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NITZA BEN-DOV

### „A Story about Fortune-Telling“

The Jews of Germany in the First World War as Seen through S. Y. Agnon's  
Novel *Thus Far*

The Israeli novelist Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888–1970), recipient of the 1966 Nobel Prize for literature, sojourned in Germany from 1912 to 1924, having left Jaffa, whither he had immigrated as a Zionist in 1908 from Buczacz in Polish Galicia. The First World War, which erupted about two years after his arrival in Germany, was a foundational experience that took place in his lengthy stay in that country, not his motherland: he had not been born there and it was not the land of choice of a Zionist Jew such as he. His thoughts on the war and the deprivations he suffered as a temporary resident in Germany resound in some of his works, such as the monumental novel *Shira* (1970), or the short novel *Ad Hena* (1950; *Thus Far*). Both were written and published after the Holocaust, but while in *Shira* not only the First War is present, but also the Second, in *Thus Far* the latter seems to go unmentioned.

The novel *Shira*, set in Jerusalem of the mid-1930s – a bad time that has come to be known in Jewish historiography as “the time of the riots (me 'ora'ot) troubles” and in Arab historiography as “the Arab revolt” – takes notice of the wheels of the war machine beginning to turn in those years in Europe. By contrast, *Thus Far* describes only the acts, confrontations, anxieties, distress, thoughts and nightmares of the narrator-protagonist, namely Agnon, who went to Germany from Palestine as a “guest” for a short time, where the War “caught” him, to his dismay. The novel is set in Berlin and in Leipzig around 1916, and it portrays German Jewry fighting for the German fatherland without the slightest notion of what the future has in store for them in the next World War. In *Thus Far* the First World War is called “the Great War”, its title implying that the war that was to follow would be tenfold “greater” and more terrible. This naming highlights the fact that the novel was evidently not written from the perspective of the Second World War. For only in hindsight is the Great War called the “First”, and in *Thus Far* the narrator-protagonist, like all other characters, lives out the “Great War” as if it is the most terrible of all.<sup>1</sup>

The main difference between the hero of *Thus Far* and most characters who feature in the novel as the story develops, Jews and Christians alike, is that they see themselves as German patriots while the narrator considers himself as be-

<sup>1</sup> In my book *Agnon's Art of Indirection: Uncovering Latent Content in the fiction of S. Y. Agnon*, (Leiden/New York/Köln 1993) I have devoted three chapters to the novel *Thus Far* (*Ad Hena*).

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longing to "the descenders from the Land of Israel" (*Ad Hena*, p. 6).<sup>2</sup> He thus belongs to those who have been trapped in a war not their own, and he must keep a low profile and wait for the war to end. His emotional and physical non-involvement in the success or failure of the war allows him to observe it from the outside, and to criticize it as well as those engaged in it. The novel is replete with paradoxical and ironic situations whose purpose is to emphasize the pointlessness of war. Particularly interesting is the tragicomic light with which Agnon portrays the Jews who consider Germany to be their fatherland, ready to sacrifice their children on its altar.

The novel opens with the narrator who lodges at a boarding-house in West Berlin, owned by Frau Trotzmüller, mother of three daughters and a son who has disappeared in the war. The narrator hears his landlady's weeping at night. He expresses neither pity nor identification with the suffering mother, and he explains his indifference to her suffering by arguing that in times of war people keep away from each other: "The mother and her daughters in their sorrow did not disturb the lodgers, and the lodgers did not trouble themselves to learn how the son had disappeared. Every person looked out for himself, and was not accessible for the distress of his fellow" (p. 5). Even when the landlady recounts her sensational dream, in which he, her tenant, is to restore her lost son to his home, the hero remains apathetic to the mother and her wishful dream. When unexpectedly the dream becomes reality and the hero returns from his travels with the lost son, it is the mother and her daughters who show no concern whatsoever for the hero who made their dream come true. As it happens, his room in the house had been the son's room before he went off to war and returned brain-damaged; still, the joy at his return is enormous, and in the great excitement no member of the landlady's family cares about the narrator who is left without a place of stay. The night of the return, when the narrator is finally offered the bathtub as a sleeping place, is one of the most surrealist nights portrayed in the novel.<sup>3</sup>

The case of the lost German son, who returns home braindead, foreshadows individual lost sons who went off to war and did not return, among them sons of Jewish families. The following situation bears riveting witness to the psychological state of German Jews and to the existential problematic situations of one who is no authentic German Jew but whose life is bound up with Germany and its Jews. The story dwells on Doctor Isaac Mittel who is old, astute and wise, a book antiquary, resident of Leipzig. He is not a German Jew but a Polish Jew who had once been a *hassid*, later became a socialist and was therefore pursued by the secret police, prompting him to flee to Germany. When he got there he earned his living making inventories of antique books for commercial houses and teaching Christian theologians Hebrew. His proximity to these people raised his prestige among Jewish traders. The irony in respect of German Jews is clearly evident in the following passage:

And when they heard of his comings and goings among the Christian professors, namely that he was close with the Germans, which they themselves precisely were not, those Germans of the Mosaic faith, they too began to make his acquaintance and invite him for

a cup of coffee and some of them. He brought him a larg

Doctor Mittel, native wealthy merchant's son who had gone off to war, while the mother, off to defend the country, the mother is those giving her share to reveal to the guests, their only son with great bitterness

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<sup>2</sup> All the citations from the original Hebrew of *Ad Hena* have been translated by me (N.B-D.).

a cup of coffee and an evening meal, to the point that he became part of the family of some of them. He got to know the daughter from a wealthy family, and she married him, brought him a large dowry and relieved him of the burden of making a living. (p. 17)

Doctor Mittel, native of one of the Polish townships, and his wife, daughter of wealthy merchants who saw themselves as “Germans of the Mosaic faith”, had a son who had gone off to war. The father confronted this fact with irony and heartache, while the mother’s heart was bursting with pride because her son had gone off to defend the country. When the narrator-hero visits his friend at his Leipzig home, the mother is not in; she, the female patriot, was helping out, as one of those giving her share to the war efforts. Doctor Mittel takes the opportunity to reveal to the guest the profound difference between himself and his wife concerning their only son who has departed to fight Germany’s war. Mittel speaks with great bitterness:

What news is there in the world? One kills and is being killed. The world has lost its senses and makes war, and now the war already makes itself. Even my only son has taken up arms and makes war. If you have not seen him, look at his picture. Is he not a warrior, a conqueror of lands? It is not without reason that his dear mother takes pride in him. Never did it cross my mind that I would beget a son who would make war. (p. 18)

In fact, the narrator has seen the son, not only his picture. On an earlier visit to Mittel’s home, the narrator had witnessed the son’s enlisting to the war and the mother’s affirmative stance on this act: “I was in his house the day his son volunteered to go off to war. I still remember how the mother peered at each and every weapon the son shoved into his knapsack, a soldier’s knapsack, and how her eyes shone with joy that she had merited a son ready to stand and defend the fatherland” (p. 18).

Doctor Mittel’s only son falls in battle. The narrator hears this piece of news after bringing the lost son, the mindless German soldier, back home to Berlin, ironically to the room that until then was the narrator’s rented room. The narrator’s tribulations with his accommodation problems form the central thread of *Thus Far*. Agnon does not spare the rod of criticism, and he even treats his wandering hero, a literary embodiment of himself, with irony. The narrator has this to say about why German Jews too began to lease rooms like their German neighbours, and about his own hesitation whether or not to rent a room from them:

Because of the turbulence, the Jewish householders fell upon hard times, and began leasing rooms. Throughout the time I sojourned in Germany, I, like most of my friends, avoided lodging with a German Jew, for the Jews of Germany were German patriots, and it was not right in their eyes that we made known our being Jewish, and this gave rise to altercation. After spending a night without any place to stay, I ceased being choosy. So when I chanced upon a room with a Jew I took it there and then. (p. 90)

When the narrator says “we made known our being Jewish”, by “we” and later by “my friends”, he means eastern European Jews recently arrived in Germany, like himself and like Doctor Mittel; those who – in contrast to German Jews – did not hide their Jewishness. Nevertheless, the German Jew’s kindness to his fellow Polish Galician Jew makes the experience worthwhile. However, the relatively good days for the narrator-protagonist in that room are few, as soon afterwards

l Hena, p. 6).<sup>2</sup> He thus their own, and he must onal and physical non- 1 to observe it from the he novel is replete with iphasize the pointlessness with which Agnon land, ready to sacrifice

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the house is sold to a commercial firm. When the protagonist is about to leave, just like the room at the boarding house of Frau Trotz Müller, the motif of an only son who is killed or badly wounded in the war emerges, except that here the son is substituted by a daughter: "He [the landlord] had an only daughter whose husband fell in the war, and she implored her father and her mother to come to live with her" (p. 93). The patriotism of German Jews seems to demand a heavy price.

Let us go back to the only son of Doctor Mittel and the manner in which the bad tidings of his death reach the narrator's ears. Simon Gavil, a functional architect in the wake of the Bauhaus movement, works on behalf of the company that has purchased the house in which the narrator found a temporary lodging. Throughout *Thus Far* the narrator treats this Jewish architect with irony. The modernist seems to be involved in everything, erecting structures devoid of soul and ornament, both alien and cold. It is this man who informs the narrator entirely offhand, in a cold and alien manner, that the son of Mittel, his cherished friend, has been killed.

Unlike his indifference to the landlady who weeps for her son each night, the narrator responds in two ways to the dreadful news dropped on him in passing by the architect. Let us listen to the narrator's first response to the ill tidings. It sounds like a eulogy: "Isaac Mittel had an only son. The son volunteered to fight Germany's war, an enemy bullet struck him and he fell in the war. Isaac Mittel paid for the privilege of living in Germany with the death of his son and the son paid for the privilege of patriotism with his own life" (p. 95).

The second response is more complex. It recalls the day of the son's enlistment, when the narrator-protagonist was present. While recalling, the narrator relates for the first time a story he had been told by Doctor Mittel on that same day.

Agnon's storytelling in *Thus Far* – as in many of his writings – is eclectic and replete with digressions, and he returns to essential events so as to preserve the central plot line. Furthermore, sometimes the hero-narrator, by virtue of Agnon the artist, withholds a subsidiary story until it matches analogously or through inner logic an event which can be told only at a particular point, in terms of artistic or associative relevance. This will be made clear further on.

As we recall, at this point of the plot, after leaving two rented rooms in a row, the hero-narrator is homeless once again. In the course of his wanderings through Berlin, he decides to go to the post office to write a letter to Malka, a female relative of his, whose husband and son have gone to war, leaving her all by herself in the village of Lunenfeld, near Leipzig. The introduction of the Jewish woman whose two dearest ones have gone to war, and who knows not what has or will become of them, is undoubtedly intended to flesh out once again the motif of Jews sending their dear ones – usually an only son or a husband – to fight on behalf of Germany. In the case of the relative, her cherished ones are perhaps still alive; in any event no word has come of their being killed – unlike the husband of the only daughter of the German Jewish landlord who sold his house to the commercial firm, and unlike Mittel's son. The narrator who has reached the post office apologizes for not devoting his thoughts to Malka, on whose account he had gone there. This is

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During his last visit whilst the son was alive she was busy helping tells us that on a pre "the story of Heshel" relates the first visit and recount what Mittel told the story "so as not to tell the story but not tell comes, where in fact death of Mittel's son, presented in the text

Here is the story in which the narrator had reached him:

Heshel Shor *Baal* was about to obtain Heshel and his wife selling their house, a letter other than the document this was a missive re the father mumbled what happened, but "there never changed his clothing son's death reached him same clothing he had

Why did the narrator Mittel until this point clearly foresees the son Mittel, long before he war. Thus, it appears die in the war. Telling future mourning. Then when nobody knows his readers until the true. Apparently, he son would return alive office, about an hour a letter to Malka who

<sup>4</sup> Heschel Schor was the *Jüdische Geschichte*, I

because of the bad news I heard an hour ago about Mittel's only son who fell in the war. I remember him, for on the day Mittel's only son volunteered to go to war, I happened to be at Mittel's house and Mittel was distraught that he had begotten a son for war while his mother was proud that her son was going off to defend his country. That day Mittel told me this story... (p. 99).

During his last visit to Leipzig, when the narrator visited Mittel at his home, whilst the son was already on the war-front, Mittel's wife was not in (as we recall, she was busy helping out with the war efforts). On that occasion, the narrator tells us that on a previous visit, when the son was still at home, Mittel told him "the story of Heshel Shor *Baal Hehalutz*".<sup>4</sup> In the course of the second visit which relates the first visit and is described in great detail, the narrator does not stop to recount what Mittel had told him during the previous visit, claiming that he skips the story "so as not to break off from the main thing" (p. 18). Clearly, intimating the story but not telling it must mean that it is being delayed until the right time comes, where in fact the story is to be the "main thing". Once news arrives of the death of Mittel's son, the father's story evidently becomes relevant. It is therefore presented in the text for the first time.

Here is the story Mittel tells on the day his son enlisted to the war, the story which the narrator had avoided telling until the news of Mittel's son's death has reached him:

Heshel Shor *Baal Hehalutz* had one son only, a gifted and successful son who was about to obtain an appointment as lecturer at the Sorbonne. One day, when Heshel and his wife sat down for the midday meal, he saw the postman approaching their house, a letter in his hand. The father was certain that the letter was no other than the document of his son's appointment. Heshel could not imagine that this was a missive reporting the son's death. After the evil tidings reached him, the father mumbled something to himself, and resumed his meal as if nothing had happened, but "thereafter, until the end of his days, he never varied his meal and never changed his clothes. The same dish that he ate on the day when news of his son's death reached him, he would eat every day; and every day he would don the same clothing he had donned that day" (p. 99).

Why did the narrator put off telling the story which he had heard from Doctor Mittel until this point, and why did he not relate it earlier? Because this story clearly foresees the son's death. To our great horror it is told by the father, Doctor Mittel, long before his son is killed, when the young man is preparing to go to war. Thus, it appears that the father knows in advance that his only son is going to die in the war. Telling the story on the day he joins the army matches the father's future mourning. The narrator who feels he heard the story too early, seemingly when nobody knows that the son is about to fall in battle, postpones telling it to his readers until the time at which the father's bleak foreboding sadly becomes true. Apparently, he could not tell this tale when there was still hope that Mittel's son would return alive and well from the war. When the narrator is in the post office, about an hour after having heard the dreadful news, he is about to send a letter to Malka who still does not know what has become of her dear ones. It is

<sup>4</sup> Heschel Schor was the editor (*Baal*) of *Hechalutz: Wissenschaftliche Abhandlungen über Jüdische Geschichte, Literatur, und Alterthumskunde* (1852-1889).

then that the narrator recalls and relates the story about a father who sees a postman approaching his home, certain that the postman carries good tidings, only to learn of the worst of all tidings.

If Doctor Mittel is a prophet, let us listen to his remarks about the Germans and their war:

This war will not end soon. The Germans are a stubborn people. When they start something they never let go. And because they are waging war they will not give up until they win or their enemies win. To my mind there is no difference between the two sides. Both love war, both sides love victory... If I wrote stories I would write a story about fortune-telling... War entails war. The Germans go on waging a second and a third war, until they are exhausted and fall, and rise no more. (pp. 23–24)

We began by saying that the Second World War has no mention in *Thus Far*; but a mention is found in “a story about fortune-telling” told by Doctor Mittel, an East European Jew who decided to link his individual fate to that of Germany. Unlike so many German Jews, he is not blind to his position in German society. His eyesight has suffered from excessive reading of books, but in his spiritual eyes he sees that the Germans are going to wage war again and again. The merit of Doctor Mittel’s son and of the sons of other Jews who died for the German fatherland during the First World War will not win them credit in the next war to be unleashed by the Germans. Thus, Doctor Mittel – like Heschel Schor *Baal Hehalutz*, whose tale he related as “fortune-telling” – returns to his books after his son’s death, clinging to his old habits as an expression of deep grief and grim reconciliation with the present and the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Ha'aretz, May 15<sup>th</sup> 19

<sup>2</sup> Nurit Govrin, *A Pre*  
*News* (5678–5679), p1