
OBSERVATIONS

An Unheralded Zionist

Ruth R. Wisse

BY ISRAELI standards, my friend Gerhard Mandel lived a fairly typical life. Born in Vienna in 1929, he was brought to Palestine in 1938 as part of a rescue operation for Jewish children from Nazi-occupied Europe. When his parents reached Palestine not long afterward, they felt they could not afford to keep him at home, so he was sent temporarily to a youth village for orphans and immigrant children.

His character was forged by overcoming poverty and foreignness. After attending high school in Tel Aviv, and doing his obligatory service in the army, he began studies in Hebrew literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and received his Ph.D. there in 1964. He went on to become chair of the department, published over twenty books of literary history and criticism, and dominated Israel's cultural scene as one of its most authoritative critics.

Somewhere along the line he

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changed his name to Gershon Shaked (*sha-kéd* being Hebrew for almond, or *mandel* in German), married a fellow literary scholar whom he had met at the university, had two daughters and six grandchildren. He was undergoing an operation on his heart—not the first—when he died at the end of December 2006.

I formed my impression of Gershon Shaked as a “typical” Israeli in 1982, when I met him at an international conference of Jewish writers in Bellagio, Italy: a one-time, week-long gathering of writers and literary scholars to explore subjects of common interest. Among the six Israeli participants, the eldest was the poet Yehuda Amichai, born Ludwig Pfeuffer in Würzburg, Germany in 1924, who immigrated to Palestine with his family in 1936. Sami Michael, born Sallah Menasse in 1926 and forced to flee his native Baghdad because of underground political activity, reached Israel in 1949. Aharon Appelfeld, born in Czernowitz, Romania in 1932, was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp at the age of eight or nine and arrived in Palestine via Italy in 1946. Of the two Israeli-born writers, Dan

Miron and A.B. Yehoshua, only the latter had deep roots in the country.

But Amichai, Michael, Appelfeld, and Shaked were not the only ones at the conference who had been born elsewhere than in the country in whose language they wrote. So, too, were two-thirds of the remaining dozen participants, including me. Then and later, Shaked was intrigued by the “dual identity” of writers straddling two or more cultures, a subject to which he devoted his final book, *Zebut* (“Identity,” 2006).

The man I met in 1982 was gruff and ungainly. He breathed heavily and with apparent difficulty—I would learn that he suffered from asthma. His English was not yet as good as it later became, and even when speaking Hebrew he sometimes resorted to the older Ashkenazi, or European, pronunciation instead of Israel's Sephardi usage, interjecting German into his speech as if to lampoon his foreign provenance. In his pronouncements about books and their authors he was intensely serious. But he was also a would-be actor who liked to parody literary pretentiousness and lofty flights of rhetoric—including his

own. When provoked, he could be rude. At Bellagio he did nothing to ingratiate himself or to disguise his impatience with ignorance, foolishness, and cant.

I wish I had taken better notes on discussions around the massive table and at some of the informal goings-on. Among the tidbits I remember, the American editor and novelist Arthur A. Cohen was the only one who had ever vacationed at Lake Como before—as a child with his parents—and retained happy memories of his time there. Appelfeld had recently evoked a much more ominous version of a European “resort town” in the novel translated as *Badenheim 1939* (1979). On a boat trip across the lake, he and I traded thoughts about the legacy of Czernowitz, where I, too, had been born, and about what not so long ago had transpired in this now-tranquil part of the world. My biggest surprise was the British playwright Arnold Wesker, who one evening led us in Hebrew songs he had learned in Jewish youth groups.

There were many fault lines at the conference—between those fluent and those struggling in English, between Jews living in and outside Israel, among the diverse strands of religious observance and non-observance. Cynthia Ozick and Grace Paley, closest in their New York origins, were the most opposite in their views of Jewishness. Ultimately, though, character spoke louder than argument. At the end of the gathering and despite some of his intemperate outbursts, my notes designate Gershon, with a dollop of surprise, as “the most honest and wholesome among us and the most carefully nuanced in his judgments.”

THE OBITUARY for Shaked in *Haaretz*, Israel’s leading paper, called him “the cartographer of Hebrew literature,” a profession for which he had been awarded the Israel Prize in 1993. If cartographer he was, he would have agreed with Artur Sammler, the hero of Saul Bellow’s

Mr. Sammler’s Planet, that “All map-makers should place the Mississippi in the same location, and avoid originality. It may be boring, but one has to know where he is. We cannot have the Mississippi flowing toward the Rockies for a change.”

In Gershon’s case, charting the Mississippi meant writing the first full-scale historical survey (1880-1980) of modern Hebrew literature. In five basic volumes of the kind that other literatures already had in abundance but modern Hebrew literature had yet to produce, he supplied patient introductions to the major figures, traced artistic and historical lines of influence, marked points of innovation, and explained what distinguished the great from the minor. The work was commissioned in 1972; he submitted the final volume in 1998.

He was well prepared for this project, having begun his teaching career by designing an introductory course along precisely such lines while also compiling the mimeographed anthologies that used to serve Israeli students as textbooks. He was a truly voracious reader, no doubt driven in part by some of the strongest competition any professor has ever enjoyed. His near-contemporaries were Dan Miron, Benjamin Harshav (Hrushovski), and Menahem Brinker; a host of younger literary scholars and critics were nipping at their heels. The fiercely rivalrous atmosphere of the Hebrew University’s literature faculty has been well captured by the detective novelist Batya Gur in *Literary Murder: A Critical Case*, where Shaked is cast as the only male in the department who does not figure as a suspect.

Commanding the literary history of modern Israel was Gershon’s way of making himself at home in the new country and culture. For him as for some of his colleagues in the field of Jewish studies, Hebrew literature and culture formed the organic link between the religious civilization that had sustained the Jew-

ish people in the past and the essentially secular society they wished to build in its place. Jewish communities had been guided by their scholar-rabbis for two millennia: what was more natural than the transposition from religious academies to departments of Jewish studies where textual study could proceed with the old intensity, now concentrated on modern as well as ancient texts? Situated in the country’s senior and only university until the founding of Tel Aviv University in 1956, Jerusalem’s Jewish-studies faculty tried to shape a holistic national culture in a language that was itself undergoing a rapid transformation from the “biblical tongue” to the argot of daily speech.

While still a graduate student, Gershon had been invited by his teachers to join them in their project of culture-formation. His fluency in German was a rarity among his cohort, and must have won him the trust of a faculty dominated by mostly German-trained professors. As a teacher, he tried to give his own students the same comprehensive grounding that had been given him. “I am [not] longing for Israelis created on a conveyor belt according to a historical cookbook recipe,” he wrote in 1998, parodying what had in fact been his ambition—to create an effective process of transmission between his European-born teachers and the pricklier native-born Israelis he taught.

ISRAELI historiography marks off successive waves of *aliyah*—“ascent” to the land of Israel—between 1882 and 1939. Shaked’s periodization of modern Hebrew literature followed a similar timeline, beginning with the first volume, “Exile,” devoted to the pioneers of modern Hebrew prose and poetry in the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. Most of those writers either faced or actually headed eastward toward Palestine, while remaining culturally rooted in the religiously devout, small-town communities of their

birth. In the second volume, the anchor and centerpiece was S.Y. Agnon, the dominant figure of modern Jewish prose, who moved to Palestine from the periphery but insisted on sustaining the tension between the two just as he did between other polarities like tradition and modernity, individual and nation, skepticism and faith.

The third volume, originally intended to be the last, was devoted to the rise of Hebrew modernism in the land (not yet the state) of Israel between the world wars. The fourth went over some of the same ground but extended into the period of statehood, tracing the simultaneous emergence of Hebrew realism. Here Shaked gave their due to writers of the "Palmach" generation, named for the strike units of the Hagana, the Jewish fighting force in Mandate Palestine. The writers formed by the Palmach experience—including the novelists Moshe Shamir, Hanoah Bartov, and S. Yizhar—set the cultural tone for the Jewish state that emerged in 1948.

The aura of heroic self-sacrifice justly associated with the men and women who gained victory in the struggle for independence attached equally to the literature of that generation. According to Shaked, these writers created the "Zionist standard narrative," by which he referred not to any formulaic elements in their work but to the moral confidence they invested in telling the story of modern Israel. As a reader and critic, however, Shaked felt the greatest affinity not with these writers but with those of his own literary generation, born in the 1930's and 40's and coming of age in an existing Jewish country.

He treated this "new wave" in his fifth and final volume, having reviewed many of their books as they appeared. At the Hebrew University he would teach his favorites among them as classics-in-the-making: Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua, Aharon Appelfeld, Amalia Kahana-Carmon, and the early-departed

Yaakov Shabtai (1934-1981). Yehoshua would credit Shaked with having defined this generation to itself. In a literary community as small and intense as Israel's, a good critic guides as much as he tracks.

Both as a critic and as a teacher, Shaked enjoyed placing the individual writer and work against the largest available historical canvas. Thus, in tracing the evolution of Hebrew literature, he was forever formulating the history of Israel itself. Here is a typical topic sentence:

The creators of the new culture in the land of Israel apparently stood before a broken trough, having rejected the two principal forces that had shaped the history of the Jewish people in modern times: traditional culture and its opposite, which fostered assimilation to the urban environment.

The image of the broken trough describes the thirst for "another Genesis" on the part of literary newcomers who had left Europe because they were unable to live within traditional Jewish communities and unwilling to merge with the surrounding population. We are invited to experience both the desperation and the eagerness of their attempt to create a new literature in a language being put to new uses. What would replace the fertile tensions that had generated the culture of the Jewish diaspora? "What image would the new culture bear?" The several books by Shaked that have been translated into English capture his ideas, but without the passion of his Hebrew delivery.

ALTHOUGH Gershon was highly excited about the emerging talents of his generation, he grew increasingly anxious about the political-ideological direction their work was taking. Until the late 60's, even the most tortured and fault-finding writers in Hebrew had felt part of the larger project of national renewal. The new generation, by

contrast, advertised its opposition.

Among Israel's wars, the apparently successful ones had engendered guilt toward the defeated Arab population, while the apparently unsuccessful ones had generated anger at the incompetence of a government that sent soldiers to their death. One writer might be repelled by a country of "contractors, snobs, and the newly affluent." Others, well to the left of the political divide, treated the first election of a right-of-center Likud government in 1977 as a betrayal of the country's presumed socialist mission. In the academic jargon to which he sometimes resorted, Shaked wrote that some of these writers actually "subverted the Zionist metaplot," meaning that they challenged Israel's moral and political legitimacy and indeed the very idea of a Jewish state.

As Israel's intelligentsia moved steadily leftward, Shaked found it hard to maintain his critical equilibrium. He tried to defend the "new wave" of his contemporaries against the accusation that they were "post-Zionists," but was faced daily by colleagues and students who proudly promoted the label. So closely was Gershon associated with Israel's literary community that he found *himself* lumped among these "post-Zionists," although in fact he was a relatively conservative hold-out—enduringly grateful for the shelter he and his family had been accorded as refugees from Europe.

Israel's cultural elite has not yet produced a home-grown equivalent of neoconservatism. This presented someone like Gershon with the choice of tacking enough to stay afloat or being relegated to cold storage. It is true that he sometimes temporized in his criticism of the "new wave." But he held nothing back when it came to those who actually left the country or chose to live permanently outside it.

One of his most revealing and deeply-felt essays was a response to Saul Friedländer, his erstwhile colleague at the Hebrew University

who in 1978 published his memoir, *Quand vient le souvenir (When Memory Comes)*, to great critical and popular acclaim in France. Friedländer's book intersperses passages on his experience of Israel, where he and his family still lived at the time of writing, with memories of his early childhood in Prague, his separation from his parents, and his solitary survival during World War II.

Gershon recognized the power of Friedländer's writing, and identified closely with this boy whose life, like his own, had been hideously interrupted by Hitler. Although the two survived the war in dissimilar circumstances—Friedländer as a Catholic convert in a French convent school—both came to maturity in the nascent state of Israel, served in its armed forces, and received in its universities the higher education that would make them renowned professors of history and literature. Both resented the ruin of the world into which they had been born, and both, as adults, tried in their work to reestablish a version of its urbane culture.

But that is where the similarity ends. Friedländer's book, whether consciously or not, justified his impending self-removal from Israel and Israeli identity. Gershon opens his essay on Friedländer with his own memory of the morning after Kristallnacht, the Nazi attack on Jewish institutions and businesses on November 9, 1938. A boy of nine watches from a "hiding place" under the piano as Nazi storm troopers strip the family apartment of its furniture and goods. His father has been in a concentration camp for many months, and there is no one to protect him from the men's cruelty, the details of which he passes over in silence. Between the bare walls is born the boy's Zionism.

INFUSED WITH the same longing expressed by Friedländer for the European experience of which he had been deprived, Shaked in this essay makes his peace with the direction

his life has taken. "No one can erase his past," he writes. "A person bears both the wounds and the cultural treasure that he accumulates during his lifetime. But when the world of yesterday is destroyed, anyone who continues to look back with perpetual longing will—like Lot's wife—never reach the promised land."

No Other Place, the book that grew from Gershon's essay on Friedländer, declares a passionate Zionism, but a Zionism different from its pioneering origins. The mistake of Israel's founders, in Shaked's conception, was to think that they could leave behind the Jewish history of heartbreak and begin anew with an old-new language in an old-new land. The Talmud says that to change your place is to change your fate. This was true for the Jews as far as it went: no people had ever effected so quickly and thoroughly the kind of self-transformation that political independence required. But how could refugees be expected to shed their formative cultures, or stifle regret for all they had lost or sacrificed in coming to a small Levantine land? Gershon records a conversation in which his teacher Baruch Kurzweil said that he could never forgive Hitler for destroying his spiritual world and consigning him to a culture that was no culture at all.

But Gershon's choice of an epigram for the book, from the Hebrew writer Yosef Chaim Brenner, strikes a different if even more searing note: "It may be, it may very well be, that it is impossible to live here; but here one must stay, here one must die, sleep. . . . There is no other place." This weathered Zionism invites Israelis to admit to as much dismay as they may feel about their confinement to a beleaguered Jewish society when the whole beautiful world lies before them (at least in theory), while insisting that their human dignity, not to mention their self-respect, consists in sharing the fate of their demanding, difficult land.

OF COURSE, Israeli writers are by no means unique in brandishing their society's troubles and failures as a badge of honor. The word "post-," as in "postmodern," has been called "the favorite prefix of our age," suggesting that life in developed nations is everywhere experienced as belatedness and exhaustion. Gershon registered this phenomenon, but he was also privy to another side of Israeli experience that its cultural elites enjoy but have been reluctant to describe.

Israel's high birthrates and high rates of productivity are signs of a buoyant citizenry. The nurturing familial atmosphere of the country and the inherited strengths of Jewish civilization make it a most attractive place in which to live and raise a close family. In Gershon's case, a colleague recently asked me whether his marriage to Malka, a talented literary scholar in her own right, was not strained by the inevitable jealousies and competitiveness. I replied, just the opposite: hard as it is for an outsider to know what goes on between man and wife, the Shaked's marriage gave every impression of being blessed with collegiality, love, truthfulness, and trust.

Friday evenings, Malka gathered their growing brood for the kind of traditional Sabbath meal that, with or without religious rituals, is standard in most Israeli homes. Gershon took great pride in his daughters' achievements, and was inspired by their work in media to produce a series of video dramatizations of major literary works. His fertile scholarly output, which seemed to increase after his official retirement from teaching, was only one reason why his death seemed terribly premature. He was a poster boy for a country that tends to think it bad form to advertise.

At every opportunity, he coaxed or shamed me into reading more Hebrew. Like an older sibling, he oversaw every word published by me and my younger brother David

Roskies—like me, a professor of Yiddish and Jewish literature—and liberally scolded us when by his lights we had not consulted enough Hebrew sources. Reluctant to preach *aliyah*, he promoted Hebrew as the vehicle of attachment to the Hebrew-speaking land.

Ancient Alexandria loomed for Gershon as a negative paradigm: a Jewish community that had acculturated so successfully it disappeared within four generations. The translation of Alexandrian Jewish learning from Hebrew into Greek seemed to him both reason and evidence for its hasty evaporation. Much as he enjoyed spending time in America, he could not hide his scorn for the widespread ignorance, among otherwise educated Jews, of Jewish sources, Jewish history, Israel, and Hebrew.

But his instruction was not exclusively of the castigating kind. In the spring of 2003, while I was on an extended stay in Israel, he invited me to join him and Malka for an outing on Israel's Independence Day. To heighten the interest, he did not tell me beforehand where we were headed, but explained step by step as the morning unfolded.

On this May morning we set out northward from Jerusalem in the direction of Tel Aviv, turning off at the junction to the kibbutz and guest house at Maale Hahamisha. "The Hill of the Five" is one of those many places in Israel whose name, to those of a certain age, recalls the sacrifice lying beneath its present luxuriance. Founded in 1938 by members of a Zionist youth group who had emigrated from Poland, and named for five founding members killed by Arab attackers during its first year, the kibbutz played a strategic part in the 1948 battle for Jerusalem.

For over a half-century, veterans of the Palmach had been marking Independence Day on a steep hillside in the woods past the kibbutz. When I say "veterans of the Palmach," you can figure it out for

yourself: even the youngest were so feeble that their children and grandchildren had to help them over the inhospitable terrain. The group's numbers had dwindled to the point that younger guests, like the Shaked themselves, had been invited to fill out the ranks.

But evidently no one had suggested finding an easier spot. The cars kept coming along the unpaved one-lane road, parking perilously along the incline and dispensing travelers more obviously suited for rockers than for the treacherous climb down the hill to a blanket spread on the hard ground. The Palmach generation was indeed notoriously hard on itself, which is the legacy many of its descendants find it most difficult to forgive.

As the elderly seated themselves in the lap of what served as our amphitheater, we spread our own blanket higher up to watch the proceedings. Some of the speakers reminisced about their early years and eulogized colleagues no longer around. Others provided brief lectures on local landscape and folklore. There was singing and eating and some in-joking that even the Shaked could not follow. The inevitable argument exploded over mention of Arab terror attacks, eliciting a protest, "*lo oskim bepolitika*!"—we don't deal with politics. It was not easy to avoid "politics" in a year when suicide bombers were enjoying a particularly good run, but Israelis in general are loath to let their enemies spoil the delights of an otherwise perfect day.

Gershon knew what a gift he had given me in letting me join this noble company. Both he and I regarded the establishment of the state of Israel as the high point of Jewish civilization, and those who had helped make it happen formed the pantheon of our heroes. A few more years and there would be no more "originals": this nucleus would no longer gather in the woods. But neither was this the only such celebration of the day. Like everyone else,

Gershon and Malka were going on to other picnics and parties with family and friends. The road back to Jerusalem was clogged with traffic, the parks and hills crowded with celebrants. Zionism was reaping its pleasures, and there was no better company to share them with than the boy who so appreciated his hard-won home.

IN THE strange ways of the world, I was allowed an independent glimpse of Gershon as a child. My cousin, a slightly earlier immigrant to Palestine whose family apartment happened to be in the same Tel Aviv courtyard as the Mandels', recalls teasing Gershon, when they were both about ten years old, for eating bread on Passover. The taunt was not about disobeying Jewish tradition—my cousin's home was not traditional, either—but about the immigrant's unfamiliarity with local behavior: no one in the neighborhood ate bread on Passover. My cousin, the more thin-skinned of the two boys, still burns with guilt over this incident that his victim no longer remembered (or said he didn't)—though Gershon often did dwell on other social slights he suffered in those days.

The suppressed novelist who is said to lurk in every literary critic surfaced just once in Gershon, resulting in the novel *Mehagrims* ("Immigrants," 2001). The book carries the usual disclaimer about resemblances between fact and fiction. Yet anyone who knew Gershon would recognize some of its scenes and characters—indeed, the sweep of his life.

In the novel, the immigrant son of an immigrant carter grows up in Tel Aviv, smarting at the indignity of his father's occupation; outgrows his home; spends time in Switzerland and New York; is tempted professionally and romantically to stay abroad; but returns to make his peace with his parents and his home. In the concluding pages, as the son accompanies first his mother and then his father to their final

resting places, the novel seems to say, "This was my purpose: I was written as a leave-taking from the dead, to reassure them of my thankfulness, my fealty, and my love."

In any other language, the title of this book might have been merely descriptive. In Hebrew, it implies a repudiation of the usual term for immigrants, *olim*, which (as I mentioned earlier) signifies ascent to the

land of Israel. *Mebagrim* was just the sort of title to attract the label "post-Zionist," since why else emphasize the non-ideological newcomer over the dedicated "ascender" unless you are trying to undermine the Zionist "standard narrative"?

Yet the novel also constitutes an answer to this question by its truthful account of a family that arrived accidentally, seeking shelter, and of

a child without preparation for life as an Israeli or as a Jew. Only by admitting how unready he was for the adventure into which he was cast could Gershon or his protagonist earn the right to say, with authority and confidence, "*Ein makom akher*"—no other place but this. Gershon's Zionism was as hard-won, as instinctive, and as passionately sure as the heart in which it grew.

DANCE

Lincoln Kirstein's Achievement

Terry Teachout

ELEVEN YEARS after his death, Lincoln Kirstein, the co-founder of the New York City Ballet (NYCB), is largely forgotten. Even during his lifetime, he was little known outside a smallish circle of art-conscious Americans. Throughout the second half of his long life, he labored in the shadow of George Balanchine, NYCB's star choreographer, and many people who cared passionately about dance in America had no more than a general idea of the key role he played in the company's creation. As for his other achievements, they are still less well remembered today, despite the fact that he was also at one time a much-

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admired critic and connoisseur of the visual arts.

Should Kirstein be better remembered? Or was he only a minor figure in the history of American modernism whose posthumous obscurity is deserved? Such questions could be resolved by a biography that put its subject in historical perspective. Unfortunately, Martin Duberman's newly published *The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein*, for all its daunting length and admirable earnestness, does little to explain Kirstein's significance, and those who come to it without already knowing a good deal about him are likely to find the book exceedingly tough going.¹

Part of the problem is that Duberman is not a naturally gifted biographer. Though his prose style is direct and vigorous, he has no talent for literary portraiture, and so

none of the secondary characters in *The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein*—not even Balanchine, by far the most consequential figure in Kirstein's professional life—emerges clearly as a personality. Kirstein, by contrast, is presented very clearly indeed, but that is mostly because Duberman was given access to his private papers, including his surviving correspondence and diaries. From these he has quoted extensively but unselectively, moving from event to event without giving the reader any sense of the relative importance of the occurrences he chronicles. The results read at times more like a heavily annotated journal than a biography.

Moreover, Duberman has written about Kirstein from a constrictingly narrow point of view. An academic historian and sometime play-

¹ Knopf, 723 pp., \$37.50.