

On Jews and Judaism in Crisis

S E L E C T E D E S S A Y S

Gershom Scholem

Edited by Werner J. Dannhauser

S C H O C K E N B O O K S • N E W Y O R K

1976



Agnon in Germany: Recollections*

I came to know Agnon in the days of our youth, during and after World War I, and our friendly and close relations stem from this time.

By that time a great reputation preceded Agnon in the circle of Zionist youth, insofar as they sought to become intimate with the Hebrew language and literature. To be sure, the hunger for Hebrew and for knowledge of the sources of our literature was limited to a fairly narrow group. Agnon, however, obliged these rare birds with great affection. We first read about him in a small literary collection, published by the Zionist Association of Germany in 1916, and meant for those young Zionists who served in the war. This book was called *Loyalty (Treue)* and contained several stories by Agnon and a big section from the German translation of his first book *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight (Und das Krumme wird grade)*, together with introductory remarks about Agnon written by Martin Buber and in Buber's characteristic, slightly elevated style. It said there of Agnon that he had "dedication to Jewish things." Dedication (*Weihe*) was, coming from Buber, a word of the highest appreciation, though it was not completely clear to us what he really meant by it.

Even before I came to know Agnon personally, I had often seen him in the reading room of the library of the Jewish

* A speech in Hebrew delivered in the house of the President of Israel, November 16, 1966, in celebration of Agnon's receiving the Nobel Prize. Expanded and published as "Agnon in Deutschland: Erinnerungen," in Gershom Scholem, *Judaica 2* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Bibliothek Suhrkamp, 1970), pp. 122-32. Translated from the German by Werner J. Dannhauser.

community in Berlin, where he indefatigably leafed through the card index of the Hebrew catalog. I asked him later what he sought so intently there. He answered with a guileless-ironic wide-eyedness, "Books that I have not yet read." For he came from a city in Galicia in whose *bet hamidrash* (house of study) many thousands of Hebrew volumes were to be found that he had devoured in his youth, and he knew how to tell some story or other about each book and its author. At that time, he was a very slender, almost emaciated young man with sharp features. Only somewhat later, about the time we came to know each other, did his face and figure round out. I met him at his first translator's, the lawyer Max Strauss (the brother of the poet Ludwig Strauss), an unusually gifted, very sensitive, and magnificent-looking young man. He was of the same age as Agnon but treated him with great politeness and respect, like a rare example of the species man. Strauss had a very fine feeling for language, but was not wholly secure in his knowledge of Hebrew and consulted a number of acquaintances, among them also me (who had written a wild article against a translation from Yiddish that had just been published) about questions of Hebrew style and Hebrew usage.

Agnon was surrounded by an aura of solitude and not a little *Weltschmerz*, a delicate melancholy, as was becoming to sensitive young persons. At that time he wrote many poems, over which hovered a spirit of infinite isolation. When, some years later, after the end of World War I, we were living in Munich, he read a number of them to me. They have all been burned. Only one of them, which I transcribed into German verse, is still among my papers in the original text and in translation.

On the other hand, one could often find Agnon in the company of young men and girls. He attempted to step out of himself. Not always did he succeed in this, and then he often sat there silently, but when he did engage in a conversation, he overflowed with old stories, anecdotes and words of the old sages, and we, young Jews with a German upbringing, were enchanted by him. Naturally, at the time we spoke German with him, even though Agnon's German was quite peculiar, with its Galician accent, half-Yiddish syntax, and with its cadence of Hasidic anecdotes. Sometimes he spoke with the greatest shyness and reticence, but sometimes also with a certain firmness. All this

very much raised him in our esteem. This, after all was the time when a kind of veritable cult of the Eastern Jews (*Ostjuden*) reigned in Germany, which represented a backlash against the arrogance and presumption against them, which at the time were accepted attitudes in the circle of assimilated Jews from which we were descended. For us, by contrast, every Eastern Jew was a carrier of all the mysteries of Jewish existence, but the young Agnon appeared to us as one of its most perfect incarnations.

I recall an evening in May 1917 in Berlin's Hebrew Club, which was frequented almost exclusively by Russian, Polish, and Palestinian Jews. A born Berliner like myself stood out like a sore thumb there. On this evening Agnon read one of his most perfect stories, "The Tale of the Scribe," which at the time was not yet in print. Even now the deep impression made by Agnon's story is present in me, and I still hear the reverberation of Agnon's delicate and plaintive voice as he read his story in a kind of inward-turned, monotonous singsong. It was like an illustration of the word of the poetess about the "languages which are notched like harps."

At that time he set great value on sharply distinguishing between Agnon the artist and Agnon the human being. It is characteristic of this that he protested at once when I addressed him by his Hebrew *nom de plume*, "Agnon." "My name is Czaczkes," he used to correct me. When I asked him what he had against being called Agnon, he explained to me that Agnon was, no doubt, a very beautiful literary name, but how much could there be to a name he had invented himself and which did not occur in the Holy Books, while the name Czaczkes could be found expressly among the mystical names of angels in the Book of Razi'el (an ancient Hebrew book about angelology). Even at that time I was unable to take this argument really seriously. Indeed, eventually, when he returned to Palestine at the end of 1924, he let—at my urging—his civil name be exchanged for his literary one and came once and for all to be called Agnon. I was at that time a librarian of the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem and said that with us he would be listed by the name of Agnon and that no remonstrations would be accepted.

As far as I know, during World War I he lived mainly from his work as literary adviser of the "Jewish Publication House" of

Dr. Aron Eliasberg, who was particularly fond of Agnon even though the former was a pronounced "Litvak," which is to say, a Lithuanian Jew, and Litvaks and Galicians in general could not stand each other. (Today, when all have fallen under the hand of the same murderer, these controversies are forgotten.) Agnon edited at least two books which at that time were published in German by the "Jewish Publication House," *The Book of the Polish Jew* and *The Book of Hanukkah* (I already collaborated on the last one as translator). I remember that my first familiarity with one of the most famous works of kabbalistic literature, the book *Hemdat Yamim* (*The Adornment of Days*), which describes exactly how a Jew must comport himself if he wishes to lead his life according to kabbalistic principles, stemmed from a discussion with Agnon about the depiction of the Hanukkah festival in that book.

At that time, Agnon spent every morning writing in his room. Many of his later writings date back to this period, even though what was written at that time, insofar as it was not already published, perished in the great fire in his house in Homburg. At first I could still quite well decipher the handwriting of his letters and the stories he gave me to read and also to translate. But even at that time he already showed a marked tendency to transform his handwriting into a kind of secret writing that puts the eyes of the reader at a loss. In the course of time things went so far that if his wife Esther wished to do one a favor, she simultaneously enclosed a transcription of his letters in order to facilitate the work of deciphering his secret writing, which resembled fly-spots rather than Hebrew letters. It also happened that Agnon wished to honor his friends. Then he would send his things to them in a form that was a joy to behold, and one could notice that his heart was drawn to the calling of the Torah-scribe, the Jewish calligrapher. I still see before me the complete copy of *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, in one of its innumerable versions, which Agnon had made for his friend and patron Salman Schocken in Zwickau, later his publisher, and which he showed me before he sent it. Whoever wants to see an example of the author's beautiful handwriting can presumably still admire it in the Schocken Library in Jerusalem, where it ought to be lying among many other papers of Agnon's.

I said that in the morning Agnon remained alone with his work. But during the afternoon and evening he already at that time indulged his sense for conversations and going for walks. Many hours have I spent walking with him through the streets of Munich, Frankfurt, and Homburg and have listened to his torrent of speech, and presumably also talked quite a bit myself. If I have won his heart it ought to be owing to three things. I was about ten years younger than he and his personality made a deep impression on me, and I very much admired him, just as at the time I was full of admiration for several Russian Jews with whom I was living in the same boardinghouse in Berlin, when my father threw me out of the house because of my Zionism. But these Russian Jews—like the deceased Dr. Zvi Kitain and Zalman Rubashoff-Shazar, the current President of the state of Israel who is hopefully destined for a long life to come among us—were, in accordance with their disposition and character, enlighteners and "enlightened men." Agnon, however, came, as it were, from very far away; he was no intellectual but rather a man from the world of creativity in which the fountains of imagination bubbled most richly. His conversations had a thoroughly profane character and content, but he spoke in the style of the heroes of his stories, and there was something infinitely attractive about his manner of speaking.

I gave expression to my admiration for him in two sonnets which I wrote in German in praise of Menashe Chayim, the hero of *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*. One of them read:

MENASHE CHAYIM*

Du, der das Leben sich vergessen macht
unsterblich ist es in Dir auferstanden.
Da Du in Not vergingst, in Schmach und Schanden,
bist Du zur höchsten Ordnung aufgewacht.

Dein Dasein ward dem Schweigen dargebracht,
in das nur klagend unsre Worte fanden,
doch nicht wie unsre Klagen Deine branden,
denn des Siloah Wasser fließen sacht.

* *Menashe Chayim* literally means "who makes life forget."

Dein Leben steht im Licht der letzten Zeit,
 aus deiner Stille Offenbarung spricht.
 Unendlich gross erstrahlt in Dir das Leid,
 Du aber bist das Medium das es bricht.

Und heisst solch Armut Leid und Irrsal nicht
 Unschuld vor dem verborgenen Gericht?

(You, who makes himself forget life,
 immortally it has been resurrected in you.
 Because you perished in need, in disgrace and shame,
 You have awakened to the Highest Order.

Your existence was offered to silence
 into which our words could only enter when lamenting,
 but not like our laments did yours surge,
 for the waters of Shiloam flow softly.

Your life stands in the light of the final days
 Out of your stillness revelation speaks.
 Infinitely greatly does grief radiate from you
 But you are the medium that breaks it.

And is the name of such poverty, grief, and erring
 Not innocence before the hidden Judgment?)

I sent them to Agnon and thereby earned a place in his heart—evidently I was the first to write poems about his books. But perhaps a contributing factor was the youthful enthusiasm which caused me to return to the primary sources and which was bound to awaken his sympathy. We agreed in our judgment of many phenomena of Jewish life in Germany and poured out our hearts to each other in critical speeches about our surroundings, about people, and about literary conditions. At that time Agnon had formed a friendship with some Germans, men with heads on their shoulders, and was accustomed to deliver speeches of praise to me about them. To tell the truth, Agnon, who came from a foreign place, had by virtue of his intuition a better and deeper understanding for many a German than I did.

Toward the end of World War I and afterward, I lived in Switzerland for one and a half years. After my return, I met

Agnon in Berlin and he took me to Moses Marx, the brother of Esther Marx, who became Agnon's wife. Moses Marx, who at the time was a textile merchant in Berlin, had one of the most wonderful Hebrew libraries existing in Berlin, and Agnon (as I myself later on) was enthused by it. For already at that time he began to collect Hebrew books to a great extent, which passion enslaved him for several years. At that time Germany was dominated by inflation, and everyone who had his income in "hard currency" could be considered rich. At that time Agnon's star rose visibly in the sky of Hebrew literature, and the publisher Abraham Josef Stiebel in Copenhagen, who made his name as a patron of Hebrew literature, courted him very much and acquired his stories for good money.

After his marriage Agnon settled first in Wiesbaden and later in Homburg von der Höhe, a place to which he found himself drawn not only because of its scenic beauty, but also, as he liked to maintain, because of the old Hebrew prints that appeared there 250 years earlier. To be sure, one of the main attractions of these cities was their closeness to Frankfurt, a true metropolis of Jewish life, though in Agnon's eyes not so much because of the Jews living there, but rather on account of the secondhand Hebrew bookstores of which the Old City was full and the excellent Hebrew collection of the City Library (which burned down in World War II). With the librarian, a figure who seemed to have stepped directly out of the works of Anatole France, Agnon got along famously.

During the summer of 1923, before I went to Palestine, I taught at the "Free House of Study" in Frankfurt, which Franz Rosenzweig had established, and there I read a number of Agnon's stories with a group of students who already knew Hebrew to some extent. This gave great pleasure not only to my pupils but to Agnon himself. At that time he was not yet used to having his books read in schools.

During these years after World War I, I took a stab at a few translations of Agnon stories into German, of which several appeared at the time in Buber's monthly *Der Jude* (*The Jew*). That was an uncommonly difficult undertaking, and I acquired a precise concept of the enormous difficulties encountering anyone who undertakes to translate his great Hebrew prose, who not

only wishes to reproduce the content of what has been narrated but to give expression in a foreign language to something of the particular tone and rhythm of the original. I would not like to make the claim of having been successful in my undertaking, but perhaps I can say of myself that since then I have been entitled to a judgment of the work of other translators. If we now praise the genius and greatness of Agnon, it also behooves us to praise the powerful achievement of his most recent translators, above all that of Karl Steinschneider and Tuvia Rübner, who have contributed significantly to making Agnon's *oeuvre* familiar in German-speaking circles.

During the three years Agnon resided in Homburg, three things were granted to him which, according to a saying by the sages in the Talmud, enlarge the sense of a human being: a beautiful residence, beautiful tools (that is to say, books, which after all are the tools of the writer), and a beautiful wife, who in all ways stood by his side. If I am not mistaken, she began already at that time to copy his ever-increasingly unreadable manuscripts in her calligraphic handwriting. In short, at that time he was really well off. He was happy and engulfed by his work, and one story followed on the heels of another. At that time he told me much about his great novel *In the Bond of Life*, his autobiography transformed into the medium of art, in which he looked back on and came to terms with his youth. Never again have I seen him so open of heart, so radiant and overflowing with genius, as in those days.

Undoubtedly the special atmosphere of Homburg also contributed to his well-being. For at that time many of the most significant writers, poets, and thinkers of Israel congregated there, as for example Haim Nahman Bialik, Ahad Ha-am, and Nathan Birnbaum, and around them a circle of excellent minds from Russian Jewry such as Yehoshua Ravnitsky, Shoshanah Persitz, and that legendary Semitzki,* of whom the initiate whispered that he was the only one of that generation who really had a perfect command of Hebrew grammar down to its ultimate subtleties, and whom all writers considered the court of last

* A proofreader for some of the most distinguished publishing houses, first in Russia and later in Israel.—Ed.

resort in ticklish questions. Agnon found great pleasure in these friendly relations, and became especially attracted to the great poet Haim Nahman Bialik, the poet of the Jewish Renaissance in Russia sixty to seventy years ago, and who, like Agnon himself, was a conversationalist of genius. Their discussions were memorable and it paid to listen to them. Ofttimes Agnon took me along on his walks with Bialik when I came to Homburg, and it is easy to understand how much I, a young German Jew, was impressed by these discussions. Naturally, at that time one already spoke in Hebrew. Agnon used to say, "Scholem, don't forget to write in your notebook what you heard." Well, I had open ears, but no notebook, and wrote down nothing.

This splendid period of Agnon's life came to an end in a tragic manner when the house in which he lived, together with his books and manuscripts, went up in flames on a summer night of the year 1924. Walter Benjamin, who esteemed Agnon most highly, wrote to me at the time: "I am not even in the least able in my imagination to reach the situation of a man who has to go through that, not to say anything of one who has to overcome it." Indeed, when Agnon returned to Palestine in the autumn of that year, he came as one whose world had grown dark and who had to begin everything anew. Which one of us could have put himself into his situation? So he returned from the depths of misfortune. The Agnon of before 1924 was completely different from the later Agnon. He kept on creating ever more splendidly and deeply, but he was locked into himself, and the many conversations he conducted were now but walls by which he shielded his isolation. So he entered on the way that has led him to the Nobel Prize, the way of a great artist who has mastered his torments.