz Chomiszczak, "Nasz sanocki dialog przyjaciół: O powojennej korespondencji

family and friends and giving up his professional life. He failed to get to the United States where his ex-wife and daughters had immigrated and where he anticipated finding new audiences in Yiddish, his mother tongue, while he could not even dream about building a successful literary career in Hebrew—a foreign language to him.<sup>39</sup> His attempt to win popularity in the Polish press published in Israel was futile and did not provide a decent income.<sup>40</sup> Segal's attempts to write for the Polish emigration press in Paris and London proved to be equally unimpressive as his literary endeavors probably did not win him recognition in the eyes of the then editors of such leading periodicals as *Kultura* and *Wiadomości*.<sup>41</sup> Denied the opportunity to publish his Polish works, separated from his Polish readers, he found himself in a trap,<sup>42</sup> sharing with other Polish-Jewish immigrants who had fled Poland after the political crisis of March 1968 such experiences as being exiled from one's motherland and mother tongue, torn between aversion towards and homesickness for Poland, feeling alienated in the new country and going through an arduous transformation into an Israeli.<sup>43</sup>

Mariana Pankowskiego i Kalmana Segala," *Rocznik Sanocki* 12 (2017), 173–190, and id., "Między krajem rodzinnym i przybranymi ojczyznami: Przypadki Mariana Pankowskiego i Kalmana Segala," *Archiwum Emigracji* 29 (2021), 101–113. For literary expressions of Segal's difficulties, see for example Segal, *Jeszcze żyjemy*, 145, and id., "Iberflantsung," in id., *Aleynkeyt*, 112–118.

<sup>39</sup> See JDC Archives, files Segal, Kalman 1969 V.1.1969–75.27a-c1 and Segal, Kalman 1969 R.1.1969–1973.6a.

<sup>40</sup> See Anna Ćwiakowska, "Kalman Segal w Izraelu," in Tomasz Chomiszczak (ed.), *Archiwariusz zabitego miasteczka. Rzecz o Kalmanie Segalu* (Sanok, 2008), 42; Karolina Famulska-Ciesielska, Sławomir Żurek, "Kalman Segal" [entry], in id., *Literatura polska w Izraelu. Leksykon* (Kraków–Budapeszt, 2012), 141–143.

<sup>41</sup> Already at the beginning of his stay in Israel, Segal submitted his short stories to the editors of both of the two quality literary journals published abroad by Polish *émigré* intelligentsia—Paris-based *Kultura* and London-based *Wiadomości*—hoping to get them published. The complete exchange of letters between him and the editors of the two periodicals has not been preserved. However, considering the content of the fragmentary replies sent to him by Jerzy Giedroyc and the absence of any specimens of poetry or prose signed by Segal's name in either of the journals, we may assume that Segal's texts were rejected. See Kalman Segal's correspondence with Jerzy Giedroyc, editor-in-chief of *Kultura*: Archive of the "Kultura" Literary Institute, *Kultura* journal [Letters to the editor] / From Kalman Segal, in: Correspondence with the Editors, file 715; and the exchange of letters between Kalman Segal and the editors of the *Wiadomości* journal: Archives of Polish Emigration. Nicolaus Copernicus University Library in Toruń, Archive of the *Wiadomości* journal, sign. AE/AW/CCLXXXIII.

<sup>42</sup> He expressed these feelings in his letters to a friend, Marian Pankowski, which are filled with despair. See National Library in Warsaw, Marian Pankowski's Archive, collection no. acc. 019442, file no. 54.

<sup>43</sup> The experiences of Kalman Segal and other Polish-Jewish authors who came to Israel on the wave of post-March 1968 emigration are very similar in general terms, although

If Segal's tale about the shtetl is a story about grief-stricken nostalgia, then is the narrative about Poland told from the perspective of Israel a story of an anti-nostalgic writer?

### A nostalgic and anti-nostalgic story about Poland

In the most basic sense of the term, "nostalgia" is longing for one's homeland. The term "anti-nostalgia" was for the first time used in the title of a poem by Henryk Grynberg, another Polish *émigré* from the late-1960s wave.<sup>44</sup> While referring to Grynberg's concept, Jora Vaso defines anti-nostalgia as the emotions of a contemporary exile who has left behind his economically, culturally or politically "backward" homeland to live in a modern, democratic world while being perfectly aware of his motherland's shortcomings, as a result of which the motherland does not become an object of romantic nostalgia but, rather, a memory that stirs up some sharp criticism.<sup>45</sup> To be more precise, such criticism does not have to be of a general nature, but it can also refer to specific aspects of what constitutes the notion of motherland, such as its culture, history, society, or the highly politicized state structures, etc.<sup>46</sup> Vaso argues that the strong bond between the exile and his birthplace does not inspire him to return

there are also some fundamental differences. Unlike Segal, many March *émigrés* managed to find their own place on the map of Polish emigration literature. Segal, on the other hand, being a bilingual author, mostly published texts in Yiddish while living in Israel (see note 2); he also published a Hebrew translation of his novel *Mot ha-arkhivar* (Tel Aviv, 1972), as well as two collections of short stories, *Bet ha-kafe ha-mekhusaf* (Tel Aviv, 1973) and *Hizdakhut* (Tel Aviv, 1979). For more on the experiences of other Polish-Jewish authors who had immigrated to Israel in the late 1960s, see: Kazimierz Adamczyk, „Antynostalgia i nostalgia: Pamięć Polski w literackich świadectwach emigracji 1968,” in Hanna Gosk, Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk (eds.), *Pisarz na emigracji. Mitologie, style, strategie przetrwania* (Warsaw, 2005), 434–454; id., „Okolice marca 1968,” and „Zapisy z Tel Awiwu,” in id., *Doświadczenie polsko-żydowskie w literaturze emigracyjnej (1939–1980)* (Kraków, 2008), 147–253; Karolina Famulska-Ciesielska, *Polacy – Żydzi – Izraelczycy. Tożsamość w literaturze polskiej w Izraelu* (Toruń, 2008); Alina Molisak, „Narracje o wygnaniu w literaturze polskiej w Izraelu po roku 1948,” in Gosk, Kowalczyk (eds.), *Pisarz na emigracji*, 422–433.

<sup>44</sup> See Henryk Grynberg, „Antynostalgia,” in id., *Antynostalgia* (London, 1971), 33–34.

<sup>45</sup> See Vaso, „The Unprivileged Exile,” 220.

<sup>46</sup> I was inspired to formulate this observation by the comments formulated by Marcin Wolk, the author of *Recenzja rozprawy doktorskiej mgr Jory Vaso pt. „The Exiled Modern Artist: Nostalgia, Antinostalgia, and Allegorical Thinking in Witold Gombrowicz, Zbigniew Herbert, Henryk Grynberg, Gëzim Hajdari, Giorgio de Chirico, Andrey Tarkovsky and Nadav Lapid.”* published online on: Centralna Komisja ds. Stopni i Tytułów, Recenzje w przewodzie doktorskim, Recenzja 2, <https://www.ck.gov.pl/review/id/47232/type/ud.html> [retrieved: 20 July 2023].

but, rather, confirms him in his decision to remain in exile,<sup>47</sup> while anti-nostalgic memory, similar to nostalgic memory, imprisons and roots the exile in the past, turning obsessive thinking about his old life and home country into his main activity. Anti-nostalgia is an attempt at rationalization of that which is irrational in nostalgia, while the major component of both nostalgia and anti-nostalgia is the fear of taking responsibility for the here and now.<sup>48</sup>

Traces of nostalgia and anti-nostalgia in Segal's Israeli works can be found in the short stories from the *Aleynkeyt* collection, in some poems from the volume *Gezegnung*, and especially in the metanarrative passages of the *Jeszcze żyjemy* novel, where the narrator functions as the author's alter ego. He talks extensively about his voluntary decision to leave Poland and describes the process of settling into his new homeland. Already at the beginning of the novel, he declares that he no longer likes Poland: "I stopped liking the country I was born in—the motherland. When I stop liking it, I start feeling upset, and then angry. When love dies, I feel like I have lost everything, as if my house has burnt down."<sup>49</sup> In contrast to this uncompromising and emotional declaration stands the ironic (and anxious) statement that the decision to switch from his old motherland to the new one is not as easy as the decision to change one's trousers or tie, and the land of Israel, although inhabited by Jews for centuries, does not necessarily have to feel homely and give the sense of belonging.

I have pondered on the meaning of the words homeland and home for many years. How does one get a new motherland? Surely, it's not the same as getting a new pair of trousers, a new tie, or a new backpack. . . . Of course, for a Jew who had decided to immigrate to Israel it was a problem of a different nature. After all, we were not coming to a new motherland, but to our old country which had been abandoned and kept in fetters for millennia. . . . It is a country in which my forefather—a vagrant, rural Jew living a nomadic lifestyle—wandered across the desert like a Bedouin . . . But it's all a very old story, and it's inappropriate to badmouth one's own forefathers, let bygones be bygones—the only thing that matters is that he was my grandfather. And when you're going to visit your grandfather—you're going home. Isn't that right?<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> See Vaso, "The Unprivileged Exile," 220.

<sup>48</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Segal, *Jeszcze żyjemy*, 40.

<sup>50</sup> Segal, "Yetsiyes Poyln," in *id.*, *Aleynkeyt*, 92–93; see also *id.*, *Jeszcze żyjemy*, 92–93.

In his Israeli prose,<sup>51</sup> similar to his earlier writings,<sup>52</sup> Segal slightly idealizes (non-Jewish) Poles, highlighting the positive aspects of Polish-Jewish relations (both during the war and, later, in the era of the Polish People's Republic), although he does not deny the bad things that happened. The only symbol of oppression in the context of the political crisis of March 1968 that appears in his story about this crisis is Władysław Gomułka, the First Secretary of the Communist Party who governed Poland at that time—an embodiment of a highly politicized state.<sup>53</sup> Gradually, the narrator's perspective on the ex-motherland changes, shifting from anger and grief to a growing distance. Poland begins to be perceived as a “previous, Slavic homeland,”<sup>54</sup> a place where “people were murdered pointlessly, en masse and individually”<sup>55</sup> during WWII, and after the war “the dark monsters are still . . . immortal,” and the “liar, murderer and fraudster” identified with the state propaganda “spits his poison.”<sup>56</sup> Initial anger seems to be cooling off and is being replaced with longing. The object of nostalgic memory of the March *émigré* is—apart from the “Murdered Shtetl” and his Polish friends—Polish nature<sup>57</sup> and culture,<sup>58</sup> and the object of his anti-nostalgia is the politicized Polish state and the authorities representing it.<sup>59</sup> Shaped by the experience of the Holocaust, Segal voices his criticism of all kinds of nationalism (Polish, Russian, German, and later on also Israeli) starting off with his first publications,<sup>60</sup> interpreting it as an ideology that ultimately leads to killing people in the name of an abstract idea of “motherland.”

I am sick, I suffer from mental traumas—a hangover from the great, national epidemic diseases. Whenever someone starts to talk about motherland, the love of motherland in my presence, I begin to feel pain in my liver. I used to love Poland,

<sup>51</sup> See *ibid.*, 99–100; Segal, “Yetsiyes Poyln,” 92–101.

<sup>52</sup> What makes Segal strikingly different from other postwar Yiddish writers from postwar Poland is a certain kind of idealization of Poles. For more on the image of Polish-Jewish relations in this author's works, see: Magdalena Ruta, “Literatura miejscem negocjowania tożsamości? Obraz relacji polsko-żydowskich w pisarstwie Kalmana Segala na tle literatury jidysz,” in Alina Molisak, Zuzanna Kołodziejaska (eds.), *Żydowski Polak, polski Żyd. Problem tożsamości w literaturze polsko-żydowskiej* (Warsaw, 2011), 112–127.

<sup>53</sup> See Segal, *Jeszcze żyjemy*, 92–100; *id.*, “Yetsiyes Poyln,” 92–101.

<sup>54</sup> Segal, *Jeszcze żyjemy*, 93.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>56</sup> Segal, “Gezegenung,” in *id.*, *Gezegenung*, 92–93.

<sup>57</sup> See Segal, *Jeszcze żyjemy*, 145, 160, 416; *id.*, “Gezegenung,” 92–93.

<sup>58</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> See Segal, *Jeszcze żyjemy*, 96–97; *id.*, “Yetsiyes Poyln.”

<sup>60</sup> See Kalman Segal, *Na wyspie* (Katowice, 1961), 42.

but when I heard people cheering, “Long live Poland!” it made my flesh creep because after such cheers one could anticipate that the next thing they would do would be to beat the Jews. I used to like Germany and German culture, and once I was crossing a large, crowded square when someone cried, “*Es lebe das Vaterland!*” and I immediately felt a flush of anxiety in my trousers because someone could possibly reach to undo my fly to check if my crown jewel was circumcised. I used to love Russians, despite the cruelty of their tsars, but when they cheered, “*Da zdravstvuet rodina!*” I instantly knew that some major vileness was brewing.<sup>61</sup>

By the 1950s, he starts to present his recipe for an ideal world: revealing his dry sense of humor, he promotes his programme of the “sex- and family-oriented union” whose goal is miscegenation and the building of a community based on family relations.<sup>62</sup> According to Segal, home is closer to a man’s heart than a motherland, the latter being identified by him with ideology and the state.

### An arduous transformation into Israeli

In his novel *Jeszcze żyjemy*, Segal tends to focus more and more on Israel, its society, and his place in it. At the beginning, his narrator speaks about the feeling of alienation,<sup>63</sup> social decline, the hostility of sabras and representatives of earlier *aliyot* from Poland who despise people like him and tell him to apologize for being a Communist.<sup>64</sup> All this shatters the myths about Jewish brotherhood in his eyes.<sup>65</sup> He is irritated by futile discussions about who is a Jew and who is an Israeli; he also criticizes the role of the rabbinate in defining Jewish identity (e.g., on the occasion of weddings), noticing an analogy with the actions of the Nazis.<sup>66</sup> The unstable political situation of the young Israeli state and its armed conflicts with the Arabs<sup>67</sup> make him feel tension and anxiety. On the other hand, as a member of a national minority and a victim of nationalist regimes, he is sensitive to the fate of the Arab minority in Israel:

One in six citizens of this country is an Arab, one would wish that this national minority of half a million could feel comfortable here, without being underprivileged

<sup>61</sup> Segal, *Jeszcze żyjemy*, 42.

<sup>62</sup> See *ibid.*, 140.

<sup>63</sup> See *ibid.*, 146–147.

<sup>64</sup> See *ibid.*, 154–155, 310.

<sup>65</sup> See *ibid.*, 307.

<sup>66</sup> See *ibid.*, 332.

<sup>67</sup> See *ibid.*, 266, 507.

in any way . . . At this point, my old little inhibition resurfaces, the inhibition of a man who has been labeled as a national minority member for half a century . . . How is this issue addressed among us? Among us? We are the most predisposed to use the most genuine, unfeigned rules of tolerance and equality among people. We ourselves have been discriminated against . . . —and now we are free . . . Who are these cousins of ours, Abraham’s illegitimate offspring, our fellow citizens—the Arabs?<sup>68</sup>

The never-ending spiral of violence and death in Israel prompts him to ask the ironic question whether the Israelis could now be considered a “fully-fledged” nation, since they have already produced their own murderers.<sup>69</sup>

Not having resolved the dilemma whether he is a Jewish Pole or simply a Jew,<sup>70</sup> Segal more and more frequently refers to himself as an Israeli. He starts to write about the Western Wall—the symbol of Jerusalem towards which he felt quite indifferent at first<sup>71</sup>—with love:

for some time now, this stone wall has been transforming in my perception, triggering a different emotional reaction in me, looking more and more beautiful embraced by the panorama surrounding it, losing its foreignness, . . . perhaps this is the natural course, the order of feelings: you need to get closer first, get to know each other, become familiar, and then you start liking and loving each other.<sup>72</sup>

And following the outbreak of Israel’s war with Syria, he “sends” his literary alter ego to the front as a war correspondent. By doing so, he consciously takes responsibility for his “here and now,” which is something his nostalgia and anti-nostalgia previously made him incapable of. And even the “Murdered Shtetl”—an obsession of his nostalgic memory—becomes the symbol of the transformation of a Jewish exile from Poland (mentally stuck in his past) into an engaged, yet critical, Israeli. The shtetl is no longer a symbol merely of the Holocaust, but also of the death of all the Israeli children, mothers, soldiers, and of every Jew who died during the war or in a terrorist attack.

The Town I am revisiting in this book is merely a symbol, a tiny code. . . . I bend over the silence of emptiness, over grief, orphanhood, and loneliness. The children of Borysław, Będzin, Pułtusk, Stutthof, Majdanek and Treblinka . . . one hundred

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 196–198.

<sup>69</sup> See *ibid.*, 507.

<sup>70</sup> See *ibid.*, 63.

<sup>71</sup> See *ibid.*, 150.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 240–241.



thousand children perished in the Warsaw ghetto, Janusz Korczak was there with them, yesterday in Upper Galilee, in the biblical settlement of Galilee, in the small town of Kiryat Shmona eight children and five mothers were murdered . . . the school which the murderers had picked as their target in Kiryat Shmona had been named after Janusz Korczak, the man from the Warsaw ghetto, so let me repeat: do not say that these things belong to the old times, the slaughter is still going on.<sup>73</sup>

The ending of the novel becomes a proclamation of the love of life and a protest against killing people in the name of nationalism, money, and power deftly packaged in patriotic slogans.

### The sadness of an eternal exile

An essential stage in the writer's journey from one homeland to the other was the aforementioned city of Rome. While looking at the Arch of Titus, erected in the years 81–96 to commemorate the victory of Vespasian and Titus in the war against the Jews and the capturing of Jerusalem, the author starts to perceive the history of Jews as a story of recurrent persecution and homelessness. Segal writes in a poem "Baym Titus-boygn" [By the Arch of Titus]:

I am two thousand years older  
Shackles clanging on my wrists  
Choking on a curse I am

Many a time I was driven  
By the triumphant Arch of Titus  
In every generation anew

What shall comfort my eyes  
Written in the Jewish script  
"Am Yisrael chai!" Jewish people are alive! —<sup>74</sup>

When writing about the tragic fate suffered by his nation two thousand years before, Segal uses his well-tried, although slightly modified, literary trick: he smoothly switches from third-person narration to first-person narration within the same sentence. The scene depicting Jewish slaves being thrown into the arena of the Colosseum to be devoured by lions—a barbarity from two thousand years ago—intertwines with a scene from a much

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 506–508.

<sup>74</sup> Segal, "Baym Titus-boygn," in id., *Gezegnung*, 87; see also *ibid.*, 60–68.

more recent past: the death of Jews in a gas chamber, and the author's "self" is among the victims of both the ancient and the modern acts of violence:

I am running towards the Colosseum, an animal comes running down the narrow underground passage, leaps onto the arena, the naked Judaeen stands facing the enraged lion . . . [T]he crowd cheered, Nazi German soldiers wearing leather coats strolled along the rows, counting us out . . . the slave was still fighting . . . he walked naked and ugly, I walked naked and ugly, the barrack he was heading for, the barrack I was heading for stank . . . the slave was down on his knees, shaking, I'm scared, said a man with fleshless buttocks, the slave lay motionless, a wreck of a man, a wreck of a slave, I said I'm scared, death started to seep in through the ceiling, hissing, a pair of indifferent eyes clung to the vision panel in the door, the lion sat on his haunches licking blood from his face, nostrils and paws.<sup>75</sup>

By blurring the line between the experiences of ancient Jews and his personal experience, he embraces the former as his own, thus incorporating them into the series of misfortunes that have been hounding Jews for centuries. According to the writer, the Holocaust and the expulsion of Jews from Poland after March 1968 were merely the next stages of that process.

In his early youth, Segal sympathized with the Communist movement that promised people justice and a better world. He started his career as a writer in the late-1940s, having learned the true face of Communism in the Soviet Union during WWII. Maybe that is why the basic emotion that penetrates all of his works is sadness. This "heartbreakingly sad writer,"<sup>76</sup> as he was perceived in Israel, from the very beginning, continually explores the theme of unfulfilled yearning for the ideal world of his dreams full of harmony and beauty<sup>77</sup> and many of his protagonists are, much like himself, utterly lonely and maladjusted,<sup>78</sup> making unsuccessful attempts to overcome their sense of loneliness.<sup>79</sup> Communism rejects the idea of determinism and historical fatalism that leads to the belief that Jews

<sup>75</sup> Segal, *Jeszcze żyjemy*, 65–67.

<sup>76</sup> Dov Sadan, "A pruv fun an araynfir," in Segal, *Vu shmeterlingn shvebn*, 14.

<sup>77</sup> See Segal's short stories and novels both in Yiddish and in Polish: "Egzotyka," in *Kij i kadzidlo* (Katowice, 1961), 18–19 / "Ekzotik," in *Sheydvegn* (Varshe, 1962), 224–225; *Na wyspie* (Katowice, 1961) / "Sheydvegn," in *Sheydvegn* (Varshe, 1962), 76–180; "Dolina zielonej pszenicy," in *Dolina zielonej pszenicy* (Katowice, 1964), 158–166 / "Di szejne tochter," in *Shittel baym Son* (Varshe, 1965), 56–62.

<sup>78</sup> See short stories "Groyser umet" and "A gesl," in *Vu shmeterlingn shvebn*, 243–249 and 250–254.

<sup>79</sup> For more on this subject, see Ruta, "Tu jest nasza Jerozolima – Jerozolima obłakanych."

are destined by fate to endure constant persecution and homelessness.<sup>80</sup> Towards the end of his life, Segal seems to believe that, contrary to the Communist hopes of his youth, being in exile is, indeed, the universal experience and existential condition of the Jewish nation, and the Jewish longing for homeland seems to have no end.

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<sup>80</sup> A typical Communist attitude of active struggle for one’s place in history, including an active response to persecution, can be found, e.g., in the wartime writings of such Polish-Yiddish refugee poets as Dawid Sfarid and Binem Heller. By contrast, the literature produced by Polish-Yiddish refugees who were not associated with Communism is permeated with the feeling of weariness and helplessness in the face of recurring historical upheavals that result in centuries of wandering in search of a stable place to live. For more on this subject, see Ruta, *Without Jews?*, 194–203.

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