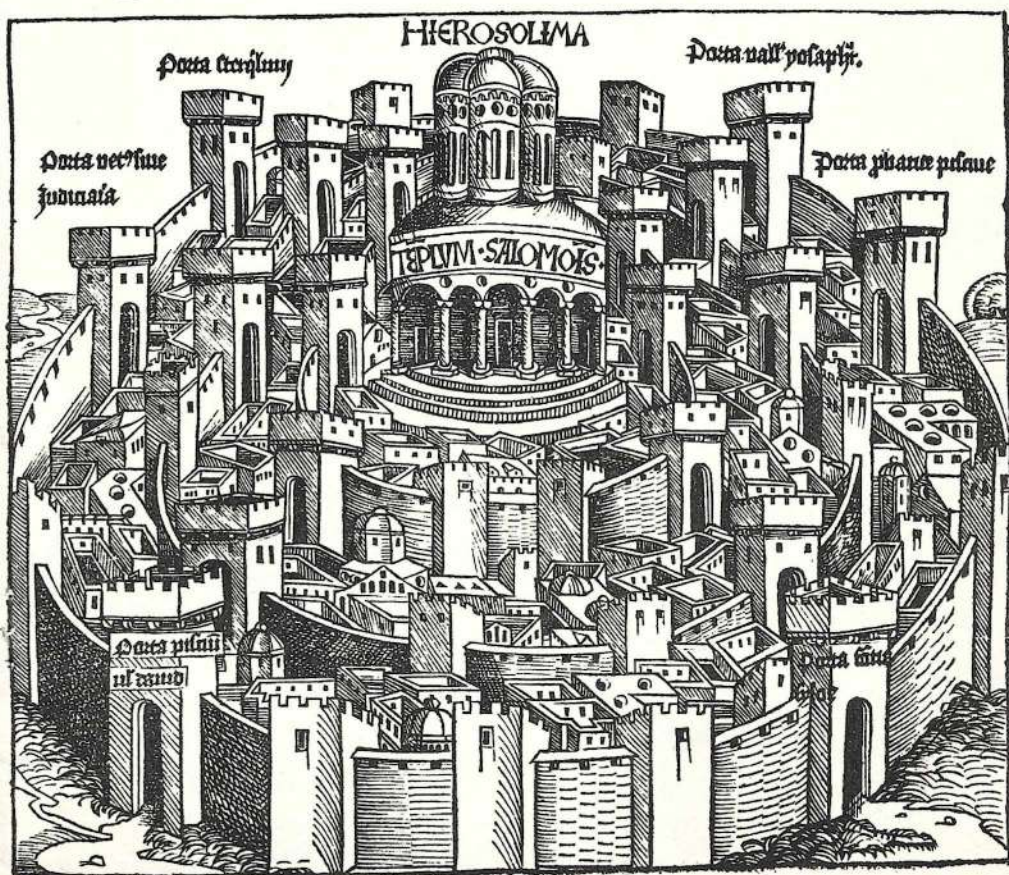


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To S.Z. Schocken after the 1929 Riots

Shmuel Yoseph Agnon

On Friday morning the Talpiot Neighbourhood Secretary came to me and asked if I would go out to guard the neighbourhood, because all the guards were exhausted. I stared at him in astonishment. The whole thing seemed to me like a kind of joke, and I found it hard to give up even one hour of my work time. When I left my room I saw some Arabs walking armed in the streets and one of them shook his sword at Jerusalem. But still I did not see any cause for fear. I expected that the Arabs and the Jews in the Old City would come to blows, but I was not really afraid. In the afternoon things took a different turn. Everyone who had a shop in

* S.Y. Agnon (1888-1970) was awarded the 1966 Nobel Prize for Literature. Several of his writings are readily available in English.

Following a prolonged dispute over the Jews' right to pray at the *kotel* (the Wailing Wall), Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the religious leader of the Muslims of Jerusalem, incited the Arab mob against the Jews, accusing them of designs upon Muslim holy places. In the Arab attacks against Jewish neighbourhoods and settlements that followed, starting August 24th 1929, some 133 Jews were killed all over the country. The anti-Jewish riots which lasted for a week put an end to the Jewish community of Hebron, which had 70 of its defenceless people killed. The communities of *Kibbutz Hulda* and *Be'er Tuvia* had to be evacuated while the community of *Safed* lost 18 persons; disturbances occurred also in Haifa, Tel-Aviv and the colony of *Motza* near Jerusalem, where some Jews were slain. Arab violence was checked, to some extent, by Jewish forces of the *Haganah* and ultimately by strong British units.

This letter by S.Y. Agnon to S.Z. Schocken (his publisher) describes events which took place in the Jewish, isolated neighbourhood of Talpiot, just south of Jerusalem, as experienced by the author. No attempt is made here to give a full, detailed, description of the riots, even in Jerusalem alone.

The original copy of this letter is not available, and it was published in Hebrew from a copy done by professor Dov Sadan in *me-Atzmi el Atzmi*, Tel-Aviv (Schocken Publishing House, Ltd.) 1976, pp. 399-406. The Editors wish to express their gratitude to the Schocken Publishing House Ltd. (Tel-Aviv) for permission to publish the letter in *The Jerusalem Quarterly*.

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the town came home, one complaining that he had been forced to close his shop and another saying that Arab dignitaries had come to plead with him to persuade the Jewish shopkeepers not to close their shops. In the meantime the people of Talpiot were forming little groups. People who did not know each other began to speak with one voice. Suddenly there was a rumour that a band of Arabs had attacked the Women Workers' Farm which is next to Talpiot and destroyed it. The Arabs had also attacked the Workers' Brigade, just a fifteen-minute walk from Talpiot and wounded one of the workers (he died of his wounds). Among the people of Talpiot were many optimists who said the Arabs would never come to Talpiot; after all, many of them earned their living there. There were also some who boasted that they had pistols and in the event of an attack they could defend Talpiot. All this time we were asking the Governor for help, and in the end an armoured car came with three or four English soldiers and an Arab policeman and a Jewish policeman. On the face of the Englishman I saw a hidden sneer at the Jews crowding together and in his voice there was a kind of bravado. As if to say, you don't have to be afraid as long as I am here. In the meantime the sun set and I went into the synagogue. I said to myself: Today there will surely not be many worshippers and this place must not be without prayer. When I came there I found only four old men who clung to the hem of my coat and wanted me to tell them what would happen. I stood and prayed by myself and made haste to leave the synagogue and go home to say grace. When I had finished my meal I went to my neighbour's house where the defence guards were gathered. When I saw that they did not need me I went home and brought them something hot to drink and then I went back again and sat in my doorway with two or three neighbours and we spoke about the events of the day. Close to eleven o'clock some people came and said, leave your houses and go to Gordon's. The maid and I set out (for my wife and children, may they live long, were then at Dr. Brin's in Bat Galim). We had to go to the home of Gordon, the director of the Anglo-Palestine Company, for all the people of our street were gathering there. I went to Gordon's house. There were about forty people there, men, women and children. They had locked all the doors and placed armed guards at the gates. I sat in the room for about an hour and went out to stand with the guards. Finally, when nothing was heard from the Arabs some of our people decided that we could go home. I went back home and got undressed and lay down on my bed, but sleep did not come to me. I kept going out to hear if there was anything new. Suddenly two or three neighbours knocked on the door and said, Come out! I was vexed at all this muddle and replied, what do you want of me? Once again we went to Gordon's. I felt no fear but a great languor such as I had never felt before. I kept thinking how good it would be to be asleep in my own bed. Close to sunrise I decided to go home. I woke our maid too

and said: Get up, you silly girl and go to sleep in your own bed. You can sleep until noon. She went and I too was about to go but I was delayed on the way by a man who told me different things. Suddenly a foul, mouldy smell reached my nose. I looked and saw that a man was sitting on a stone and one of his feet was shod in a half-torn felt shoe and the other was tied up in a rag. I asked, what does it mean? And they told me that he was from the *Haganah* and had not taken off his shoes or socks for five days and five nights and now his feet were swollen. At that moment I no longer felt the smell at all, as if there was no smell. While I was standing there we heard shots that shook the air. We ran into Gordon's house. All the time I kept on thinking that our maid was all alone in the house and wondering if she was safe. I spoke to X and to Y but they did not listen and those who did answer me out of respect said that nothing would happen to her. I imagined how the girl would hide and how she would save herself. I said, at a time like this she will put her curiosity aside and sit quietly in a corner. And thanks to this I held out for about half an hour. Before our maid went home three young girls went to Dr. Klausner's house (one was their maid and two others went along with her). She went to tidy the house before the Klausners woke up (they were sleeping in a neighbour's house). Suddenly we heard a dreadful cry: Help! Save me! I'm dying! We peeped out and saw a young girl bleeding. Immediately two of our men crawled out: Mr. Saltzman, the owner of the electric shop in Talpiot, and a Yemenite called Sha'altiel, and they brought back two young girls covered in blood. Klausner's maid was badly wounded in the arm and she kept screaming: I'm a poor girl, I have to work for my living, if I have no arm how can I work? I shall die of hunger, Oh, mother, mother. In the meantime the third girl was still in Dr. Klausner's house and our own maid was in my house. I stood there helplessly without knowing what to do; they would not let me go out and there was no one to fetch her. The armed men stood guard and the cowards stood and trembled in every limb at the sound of the firing. Suddenly there was a lot of smoke. The Workers' Brigade house was on fire. One shot followed the other and Gordon's house shook beneath the feet of the terrified men and women and the children cried without stopping. I who was not armed took first one baby and then another to calm them, but how could I calm others when I myself was full of fear for the fate of the young girl in my house? Between one shot and the next X and Y came up to me and said: you should be grateful that your wife and children aren't here. But I as usual was not sensible of my good fortune but only of my great sorrow, for possibly at that very moment that same young girl was, God forbid, being killed in my house. At last I found two people who had come in an automobile from the city and I said to them: Come with me to save a Jewish soul, and my voice made such an impression on them that they went and brought her to Gordon's house, and two others joined

them and brought the third girl from Klausner's house too. The young girl who worked as a maid in our house was called Haya. And when the young men brought her I cried aloud: Haya! And they said it's not Haya, for they had brought the young girl from Klausner's house. At long last the two young men came with Haya and I saw that it really was Haya. At that moment my heart was eased and from then on I did not feel our terrible and dangerous situation. Even when a bullet passed over the head of our neighbour Mrs. Kornberg while she was nursing her son I felt nothing. All the time I was full of the feeling that this young girl had been saved and her fate would now be the same as my fate and the fate of all the other people there with me. Then someone came and told us that a young man from Talpiot had been badly wounded. In the meantime the Arabs stopped shooting and my neighbour, the architect Kornberg, went to see his house and came back and said that it was on fire. I sat with him on the ground, because of the bullets which might be fired into the house, and my heart was empty of pity. All that time I saw before my eyes the Klausner's little maid with her hurt dead arm and I thought what was all a man's property worth in comparison to that dead arm? In the meantime silence fell on Talpiot. But the silence was worse than the shooting. After the silence had lasted for a while we began to breathe again. Then I said: I'll go to my house and see what's happening there. I went and my maid went with me. I filled two small bags, one bag with my manuscripts about which I shall tell you another time. The girl wanted to take silverware and I scolded her. All the time I had the Klausners' maid before my eyes. After a few minutes we returned to Gordon's. In the meantime the rest of the residents of Talpiot had gathered there, ready to depart for the city. Professor Klausner and his wife came. Professor Klausner said with great pathos that if only they had given his wife a bed he would have remained in Talpiot, and told us about his state and feelings. He also complained bitterly about how his wife was not well and how they had not allowed the doctor to go to her (the doctor was with us to take care of the wounded). It was a heart-rending sight when Kornberg took his two children and his wife took the baby and they set out from Talpiot leaving nothing behind them but a plot with a charred house. These poor people who had worked all their lives from five in the morning to late at night left without complaining about their situation.

Towards evening the Oxford people came. I gave them something to eat and they treated us with respect and sympathy. One of them showed me a big knife made by a fine craftsman which he had removed from the hands of an Arab. Not knowing English I let others speak to them while I myself stood and served them. After eating and drinking they announced that we had to leave Gordon's because they wanted to fortify themselves in the house. They said the women must leave for the city and only those men able to

defend themselves could remain. We went to a neighbouring house and lay down on the floor. It passed through my mind: the owner of this house has already managed to hide his carpets away. It was more comfortable at Gordon's. In the meantime they phoned the Governor and City Council to send us help and also put out all the candles so that we would not, God forbid, be a target for the Arab bullets. There were some residents of Talpiot who demanded categorically that we all leave Talpiot and stop exposing ourselves to danger. As against these there were some who said that they would not leave for the sake of the honour of the neighbourhood. I, who all these years had not had a good opinion of Talpiot, suddenly felt an attachment to the place and I too said that I would not leave, and thus we lay (those of us who were unarmed) on the floor while those who were armed stood by the windows. At nine o'clock a volley of loud shots were fired. I was lying there when suddenly I was called to the telephone. My wife was phoning from Haifa. I could not understand what she was asking and she could not hear what I was saying. Suddenly we were cut off. To me it seemed that my wife had fainted and I started thinking about her more and more all the time. I imagined her in a critically dangerous situation. Thus we lay, about twenty people in a closed room, with a young man armed with a revolver at every window. At 9 o'clock loud shots were fired one after the other. Suddenly a sweet voice said: When I count to three, fire. And someone said: Close your eyes. I closed my eyes and heard one, two three - and suddenly I saw flames and I was almost blinded. I thought what a good thing that my wife is not here, that my children are not here, and suddenly another thought came into my head: What was happening to them there in Bat Galim?

There were shots coming from both sides of the house. Between the shots I heard a voice in Arabic saying *hawaja* which means Sir. Were the Arabs so close to the house? The shots grew louder. I touched my ears, trying to see if my hearing had been damaged. Suddenly the alarming thought came to me that we were alone in Talpiot with no one to defend us, for there was no response to the Arab shots from the English. Had the English deceived us?

For four hours we were without any defence and our only arms were the little pistols and one broken gun. All the events of the day passed before my eyes. I thought about the wounded girl from Klausner's house and remembered that I had made a vow to give her a pound, and I thought, God grant me the chance, that I will be able to keep my vow. And then I thought about how I had the biggest archive in the world on the history of *Eretz Yisrael* and how much labour I had invested in arranging it and now it would all be lost. Perhaps I should have said to the Oxfordians: I am ready to give you one tenth of the whole archive for Oxford if only you will save it. But as long as the archives belonged to me I had no right to place it above anything else at a time when the whole community

was in great danger. But why should I dwell on such matters when the firing was getting louder and louder?

At 3 o'clock the residents of Talpiot agreed to leave the quarter. A big convoy came from the city to take us. Once twenty and twice twenty men. I wanted to take the two bags of manuscripts that I had brought with me and I could not find them. In all the commotion they had been lost and I could not on any account remember where they were. And it was forbidden to light a candle here, lest we betray our refuge to our enemies. In the meantime the people were being urged to get onto the bus. And I thought that I would have to leave my manuscripts behind and rely on the grace of God, for it was impossible that all these suffering people should stand and wait for me. In the meantime the Neighbourhood Secretary came and lit a candle and found my manuscripts.

We left the house and boarded the bus. One soldier stood and counted us twice and then another soldier came and counted us again. The bus started off. There were two or three shots. The soldiers among us hid their heads.

One man buried his head between my knees and by so doing he forced me to sit up very straight. I thought that he had succeeded in finding a good hiding place for himself and perhaps because of this hiding place he would be saved from all the bullets and they would hit me, God forbid. I don't remember if it was out of pity for the man or in an act of thoughtlessness that I spread my hands on my knees too, so that if a bullet came it would on no account enter that man's head. Thus we drove very fast until we reached the Russian Compound, where the army was stationed. There they took us off the bus and the bus went back to Talpiot to take the rest of the people who had remained behind. Then they brought us to the City Council building. The Council building was full of refugees from all around Jerusalem, some mute with fear, some crying with misery for themselves and for their brothers, and some sitting and drinking tea. I went to B.A., the head of the *Haganah*. He lay on the balustrade and asked me for news of Talpiot. I told him about the boy from Talpiot who had been badly wounded and he replied that he had buried him. An hour ago he had returned from the Mount of Olives where he had buried all who had been killed in Jerusalem. Many people who knew me asked me if I had saved my manuscripts. I answered: I have saved them, but the archive is still in my house, the archive on the history of *Eretz Yisrael*. They started telephoning all the 'top people' to tell them to send a convoy to save the unique archive. One was not at home and a second found some excuse and a third was busy with some other matter. Suddenly Broza (Makleff) arrived from Motza weeping bitterly. I left the Council building with my two bags in my hand and slippers on my feet and I did not know where to turn. One moment I thought I must have a cup of tea, and the next I thought first I must put my manuscripts away in a vault for safekeeping. Why hadn't I

had a cup of tea at the City Council? Since Saturday night I had had nothing hot to eat or drink. All around me I saw hundreds of eyes looking at me with astonishment and tears, for in the meantime they had heard about all that had passed in Talpiot. Someone came to ask me to go with him to Rabbi Kook, for the rabbi had inquired after my health. But I did not go to the rabbi. I knew that he had other worries. At last I found an acquaintance who took upon himself the responsibility for my manuscripts and I gave them to him for safekeeping. And another acquaintance, a shopkeeper, found me and took me by the hand and led me to his house and gave me water to wash my hands and face and also a cup of tea, and he also opened his shop despite the danger and sold me a pair of shoes. I recovered my spirits a little and set off to find out what was happening in Talpiot. But some old men from Talpiot dogged my every step and would not let me be. They said that they wanted to stay with me. I knew that I should give them comfort and that it was not right to abandon them thus in the streets of Jerusalem, but their own inquisitiveness saved me from them, for upon finding some acquaintances of theirs they stopped to talk to me and thus I was rid of them and went on my way.

Where to? It was impossible to take a single step. Here I was held up by people asking questions, there by the sound of the weeping of the plundered, and there by my new shoes. In the meantime the sun rose and I who had left my house dressed in woolen clothes was sweating like a wax candle in the light of the sun. Suddenly I saw one of the drivers of Talpiot driving a car. I climbed in next to him and heard that he was going with X to Talpiot to collect some things from his house. I said that I would go with them. I went with him to ask a soldier to accompany us. In the meantime, other people came and took our car. While I was standing there I saw Mr. Krishevsky, who used to be the Deputy Commissioner of Jerusalem. I approached him and told him about my archives and two or three people who were standing next to him laughed bitterly at the man who came at a time of such trouble to talk about some old books. But Krishevsky said that such an archive was as precious as human lives. He told me to wait twenty minutes for him and then we would see what to do. He went off and I stood there and different soldiers kept coming and chasing me away from my place, there was hardly a square foot of the Russian Compound from which I was not banished. In the meantime I met the milkman from Mekor Baruch and he lamented his four cows which he had left behind there. At last Krishevsky came, bringing with him two other Jewish soldiers, and we went to Talpiot. Krishevsky spoke to the soldiers on guard. They fired a few shots to find out if there were any Arabs there. There were no shots from the Arab side. Nevertheless they ordered us to be very careful and to wait another ten minutes and then to crawl slowly to the house. At last I reached the house. The doors were open and inside

everything was in ruins. I did not know what to do first. The archives were scattered all over the house and on the balustrade and in the yard, what should I take first and what last, and Krishevsky telling me all the time to hurry, we only had permission to stay for ten minutes and we had already wasted as much outside. I removed some manuscripts which I had left behind on Saturday from my writing desk and then I took a manuscript of *Yalkut Teman* which is the only one of its kind in the world, and also a manuscript commentary on the *Sayings of the Fathers* written four hundred years ago by a pupil of Rabbi Asher, of blessed memory, and a manuscript of the *Saragossa Scroll*, and I also took some manuscripts from the archive. And Mr. K. did the same, taking whatever he found, and we returned to the city. On the way we met some Arabs, from their faces we could see they had come to loot. [Someone] asked if he should kill them, Krishevsky said No! We all knew that if it had been the other way around they would have done the opposite. At last I returned to the city with a handful of manuscripts and the clear knowledge of what had been done in my house and the houses of my neighbours. Afterwards I went to send a telegram to my wife telling her that we were alive.

Afterwards we met an acquaintance who was staying in a hotel and he drew me unwillingly into his room and offered me his bed. I thought that I would fall asleep at once, after all I had not slept for two days and two nights, but thinking is one thing and doing is another. So I got up and sent my acquaintance with a telegram to you, my esteemed friend, *Manuscripta und Leben gerettet* (Manuscripts and life saved) and he told me afterwards that he had corrected the telegram and added the word 'nur' (only). I suppose that he meant well.

From then on nothing of importance happened to me. Except that for three days I remained without any word from my wife and children and to make things worse, on that same day (that is, Sunday) whenever people asked me, where are the wife and children? I would sometimes reply in Talpiot, when I should have replied in Bat Galim. And the eyes of all those who heard my answer filled with tears. When I saw their tears I was afraid and asked: Why, is there still danger? and people turned away from me weeping. Before evening I sat down to rest and everyone who passed me shook their heads and pointed at me. Indeed, those hours were very hard.

My dear friend, what else shall I tell you, even what I have already told you I should perhaps not have told. What are my sufferings compared to the sufferings of our brothers in Hebron and Safed and other places? When I went to Haifa two weeks later I saw two or three young boys sitting in the train and there was a kind of laughter in their eyes. I asked them who they were and they replied that they were the survivors of the Hebron *Yeshiva*. When I

stole a glance at them I saw that their eyes had been scorched by tears and their eyelashes were missing, and that is why it had appeared to me that they were laughing.

Since the days of the riots my attitude to the Arabs had changed. My attitude is now this: I don't hate them and I don't love them, all I want is not to see their faces. In my opinion we must now make a great ghetto of half a million Jews in *Eretz Yisrael*, for if not we shall (God forbid) be lost. The charity of nations is a sin, said the wisest of men (Proverbs, 14). And now we have seen how profound his words were, and how right Rashi was when he said that 'the charity of nations is a sin' refers to the idolators who rob from one to give to another.

The '*Shtimmungs*' (opinions) in *Eretz Yisrael* vary. There are the members of *Brit Shalom* who are divorced from reality on the one hand, and on the other, the big mouths who make a lot of noise and want everything. And what does the Old *Yishuv* say? They find a secret meaning in the initials of the biblical phrase *Ki Tetzei Lamilkhama* - when thou shalt go to war. This makes KoTeL, the Western Wall. In the same way, they construe *England* out of the next words *AL oyvekha* - against thine enemies (*AL* equals *Ang-Land*), and the Lord your God shall deliver them into your hands. The hatred which the Jews feel for the English now is greater than the hatred they felt for the Russians. One old Orthodox Jew of the last generation said to me that if he was a young man he would join the Bolsheviks and go to India to preach the destruction of this Kingdom of Evil to the Indians. By this he apparently meant to say that we have no power to build but only to destroy, and in that case let us destroy, and let us perish together with the whole world. As for me, I do not agree. I have never believed in the strength of Israel so much as in the past days. Anyone who saw the sons of Israel fighting like lions for every inch of *Eretz Yisrael* must be full of faith that Israel will be comforted in *Eretz Yisrael* and in God who will close up the breaches in his people and avenge the blood of his servants.

I am sending you two excerpts from the press. The consuls mentioned in the newspaper were in my house, but I did not give them permission to mention my name in this connection.

The terrible impression made by the upheaval in my house cannot be described in words. Three thousand books (many of which I inherited from my late father-in-law) overturned and scattered and torn, and among them an ancient illuminated *Haggadah* with its big shining letters crying out from the page: And we shall cry out to the Lord, God of our fathers, and he shall see our afflictions.

Much more have I to tell you, my noble friend, and God grant that I live to tell you these things in a time of gladness and rejoicing. And now I have no more words. May the Lord give strength to his people and may he bless his people with peace.