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# SEGULA

THE JEWISH HISTORY MAGAZINE

SPECIAL ISSUE  
JEW IN UKRAINE

## GOOD SPIRITS

JEW IN THE  
ALCOHOL INDUSTRY

A Brief History of Jewish Ukraine

THE AVENGER  
SHALOM SCHWARZBARD'S  
BRUSH WITH DEATH

FOREVER YOUNG  
REBBE NAHMAN'S  
CHILDHOOD

BLACK, WHITE, AND RED  
POGROM PERPETRATORS  
IN UKRAINE

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How did bartending become the most popular Jewish occupation in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Ukraine? Grain surpluses, landowners' greed, and cross-border ties between Jewish communities combined to ensure that the region's coveted alcohol concessions typically went to Jews // **Shalom Boguslavsky**

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The summer before Germany invaded Poland, S. Y. Agnon published a critical yet nostalgic novella recreating his hometown. The people, odors, light, and shade of Buczacz infuse much of the Nobel Prize-winning author's work. But why did he memorialize a town not yet destroyed? // **Michal Shir-el**



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# A WORLD IN WORDS

Nobel Prize-winning author Shmuel Yosef Agnon recreated a lost world in his prose. In Hebrew echoing the majesty of the prophets and the clarity of the Mishna, he peeled away nostalgia for the distant shtetl. Yet the pity and longing with which Agnon exposed the Diaspora's rotten core make his writing a fond farewell rather than a critique // **Michal Shir-el**

**J**ust a few months after Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes stepped off the boat in Jaffa on day 33 of the Omer in 1908, he published a short story, “*Agunot*” (Abandoned Wives), in *Ha-Omer*, a Zionist literary supplement. From then on, the young author adopted the pen name Agnon, connoting separation and longing. His vocabulary and style, rife with biblical allusions, Talmudic phrases, and Hasidic motifs, was a far cry from the popular ideal of a new literature for the new Jews of Zion.

## The Pain of Separation

Romance and its misery are a theme of Agnon's. His characters' constant search for a lost beloved resonates with the separation between God and Israel, which expresses the longing that haunts the psyche in many ways. The struggle for faith in the modern world, central to Agnon, is but one example.

After four years in the land of Israel, writing mainly about the Zionist homeland springing up around him, Agnon turned his quill back to his native Buczacz (a small village in Galicia, central

Ukraine). His novel *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight* (1912) was serialized in *Ha-poel Ha-tza'ir*, then the leading literary journal of the Jewish community in the Holy Land, and praised across the board, by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook (rabbi of Jaffa at the time) as well as by secular author Yosef Hayim Brenner, who sponsored its publication in book form.

Six months later, at the end of 1912, Agnon sailed to Germany as secretary to Zionist activist Arthur Ruppin. It would be twelve years before his return.

Creatively, however, his focus was already clear. Like a pendulum, it would swing between the two centers of gravity that pulled at Agnon's soul: Buczacz (his birthplace) and the land of Israel, his spiritual home.

## A Library of One's Own

Agnon never enrolled in any Talmudic academy, high school, or university. In his youth he studied mostly with his father, who came from a distinguished line of scholars, but the author was mostly self-taught. He spent hours in libraries, and books often play a crucial

The irony lurking just beneath the surface gives his every sentence double meaning. Agnon in his library

Photo: David Rubinger, Corbis via Getty Images



The young author set out for Germany to broaden his horizons as Arthur Ruppin's secretary but soon moved on, working as a writer and editor. Agnon in Berlin, 1918  
Courtesy of the Agnon Archive, National Library of Israel

Interwar Buczacz, at the bend in the River Strypa  
Photo: Center for Urban History, Lviv



role in his characters' development. "Every book is a part of the soul," he wrote in *A Guest for the Night* (Toby Press, 2015, p. 277), and he mourned the destruction of his libraries as personal bereavements. The books of Buczacz were the community's pride and joy, and the loss of these volumes (including some of Agnon's own writings, left behind in his parents' home) in the turmoil of World War I and its aftermath were, for him, no less a part of its tragic fate than the loss of human life. The home in which Agnon lived in Bad Homburg, Germany, with his wife and two children went up in flames in 1924, consuming his collection of thousands of volumes as well as his own manuscripts. The author rebuilt his life in Jerusalem, then saw his library in Talpiot ravaged along with the rest of the house in the 1929 Arab riots.

Wherever he lived, Agnon wrote of Galicia as well as the land of Israel. He depicted Galicia's past glories along with the yesterdays of his lifetime, stretching back two centuries to the rise of Hasidism, when traditional Jewish communities were still largely unchallenged. Against this richly embroidered backdrop, he exposed the disintegration of the shtetl as its social and spiritual resources decayed. Reading between the lines in *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, for example,

the reader realizes that the seemingly firm structures of tradition always hung from a precarious perch; the Jews' entire livelihood, not to mention their lives, could be crushed at will by their Polish overlords.

Alas, when it pleases God to subvert a man's ways, good fortune swiftly takes wing, and the Omnipresent has many emissaries to fling a man down upon the dunghill of need. While they sat safe and sound in their home, fearing no evil, offering praise and thanks to the blessed Lord for their shop and its serenity, fortune's fury sprang upon them. Their shop caught the eye of one of the town's prominent shop owners and he coveted it, seeing how good their portion was. Having close ties to the authorities, he went to the court of the town's lord and offered him significantly more rent than Menashe Chaim and his wife were then paying, and the shop nearly fell into his hands. (S. Y. Agnon, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight* [Toby Press, 2017], p. 4)

By the end of the first chapter, the protagonists' business has declined, their goods are maligned, taxes have consumed their efforts, and Menashe Chaim takes to the road to beg for his keep, leaving his



wife behind to manage as best she can – another *aguna*.

Thirty years later, writing in the new State of Israel, Agnon dug further into the rot. His tales of Buczacz and Galicia after the Holocaust differ markedly from his earlier perspective. Having heretofore confined himself to hints and irony, using the artistry of the grotesque to expose the hollow remnants of traditional life, now he twisted the point of his quill into all the community's warts and blemishes: usurers taking advantage of vulnerable debtors and rich men ignoring the plight of widows and orphans, meeting the quota of army conscripts by handing over the children of the poor instead of their own kith and kin. The strong oppress the weak, hiding behind the non-Jewish authorities to disguise their own cruelty, and communal leaders exploit their connections to take revenge on their rivals.

## Agnon's creativity swung like a pendulum between his soul's two centers of gravity: the land of Israel and Buczacz

To literary critic David Knaani, Agnon quipped:

This was how Jewish sociology worked: In earlier generations, the rabbi was primary and the town was secondary; in later generations, the town was primary, with the rabbi a poor second. (David Knaani, *The Oral S. Y. Agnon* [Ha-kibbutz Ha-me'uhad Publishing, 1971] [Hebrew], P. 52)

### In the Name of Truth

What led Agnon to so malign the town that was still his muse? Eight years after visiting for less than a week in 1930,

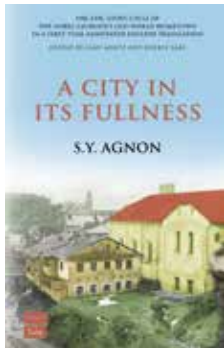
Blended easily into the Jaffa and Jerusalem writers' milieu. Agnon (right) with Yosef Hayyim Brenner (the penniless author who somehow published Agnon's first book), Alexander Ziskind Rabinowitz, and David Shimoni, 1910

Courtesy of the Agnon Archive, National Library of Israel

Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes' first story, "*Agunut*," was published in this journal in 1908. Cover of *Ha-Omer*, edited by S. Ben Zion







The title of Agnon's first novel, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, is taken from Isaiah 40:4, traditionally read on the Sabbath after Tisha Be'Av (which was also Agnon's bar mitzva)

New translations of classic works. *A City in Its Fullness* was published posthumously in Hebrew, and the Toby Press edition is the first in English

Firehoses directed at Agnon's family home in Bad Homburg after it caught fire in the summer of 1924  
Courtesy of the Agnon Archive, National Library of Israel

he published *A Guest for the Night*, in which a visitor contrasts the Buczacz he remembers with the shell remaining after the ravages of World War I and the subsequent Russian civil war. Despite the sadness, there's a bitter irony in the litany of misfortunes. For instance, Daniel Bach, the author's guide in his hometown, earns a living selling saccharin on the black market, loses a foot in a train accident, and – instead of being compensated – is forced to pay a fine based on examination of the sock from his severed limb:

The trader had to be careful not to be caught with his goods; saccharin was a state monopoly and the government was on the lookout to prevent any harm to its own revenue. Anyone who had a head on his shoulders was careful, but the head is far from the feet, especially in the case of Daniel Bach, who is a tall man, and by the time his feet managed to hear what his head was thinking, the deed was already done. Once he jumped onto a train and his right foot got stuck in the wheels; the train moved off, dragging the foot with it, and cast it out far from the station. By rights, he should have been paid for damages, distress, harm, disuse, and injury, according to law, but they did not pay, and moreover they fined him six hundred zlotys because they found grains of saccharin in the sock on his foot. (Agnon, *Guest*, p. 32)

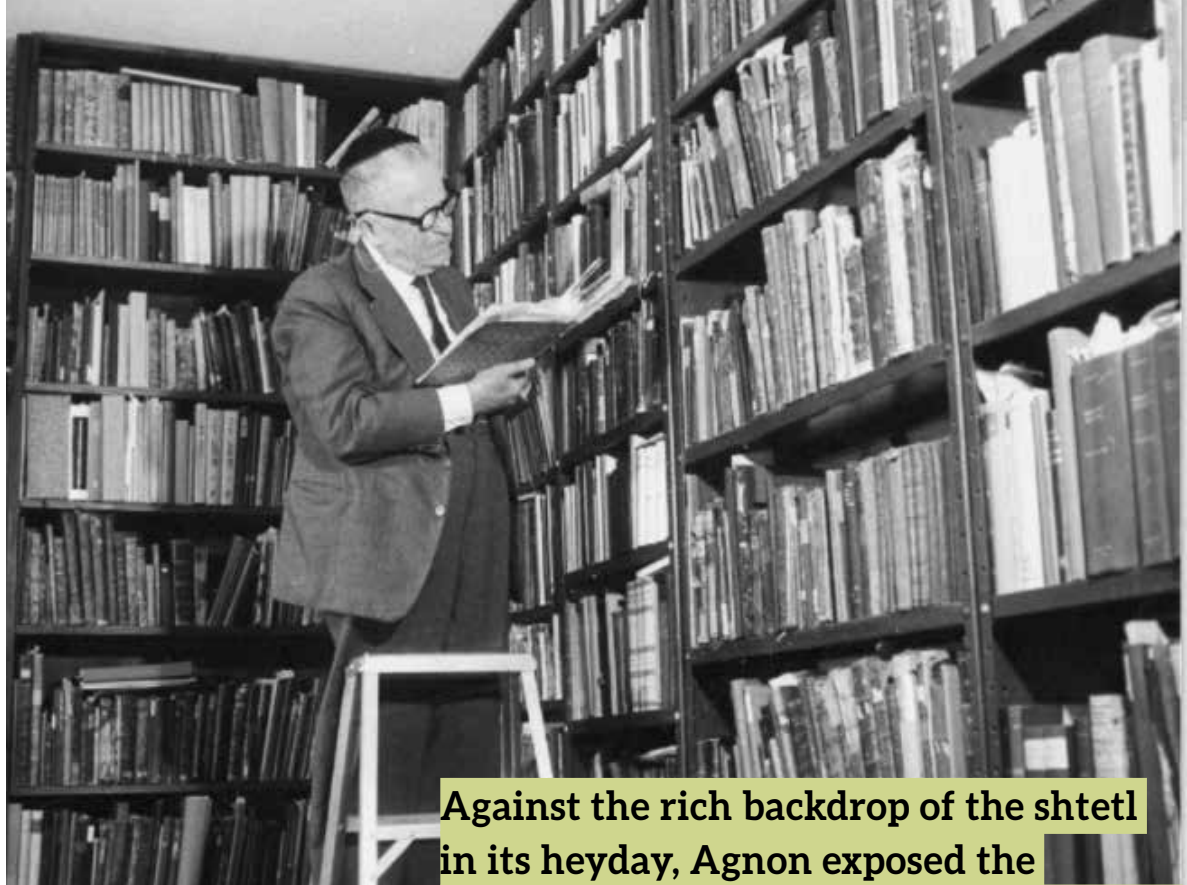
If in the 1930s Agnon had playfully nudged readers toward something more authentic than the empty rituals being observed by rote in the Diaspora's half-empty institutions, now something more theologically daring was in the works. Harnessing all the tools of his art, Agnon set out to describe the moral corruption that had preceded the physical destruction wrought by the Holocaust.

Take his portrait of Feivush Gazlan (literally, Feivush Thief), the Jewish enforcer, whose “earlocks cascaded down his angular temples onto his sallow and



sad cheeks like two perfectly curved slaughtering knives” (S. Y. Agnon, “Feivush Gazlan,” in Agnon, *A City in Its Fullness* [Toby Press, 2016], p. 228).

[...] Feivush could walk into any Jewish home. At any point during the night, as long as there was a candle burning inside, he was authorized to enter, for he was an inspector for the candle tax, which is to say, he was one of its enforcers. Candle tax inspectors were as intimidating as the royal constabulary: no door could be locked against them and they could walk into any place as if it were their own. This is how they did it. On the Sabbath or a festival, on Hanukkah or any celebration in a Jewish home, the inspectors would enter and count up all the candles. If a candle was burning with no tag indicating that the tax on it had been paid, the inspectors were authorized to extinguish the candle and levy a fine on its owner. Why was that? Because the Crown had imposed a tax on all candles lit in honor of Sabbath, festivals, Hanukkah, and wedding feasts, and the householder had to place a tag on the candle to indicate that the tax on it had been paid. The candle tax darkened the lives of the Jews and brought their joyous occasions to a halt because at any moment an enforcer could walk in the door and blow out the candles and impose a fine. On the nights of Hanukkah and



## Against the rich backdrop of the shtetl in its heyday, Agnon exposed the disintegration of the communal fabric in his own lifetime

wedding feasts, Feivush would go in by himself, while on Sabbath and festival nights he would be accompanied by two gentiles, like the two angels who on Friday nights accompany every Jew home from synagogue. If he found a candle burning without the candle tax tag, he would instruct the gentiles to extinguish it, and they, on their own, would punish the innocent along with the guilty and extinguish even those candles that had the appropriate tag. Those who had the good fortune of finishing their meal by candlelight enhanced their Sabbath delight with a fish dinner, while those who did not were deprived of the pleasure of eating fish on the Sabbath for fear of having a bone lodged in their throat and thus endangering their life. (ibid., p. 229)

Agnon's message in this later work is directed not at the old world, which was no longer, but at the nascent State of Israel. His purpose is dual: to critique the old world with none of the miasma of nostalgia and to warn the new communities replacing it not to repeat their predecessors' mistakes, but rather to build a better, less hypocritical, less stratified Jewish society.

And since I was born in Buczacz and raised in Buczacz, mine are the ways of Buczacz, and I tell nothing but the truth. For I say that nothing is finer than truth, since [...] it also teaches men wisdom. (ibid., p. 559)

Yet despite the bite of Agnon's prose, its poetry and rhythm have preserved above all his love for Buczacz, Galicia, and its individual Jews rather than its shame. □

Agnon's work bridges old and new, tradition and modernity

Courtesy of the Agnon Archive, National Library of Israel

### Further reading:

The Toby Press *S. Y. Agnon Library* is a fourteen-volume series incorporating most of Agnon's works in new translations with authoritative introductions.



### Dr. Michal Shir-el

Founder of the Institute for the Study of Agnon's Writings. A lecturer specializing in rabbinic literature and the work of S. Y. Agnon, she wrote her doctorate on dialogue in the stories of the Talmudic sages and their wives



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