

The Story of a Life

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A FEW MONTHS before Agnon's death, I passed by his house in Talpiot. A window was open and music blared from it; I felt that something was not right. I hovered near the window but did not dare to knock on the door. Eventually, however, I summoned up the courage and knocked. Agnon opened the door, happy to see me. It turned out that he had been listening to the news and had dozed off on the sofa; the radio had stayed on at full blast.

"How thoughtless of me to have left the radio on!" he said apologetically. "It's good that you woke me up." He went right off to make me a cup of coffee.

Because I so loved his writing, Agnon became my guide through the great confusion I experienced when I began to write. My encounter with the writer himself proved less simple: in Agnon, irony was so deeply ingrained and so sophisticated that sometimes it was hard to detect. Admiring professors and not a few foolish fans flocked to him. No wonder he protected himself with this arsenal of irony. The pity was that this method of expression became so ingrained

within him over the years that it became second nature to him, and he could no longer manage without it.

During the 1950s, Agnon was considered the most important writer in Israel. Everyone lavished praise on him. Research was devoted equally to important and trivial aspects of his work. And, as often happens, people almost stopped reading his books. Did he know? Was he aware of this? It's hard to say. He was absorbed in himself, talked mostly about himself, and grumbled about those who stood in his way, who didn't appreciate him as he felt they should, who bombarded him with letters, who were noisy on his street and hampered his writing, or who wrote negative reviews of his work. There is no doubt that he had a generous nature and was extremely perceptive regarding people and their situations. But he never expressed this. What stood out most was his self-absorption.

That evening, Agnon was different, as if he had come out of hiding. He didn't talk on as he usually did, but asked me things and listened to my replies with great attentiveness, as if he had just met me for the first time and was trying to solve a riddle. I told him what I had been through during the war—though not in great detail, for I knew that his attention span was short. But that evening he was apparently eager to hear, because he kept asking for more details. Eventually he said, "What you saw in your childhood would be enough for three writers."

Then he said something unexpected. "When all's said and done, I've spent my entire life among books, either reading or writing. I haven't had it hard—it wasn't as if I had to work my way up from the gutter. Had I been a blacksmith, or a farmer working the land, or a craftsman with a strong connection to his material and his tools, I would have been a different writer."

I felt that he spoke from the heart. For years people have been talking about the symbolism in Agnon's writing,

and it turns out that Agnon himself, like any real writer, preferred the tangible to the symbolic.

Several times that evening he questioned me about what I had done to survive alone in the forests, what I had eaten, and with what I had covered myself at night. When I told him about the Ukrainians among whom I had worked, he asked me to say a few words in their language. For his part, he told me many things I had never known about the city of my birth, about its intelligentsia and its rabbis, and about the infamous Jacob Frank, the false messiah, who poisoned many souls by convincing people to sin so as to hasten the redemption.

This was Agnon without his affectations. That same evening, he tried to explain to me what my parents had not been able to tell me and what I wasn't able to learn during the war years. "Every writer needs to have a city of his own," he said, "a river of his own, and streets of his own. You were expelled from your hometown and from the villages of your forefathers, and instead of learning from them, you learned from the forests."

It was almost as if he was trying to prepare me for the days ahead. The irony in his voice receded and a yearning took its place. I loved this voice, for it reminded me of the narrator's voice in his stories.

On that evening, I sat across from an old man, a man in the fullness of his years. He knew that all the honors and compliments that had been showered upon him were like chaff. What would stand the test of time was the voice—a voice without ambiguity or deviousness or irony—that he had inherited from his forefathers, the voice one could hear in his novel *Tehillah*. This was Agnon's true voice. The disguises and the evasions were, in the end, merely outer garments, necessary perhaps to capture the reader's attention, but not the core of what he had to say.

That evening, he spoke to me with the cadences of his forefathers, the sound of which still echoed in my ears from the time I had spent at my grandparents' home in the Carpathians. He spoke to me very plainly and told me that in his youth he had tried to study from one of the Jewish holy texts every morning, so as to draw upon their cadences and their holiness. He couldn't always manage it. Sometimes the books would confuse him. He advised me to study the works of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, and not only the stories that were then in fashion, but *Likutei Maharan*, a mystical book full of secrets both divine and human. As he spoke to me, something glowed within him, and I realized that this was an altogether different Agnon, one who still roamed his—and my—native land, the Carpathians, where the Ba'al Shem Tov had walked with his pupils. That evening, he felt that it was important for me to learn where I had come from and where I had to go.

Then he told me about his book *Days of Awe*, over which he had labored for many years so that Jews would find it helpful during the High Holy Days. To his eternal regret, the critics and general public never felt as he did about it.

It was already late, and I rose to leave. Agnon stopped me. "Sit. What's the hurry?" he said. I felt that loneliness was weighing him down and that it was hard for him to be alone.

He revealed something else to me that evening—that over the past few months he had been thinking a great deal about his father and his mother. Had he the time, he would have gone back and told their story in a completely different way. He felt there were more than a few defects in his writing that he wanted to correct, but this would have required considerable energy, which he no longer had. In previous years he had been able to stand at his lectern and write for hours, but this was now hard for him. And that's how I parted from him. My heart told me that I would never see him again, and my heart guessed right.