

The Love Story of Esterke and Kazimierz, King of Poland—New Perspectives

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Abstract

This article reveals and discusses four forgotten and unknown literary versions of the love story between the Polish King Kazimierz the Great (1310–1370) and Esterke, a young Jewish maiden from Opoczno. A fundamental research study by Khone Shmeruk in the 1980s examined the reception and molding of the Esterke story in both Polish and Yiddish literary works and their intertextuality. This article will discuss and analyze two Hebrew and two Yiddish versions of the story and will put each of them in its contemporary Jewish socio-political and cultural context.

Keywords

Esterke – Esterka – King Kazimierz – National identity – Conversion – Persecution – Polish-Jewish relations

1 Introduction

The love story of the Polish King Kazimierz III Wielki [Casimir III the Great] (1310–1370) and Esterka,¹ the young Jewish maiden from Opoczno, has merited many different versions and interpretations in the Polish folk tradition over the course of centuries. In the nineteenth century, as a result of political, social and cultural changes, the story entered the arena of *belles lettres* and

* I would like to express my thanks to Dr Rebecca Wolpe for her translation of this article.

1 Esterke is the customary spelling in Yiddish, Esterka is conventional in Polish, and in Hebrew works the character is usually referred to as Esther. Thus, in this article Esterke is employed in discussions relating to Yiddish texts and Esther/Esterka in connection with Hebrew/Polish works as applicable.

was the focus, or provided the background setting, for a long line of literary compositions written by various Polish authors both in Poland and outside its borders. That the story aroused significant interest in this period is clear from the detailed entry (almost four pages in length) dedicated to “Esterka” in the general Polish encyclopedia *Encyklopedia Powszechna*, which began to appear in 1859.² From the academic perspective, Khone Shmeruk, historian of the culture of Ashkenazi Jewry, devoted great attention to researching the subject and published works in a variety of formats detailing his research over the course of his career.³ Analyzing the affinity and contact between Yiddish and the surrounding Polish literature, Shmeruk revealed the revolution which took place in the character of the young fictional Jewess Esterka: until the mid-nineteenth century, she served as the outrageous cause of King Kazimierz’s unjustifiably positive (in the opinion of various writers) attitude towards the Jews of Poland, but with the passing of time and a change of mood amongst Polish intellectuals, she became a symbol of the ideal co-existence of Jews and Poles and the desired integration of Jews in Polish society.⁴ Shmeruk also examined the

2 *Encyklopedia Powszechna* (Warszawa: Wydwan, 1861), vol. 8, 434–436. The author of the entry was the historian Juljan Bartoszewicz. It should be noted that the 1897 edition of the encyclopedia devoted a detailed entry to Esterka, written by Jan K. Kochanowski, see below notes 4 and 55. Over the course of the years, the entry was shortened continuously, until by 1963 it numbered only 8 lines, and in the 1995 the entry had disappeared altogether.

3 The first article on the topic, “Hamaga'im beyn hasifrut hapolanit le-beyn sifrut yidiš 'al-pi sippur esterka ve-qazimir ha-gadol melekh Polin [Contacts between Polish and Yiddish literature according to the story of Esterka and Kazimierz the Great, king of Poland],” *Hasifrut* 21 (1975): 60–100, includes a detailed appendix of literary works, in various languages, concerning the story. This appendix was not reprinted in following publications. The article also appeared in Shmeruk’s *Sifrut yidiš be-polin* [Yiddish literature in Poland] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1981), 204–279, and as a book in English translation: *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature—A Case Study in the Mutual Relations of Two Cultural Traditions* (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for the Furtherance of the Study of Jewish History, 1985). References herein are to the English work. The work was translated into Polish in 2000, entitled *Legenda o Esterce w literaturze jidisz i polskiej* (Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa, 2000).

4 In an appendix to his work, Shmeruk included a survey of references to the Esterka story in Polish and Polish-Jewish historiography (110–115). To this list the following may be added:

Ludwik Gumpłowicz, *Prawodawstwo Polskie względem Żydów* (Cracow: J.M. Himmelblau, 1867), 136–150; Wacław Aleksander Maciejowski, *Żydzi w Polsce, na Rusi i Litwie* (Warsaw: K. Kowalewskiego, 1878), 29–31; Ernest Sulimczyk Świeżawski, *Esterka i inne kobiety Kazimierza Wielkiego* (Warsaw: nakł. własny, 1894), 86–148; Jan Korwin Kochanowski, *Kazimierz Wielki: Zarys życia i panowania* (Warsaw: Bronisław Natanson, 1899), 69–70; Salomon Spitzer, *Kazimierz Wielki: W 600. rocznicę urodzin* (Cracow: nakładem autora, 1910), 40. These writers completely rejected Jan Długosz’s anti-Semitic approach, although no unequivocal answer is

reception and molding of Esterke in modern Yiddish literature, its artistic and social contacts, and the messages which the various writers sought to transmit through their use of this character. It is quite clear that most of the Yiddish writers were acquainted with contemporary Polish literature (in contrast to their Polish colleagues, for whom Yiddish literature was a *terra incognita*). They used the Esterke motif for the purpose of emphasizing the gulf between Jews and Poles and rejected the possibility of the expected integration of Jews into Polish society. Esterke was usually described as a tragic heroine, torn between her religious and national duties and her hopeless love for the king of Poland, a situation that could never lead to a “happy end.” However, since Shmeruk’s research focused on works written in Polish and Yiddish, Hebrew works relating to the topic were only touched upon tangentially.⁵ Examples of these are the legend “Ha-lev we-ha-‘eynayim [The heart and the eyes]” by Sh. Y. Agnon—a work discussed in other connections by Shmuel Verses and Chaya Bar-Yitzhak⁶—and two other Hebrew compositions merely mentioned in the bibliography attached to Shmeruk’s first publication on the topic. As a result of purchases by the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem since the publication of Shmeruk’s research, and thanks to technological developments,

to be found on the question of the existence of Esterka and her descendents (see Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature*, 17–18). I would like to thank Prof Eugenia Prokop-Janiec for her help in the location of these sources. For more about the new historical circumstances that enabled new approaches to the “Jewish question” and their literary implementations in the second half of the nineteenth century see Magdalena Opalska and Israel Bartal, *Poles and Jews: A Failed Brotherhood* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press and University Press of New England, 1992), mainly 103–122.

- 5 Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature*, 30, note 21, mentions the Hebrew translation of a Polish play by Stanisław Gabriel Kozłowski (“Maś’a Ester: ḥizayon be-šeš ma’arkhot yesodoto be-divrei ha-yamim me-et ha-sofer ha-polani Kozlovski u-meturgam ‘ivrit me-et Yisra’el Frenkel [‘Esther’s burden’: A spectacle in six acts, based on the history by the Polish writer Kozłowski, translated into Hebrew by Israel Fraenkel],” *Ha-Asif* 5 [1889]: 1–108, separate pagination). Another translation/adaptation is mentioned on page 44, note 8: “Ha-‘alilah [The plot],” in: *Mēgilat sefer*, ed. Eliezer Dov Liberman (Johannesburg: s.n., 1854), 15–40. The references to the Esterka story in works by David Frishman and Sh. Y. Agnon may be found on page 63, note 4. Yona Hayim Kronenberg’s book, discussed below, is noted on page 107, note 2. The bibliographical list (see note 2 above) includes two further Hebrew versions of the story.
- 6 Haya Bar-Yitzhak, *Polin—agadot rešit: etnopoetiqa ve-qorat agadim* [Legends of Origin of the Jews of Poland: Ethnopoetics and Legendary Chronicles] (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1996), 133–157. Shmuel Verses, *Š’Y Agnon ke-pěšuto* [Sh. Y. Agnon literally] (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2000), 246–247.

it has become evident that there exist additional Yiddish versions of the story of which Shmeruk was apparently unaware.⁷

In this article I will examine the story of Esterka and King Kazimierz of Poland according to five versions not discussed by Shmeruk. I will begin with two Hebrew versions (the earliest in chronological terms) and following this will discuss three later, previously unknown, Yiddish versions.

2 Yitzhak ben Moshe Rumsch: *Męgilat esęter ha-šęnįyah* [The Book of the Second Esther]

The first known (according to year of publication: Vilna: Yehudah Leyb Mets, 1883) Hebrew literary work surrounding the Esterka story is *Męgilat esęter ha-šęnįyah* [The Book of the Second Esther] by Yitzhak ben Moshe Rumsch (1822–1894).⁸ The author, born in Źęžmariai, Lithuania, arrived in Vilna as a child and there in his youth became accomplished in Hebrew, German, Russian and apparently also Polish, and joined the circle of local *maskilim*. In 1853 he settled in Panevęžys, founded a school for girls (1861) and occupied himself with teaching and literary writing.⁹ The title page of *Męgilat esęter ha-šęnįyah* states that the work was “copied from German [šęfat aškenaz] and almost completely suited anew to the spirit of Judaism and the Hebrew language.” In other words, the author created a totally new adaptation of a German source text.¹⁰

7 One of the Yiddish versions was located using the Index of Yiddish Periodicals, a project of the Yiddish department at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, available at <http://yiddish-periodicals.huji.ac.il/>.

8 The book, 78 pages in length, format 4°, was printed in Vilna by Yehudah Mets in 1883. The second edition appeared in 1885, printed by the same publishing house. Quotations here are from the second edition, the pagination of which differs to that of the first.

9 Rumsch wrote for *Ha-melits* and *Ha-karmel*. Among his varied works are translations/adaptations from German to Hebrew, for example *Sefer kur 'oni* (Vilna: s.n., 1862), an adaptation of *Robinson Crusoe*; *Šilumat ręš'ayim* (Vilna: Yehudah Leyb Mets, 1872), concerning the persecution of Jews during the Thirty Years' War; and “Bat ḥayil,” *Ha-Asif* 5 (1889): 1–48, concerning the persecution of the Jews of Spain prior to their exile. It should be noted that this last historical story also centers on the character of a young woman. For a detailed discussion of Rumsch, his biography and works see Mordechai Zalkin, “Yitshak Rumsch: beyn 'haskalat ha-periferiyah' le-'haskalah periferiyalit' [Itzhak Rumsch: Between 'Educating the Periphery' and 'Peripheral Education'],” in: *'Olam yašan 'adam ḥadaš: kehitot yisrael be-'idan ha-modernizatsiyah*, ed. Eli Tsur (Sdeh Boker: Ben Gurion Institution, 2005), 185–213.

10 In other translations/adaptations (*Sefer kur 'oni* and “Bat ḥayil”) Rumsch emphasizes that his work is an adaptation and that he applied great freedom of language. See Zalkin,

Since Rumsch himself states that the work was almost completely re-written, and since it is possible that this work was not based on one single source text, I have chosen to discuss it herein as an original composition.¹¹ Along with the description of the work and its source, the title page also states that this is “a nice and beautiful story founded in truth concerning the miracles and salvations carried out on behalf of our forefathers the inhabitants of Poland and Lithuania, by Esther the beloved of Kazimierz the great King of Poland [...],” indicating that in the opinion of the author, this story is based in historical fact. It is also significant that Esther is referred to as the king’s “beloved” and not as concubine, wife or queen—the most appropriate title for her has, in fact, been a subject of debate among the various Jewish writers to discuss the story since David Gans in his work *Tsemaḥ David* (Prague: Solomon ben Mordechai and Moses ben Joseph Bezalel Katz, 1591–1593).¹²

“Yitshak Rumsh: beyn ‘haskalat ha-periferiyah’ le-‘haskalah periferiyalit,” 197. The source to which Rumsch refers in the work discussed here is a story that appeared in a series of historical novels, *Lilien: Taschenbuch historisch-romantischer Erzählungen für 1845*, edited by Karl Adolf von Wachsmann (Leipzig: Carl Focke, 1845; no. 8 in the series). However, this should not lead us to conclude that Rumsch did not also employ sources in Polish (and Russian). Rather, mentions of such works (see below), and the many footnotes directing the reader to Polish sources (as well as German and Russian), explanations of concepts in Polish, including quotations of idioms (see for example 34, 37), and a mention of the king’s popular nickname, “Król chłopów” (the king of peasants), which is also the title of a novel by Józef Ignacy Kraskzewski first published in Cracow in 1881 and which, according to Shmeruk, influenced a number of Yiddish authors who wrote about the subject (see Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature*, 28–30, 98–99), all appear to indicate that he indeed utilized sources in Russian and Polish.

- 11 In the composition of another of his works, *Sefer kur ‘oni*, Rumsch also employed a number of source texts, combining them with his own additions and alterations to plot and character to create an innovative version of the Robinson Crusoe story. Thus, it would seem that this approach characterized Rumsch’s writing. I would like to thank Dr Rebecca Wolpe for bringing this to my attention. On the freedom with which translators/adaptors approached their work, see Shmuel Feiner, *Haskalah ve-historiyah: toldateyah šel hakarat-‘avar yehudit modernit* (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for the Furtherance of the Study of Jewish History, 1995), 327–328 (available in English translation by Chaya Naor and Sondra Silverston as *Haskalah and History: The Emergence of a Modern Jewish Historical Consciousness* [Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2002]) and Nitza Ben-Ari, *Roman ‘im ha-‘avar: ha-roman ha-histori ha-yehhudi-germani min ha-me’ah ha-19 ve-yetsiratah šel sifrut le’umit* [Romance with the past: The nineteenth-century Jewish-German historical novel and the creation of a national literature] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1997), 195.
- 12 On the various definitions of Esther’s status, see Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature*, 37–45.

Since he perceived this story as a historical truth, Rumsch necessarily began his work with an introduction: a short historical chapter, followed by a slightly longer chapter in which he enters into dialogue with the Jewish historical chronicles discussing the Esterka story. At the beginning of this introduction, Rumsch describes the positive treatment accorded to the Jews of Poland by Kazimierz the Great while their co-religionists in other European countries were persecuted. This wise and brave king had one flaw: he “was weak-spirited and weak-hearted in his love of women and they ruled over him and his spirit . . .” (4). Both his female partners, Adelheid (his legal wife) and Rokiczina (his lover) were famous for their hatred of their Jews and the detrimental influence that they exerted over the king. In 1356 “Kazimir saw Esther and his soul desired her” (3) and “and she, driven by the fire of her love and passion for her people, did not rest until Kazimir cancelled the terrible decrees made by his lovers in his name without his knowledge, reinstated the positive laws of Bolesław and also enacted new favorable laws and privileges on behalf of all the Jews living in Poland in general and on behalf of private individuals in particular” (4).¹³ Rumsch mentions by name traditional Jewish historical works—including *Tsemaḥ David*, *She’eris Yisroel*, *Seder ha-dorot* and *Sefer Gedulat Ša’ul*,¹⁴ all of which incidentally discuss the story—in his complaint that the historical and educational values of the story have been ignored. Even a respected historian such as Heinrich (Tsevi) Graetz and a learned Jew such as Matityahu Strashun were not spared Rumsch’s criticism: according to him they expressed scorn for the value of the story.¹⁵ Indeed, Rumsch continues,

13 On the renewal of the privileges granted to the Jews by Prince Boleslaw of Kalisz and others awarded by King Kazimierz the Great (without mention of Esther’s role), see Raphael Mahler, *Toldot ha-yehūdīm be-polin* [History of the Jews in Poland] (Merhavia: Sifriyat Hapoalim, 1946), 51–54.

14 On the first two works see Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature*, 37–39. *Sefer Seder ha-dorot* was written by Jehiel ben Solomon Heilprin and first printed in Karlsruhe. Page 382 includes a quotation from *Tsemaḥ David* concerning Esther. *Sefer Gedulat Ša’ul*, written by Zvi Hirsch Edelman, was printed in London in 1854. Most of the work relates the biography of Shaul Wohl, considered a confidant of the kings of Poland and king of Poland for one day. Pages xi, 5b and 13a mention Esther as the wife of King Kazimierz. Apparently the writer based this on information from *She’eris Yisroel* (a Yiddish addition to *Sefer Yosifon* by Menahem Mann Amelander, first edition Amsterdam: Naftali Hertz Levi Rofeh & his son-in-law Kashman, 1743).

15 Rumsch refers to Graetz’s German history of the Jewish people and to his complete denial of the reliability of the Esterka story (see Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature*, 111–112). Strashun’s comments were printed in his notes to Shmuel Yosef Fuenn’s *Qëriyat ne’emanah* (Vilna: Joseph Reuben Rom, 1860), 292. There he contradicts the

amongst other peoples, a woman as exalted as Esterka would be rewarded with fame and glory: in German, Polish and Russian there already exist “many varied books and plays” (7) dedicated to her. Yet amongst “our people,” “Esther and her great and good works are almost completely unknown. Our literature is also silent on the topic and for the most part does not mention her at all” (5). Thus Rumsch’s decision to bring to his Hebrew readers his own adaptation of the story was, in a sense, a national mission: he sought to inform his readers about a stormy and important chapter in the history of Poland and its Jews, “as though you had seen it in a solid mirror” (8).

The narrative of *Męgilat esēter ha-šēnīyah* opens with the ritual Purim reading of *Męgilat Esther* [The Book of Esther] by Rabbi Yosen ben Yehoshua, Rabbi of Miechów, in the presence of the community leaders and the “beautiful Esther” from Cracow. The reading takes place in the home of the widow of Nathan, Esther’s aunt (the proprietress of an inn frequented by the elite of the Polish kingdom) and the mother of Esther’s intended husband, Eliezer. Esther, a young woman of twenty, of good family whose beauty and attire are remarkable, listens intently to the reading of the *Megilah* and requests that the Rabbi repeat the words “Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king’s house, more than all the Jews. For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then will relief and deliverance [arise to the Jews from another place, but thou and thy father’s house will perish]” (11, Esther 4:23–14).¹⁶ Following the reading, Esther commences a moral-ethical debate with the Rabbi concerning the suitability of the Biblical Esther’s actions and whether it would be right to act in this manner in the present day, even if the woman in question were already engaged to another man. The Rabbi gives a decisive answer: “If it were so, then now the decree would be upon her to break the covenant with the love of her youth and to pledge all her heart and her soul for the good and peace of her people” (13). At this point those present begin to discuss the decrees that Rokiczina is forcing the king, her lover, to enact against the Jews, the

traditional (anti-Semitic) approach, according to which the king’s love of Esther resulted in the granting of privileges to the Jews (unjustified in the eyes of the Jews’ enemies) and argues, similarly to Graetz, that the privileges were awarded many years before the king supposedly became acquainted with the young Jewess. Rumsch claims that the privileges were admittedly granted in the second year of the king’s reign, but were breached by Kazimierz’s wives and, only as a result of his relationship with Esther were they re-instated and to them were added “positive new laws, also strange and wonderful” (6). For a wider discussion about the acceptance of Graetz’ historical approach among East European Jewish historians, see François Guesnet (ed.), *Zwischen Graetz und Dubnow: Jüdische Historiographie in Ostmitteleuropa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Leipzig: Akademische Verlagsanstalt, 2009).

16 Translations of Biblical verses are from the JPS Bible (Philadelphia: JPS, 1917).

harshest of these being the exile of all Jews not born in Poland. “The times of King Ahasversus have turned backwards: a wicked and evil hearted Vashti has risen up against us, as a result [...] will God send His help—an Esther to save us [...]?” (15) asks the Rabbi rhetorically.¹⁷ In this gloomy atmosphere, Esther, “like a female prophet with God’s spirit within her” (20),¹⁸ delivers a passionate speech on faith in God the savior and the power of the chosen people to withstand all the decrees that have been and will be enacted against them. In face of the total helplessness that she sees amongst those present, Esther continues, declaring that:

These men are acting just as the men of Shushan behaved: they eulogize [lament], fast and weep but not even one of them will overcome his fear in the face of the approaching evil—and now come, if you lack the strength of the young woman who dared to approach King Ahasverus, then it is your duty to acquire the wisdom of the man who sent her to the king. (21)

Upon hearing these words, those present regain their composure and decide to support this brave young woman ready to endanger herself and deliver a petition to the king from his Jewish subjects. To this end, her future mother-in-law promises to recruit the support of her Polish customers. Indeed, little effort is necessary in order to hear them publicly acknowledge that “without Jews we have nowhere to turn” (36). It is interesting to note that at the same time as they praise the Jews, these members of the Polish elite disparage the Germans.¹⁹ Fortified by the blessing of her Jewish dispatchers and the promise of support by a summit of nobles and rulers, Esther sets out for the king’s palace on his birthday. Whilst the bystanders marvel at her amazing beauty, Esther delivers to the king a letter detailing all the decrees and persecutions threatening his Jewish subjects. She seizes this opportunity to admonish Rokiczina to her face and even reveals in public how unattractive the latter is (since she is wearing a gentile wig),²⁰ an act for which she immediately expresses regret since it is

17 Not only hints but also direct references to the Biblical book of Esther are to be found throughout the work. Biblical inlays and idioms from *Méqilat Esther* are frequently woven into the text.

18 On page 16, on the same occasion, Esther is described thus: “As the prophetess, daughter of Lapidot, Esther stood among the readers.”

19 See pages 36–37.

20 For more on the motif of the wig, see below, and Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature*, 57.

not directly connected to her mission. At the close of this fateful meeting, after receiving the king's promise to investigate the matter, Esther returns to her aunt's home.

Under pressure from ministers and the king's intimates who seek to purge him of his love for Rokiczina, and with the blessing of the Rabbi of Miechów, Esther once again sets out for the palace,²¹ this time accompanied by her fiancée, Eliezer. It is at this meeting that feelings of mutual affection begin to blossom within the hearts of Esther and the king. While Esther is praising the king to her fiancée, who now understands that her heart no longer belongs to him alone, a shocking drama unfolds in the "palace garden" (Esther 7:7). Esther is kidnapped and imprisoned in the palace dungeon at the instigation of Rokiczina, who seeks to force Esther to convert and recruit her support for her cause. Esther forcefully refuses to convert, in spite of Rokiczina's pleading and threats: "Until I die I will not deny God and I will not lie against my ancient religion, which is holy and faithful" (65). At one of the peak moments in the conflict between the two women, the king suddenly appears accompanied by his aide "Major-General Dobrin." Esther is released and Rokiczina is exiled from the kingdom. Soon thereafter the king reveals to Esther his feelings of love for her. He quickly calms her doubts about their "lack of religious compatibility," saying that "religious zealotry has not found a nest in my heart" (73) and that he does not expect her to abandon the faith of her fathers. He promises to grant her Rokiczina's "forest palace" and permits her aunt to reside in half of it.

Just as Esther's disappearance caused widespread concern amongst Jews and non-Jews alike, so the rumor of the king's love for Esther leads to great happiness among all those that hear of it. "The rulers and lords of the country" thought that "a Jewess will not rule his spirit as a free noblewoman" (75), and Rabbi Yosen determines that

Esther has not sinned against God in giving her affection to King Kazimir, and God will not consider this a sin, because in doing so she will save Israel and she is no different from the Esther who lived earlier in the nation of Israel, and whose fame and blessing are described in the holy books.

Only one Jew in Cracow is saddened by the outcome: Eliezer, Esther's fiancée, whose love for Esther continues to "burn like a fire" (76) and will continue to do so until the end of his life. The king deals favorably with the Jews of Poland

21 It is important to note that the diminutive "Esterka" is only customary in the book in the speech of Poles. For more on this see Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature*, 55, note 2.

and grants them various privileges. Esther, who maintains her religion devotedly, bears the king two sons and two daughters, but is only permitted to raise the daughters as Jews. The king loved Esther with the “love of the spirit and soul [...] and after her he did not love any other woman” (78), even though he outlived her considerably. Esther died following a serious illness and was buried, according to her request, in Cracow, in a Jewish grave “and all the land of Poland, Jews and non Jews, lamented her passing and eulogized her. The King Kazimir refused to be comforted until the day of his own death [...]” (80).

Rumsch’s work, adapted from a German source, is an example of the literary-historical genre employed by moderate Jewish *maskilim*. This genre began its life in Germany, inspired by the popular German historical novel of the first third of the nineteenth century, and later became popular among Eastern European *maskilim* in the second half of the nineteenth century. Texts of this kind popularized history, weaving dramatic plots of apologetic character around exemplary historical characters and events engraved upon the Jewish memory from Biblical times until the early modern period. This type of writing, at first in Hebrew and later also in Yiddish, enabled writers to reach a wide and varied audience and to widen the readers’ knowledge, exposing them to a range of actual problems under the guise of an enthralling tale combined with a romantic plot from the past and imparting the *maskilic* ideology of the authors.²² Eastern European writers perceived German-Jewish historical literature as a diverse source for translation and adaptation, especially suitable for their purposes since its tendencies dovetailed with their own outlook. Shmuel Feiner has numbered more than 30 such works of historical Jewish fiction, most based upon German sources, published in Eastern Europe in the period 1858–1881, during which time Jewish historical and social-realistic novels also developed.²³ In addition, Rumsch attempted also to imbue his work with a

22 See Feiner, *Haskalah ve-historiyah*, 310–339; Roman ‘im ha-‘avar, 34–46; Shmuel Verses, “Ha-‘agadot ‘al ‘aseret ha-ševetim ve-hasambatiyon ve-darkhey qēlitan ve-sifruteynu ha-ḥadašah [Legends concerning the Ten Tribes and the Sambation and their absorption into our modern literature],” in: *Me-Mendele ‘ad Hazaz: Sugirot be-hitpathut hasiporet ha-‘ivrit*, ed. idem (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1987), 300–328; Shmuel Verses, “Geyruš Sefarad be-aspeqlariyah šel sifrut ha-haskalah [The Spanish exile from the perspective of Haskalah literature],” in: *‘Hakeytsa ‘ami: sifrut ha-haskalah be-‘idan ha-modernizatsiyah*, ed. idem (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 157–190; and Dan Miron, *Bodedim bēmo‘adim [When loners come together]* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1988), 62–65.

23 Feiner, *Haskalah ve-historiyah*, 317–318, 323–324. One of the popular German language Jewish writers of this genre of writing was Ludwig Philippson. In 1839 he adapted for theatre (in German) part of a French book concerning Esterka by the exiled Polish writer Jan Czyński and this work was published in *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums*.

national hue, perhaps in the spirit of Peretz Smolenskin, who preached the importance of a Jewish national historiography,²⁴ yet a review of *Mēgilat ešēter ha-šēnīyah* written (apparently) by Smolenskin criticizes the literary quality of the work and the mistaken presentation of the character of the king's concubine [!] as an object of admiration. The writer of this review also perceived the first Esther, who acted on behalf of all her people, in a negative light; even more so one who acted for her own interests alone: "a people will not be praised for producing beautiful daughters who capture the heart of the king and on their behalf he eases the suffering of the Jews. [...] God forbid we should take pride in producing mistresses for kings and ministers."²⁵

Rumsch's work portrays relations between Poles and Jews in rather a simplified manner, painting a utopian picture of harmony and fraternity violated by the king's crazed lover who harbors a hatred of Jews and Poles alike. It should be noted that the positive image of the representatives of the Polish ruling elite fits with a known trend in the writings of *maskilic* authors (although for the most part this was popular in the first half of the nineteenth century).²⁶ The historical guise of the text, its periodically melodramatic style and the idealized depictions of the constantly virtuous heroes, are similar to other *maskilic* Hebrew novels of the same period. Yet amongst these novels, Rumsch's exceptional female heroine stands out. Unlike the Biblical Esther, who acted on Mordechai's instigation, and unlike the heroines of romances and those depicted in most of the realistic novels of the period, this young girl from

Other extracts from the play in German translation had appeared in the same journal only a number of months earlier. More bibliographical details may be found in Shmeruk's bibliography in "Hamaga'im beyn hasifrut hapolanit le-beyn sifrut yidiš 'al-pi sippur esterka ve-qazimir ha-gadol melekh Polin." For more information on Philippson and the historical novel see the fourth chapter of Ben-Ari's work, *Roman 'im ha-'avar*.

24 Feiner, *Haskalah ve-historiyah*, 430–457, especially 432–436. In this connection, the lively debate in *maskilic* circles in Germany and Eastern Europe concerning summaries and partial translations of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* should also be noted. This work reached the Hebrew reader through translations from German and Russian. See Shmuel Verses, "'Daniyel Deronda' be-'itonut u-be-sifrut ha-'ivrit [Daniel Deronda in the Hebrew press and literature]," in: *Mi-lēšon el lēšon: yetsirot ve-gūguleyhen be-sifrutenu*, ed. Shmuel Verses (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), 406–425, especially 415.

25 The review was published in Smolenskin's newspaper *Ha-šahar* 11 (1883): 355–356, and in Shmeruk's opinion (as is noted in his bibliography) was written by the editor.

26 On this, see Israel Bartal, *Ha-l'o-yehudim ve-hevratam bē-sifrut 'ivrit ve-yidiš bē-mizrah 'eyropah beyn ha-šanim 1856–1914* [Non-Jews and their society in Hebrew and Yiddish literature in Eastern Europe in the years 1856–1914] (PhD dissertation, Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1981), 53–56.

Cracow is revealed to be independent, assertive, an instigator in her own right, charismatic and alluring, ready to endanger her life on a mission of national importance that no man is willing to take upon himself, very much like the prophet Devorah, as is hinted at in the story.²⁷ It is perhaps possible to understand this innovative approach, in which one may discern echoes of the rise of the movement for women's liberty in Tsarist Russia which aroused widespread public debate at the time, on the background of Rumsch's role as founder and principal of a girls' school.²⁸

Esther, as depicted by Rumsch, must stand alone in the face of crucial decisions, both on the personal (and feminine) and national-religious level. She acts with wisdom and the confidence that she is accompanied by God's mercy and she refuses to renounce her values and beliefs even when this endangers her life.²⁹ In order to moderate the religious tension in the story, the writer depicts the relationship between Esther and the king within an idealistic atmosphere, and attributes this harmony also to the general public. It would appear that it was for this reason that Rumsch avoided officializing the relationship between the two—Esther does not become the king's wife, nor is she crowned as queen, but rather she remains his beloved. In this way she could, ostensibly, retain a modicum of independence (national-religious and personal), for example allowing her aunt to live with her in the palace and raising (only) her daughters as Jews.

27 For a discussion of depictions of women in *maskilic* Hebrew literature, see Tova Cohen, *Ha-'ehat 'ahuva ve-ha-'ehat sénu'ah: beyn métsi'ut lé-bidyion bé-ti'urey ha-'iša bé-sifrut ha-haskalah* ['One Beloved, the Other Hated': Between Fiction and Reality in Haskalah Depictions of Women] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2002). On the romantic heroine, similar to Esther only in external appearance, and that of the realistic novel, see Cohen, 130–137, 192–231, and other referrals in the index. This may be compared with the heroine of the German-Jewish historical novel, as discussed by Ben Ari, *Roman 'im ha-'avar*, 143, 235–236. Cohen also presents in her research a number of exceptional heroines, “new women,” who hold strong opinions and are willing to take initiative, but most of these do not reach the stature of Esther (see, for example, 174–175, 215–218, 243–253, 339–359). On the character of Devorah the prophetess, to whom Rumsch compares Esther, see Cohen, 251–252.

28 For further discussion of this topic, its expressions in literature and literary criticism see Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism and Bolshevism, 1860–1930* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 29–63, 89–114.

29 On the figure of the “vacillating woman,” see Cohen, 239–257. It is of course possible that Rumsch was familiar with the works discussed by Cohen and influenced by them to some extent.

A particular phenomenon worthy of note is the existence of two Ladino translations of Rumsch's story.³⁰ Neither of these names the writer, but the content is largely identical to that of Rumsch's work, apart from one significant difference in the Jerusalem edition: the marriage of the king and his Jewish mistress without any need for her conversion.

In 1890, a play in five acts entitled *Esterke* was published in Warsaw, penned by writer and editor Heshel Eppelberg. Seventeen years later it appeared again, featuring a significant change in the title: *Esterke, oder di yudishe tokhter als polylishe kenigen* [*Esterke or the Jewish daughter as Polish queen*] (Warsaw: Farlag un Eygentum fun L. Morgenshtern, 1907)—a return to the tradition according to which Esther was indeed crowned as Queen of Poland.³¹ Apart from a traditional Jewish element, the source of which was the *Purim shpil*, Shmeruk pointed to this composition as containing “initial signs of knowledge of Polish sources on the subject [*Esterka*]” and saw in it “an indication of the beginning of contact between Polish literature and Yiddish literature.”³² Shmeruk asserted that Eppelberg was acquainted with Kozłowski's play in Hebrew translation (see note 5 above) “and certain aspects” of Kraszewski's work (see note 10 above).³³ Without detracting from this assertion, a comparison of Eppelberg's play with Rumsch's novel raises the possibility that, in addition to the sources named by Shmeruk, *Męgilat ešēter ha-šēnīyah* (which preceded *Esterke* by seven years) was also employed by Eppelberg in the writing of his drama. Aside from the relatively limited number of characters in both works and similarities in some of their names,³⁴ there exist a number of further similarities. Both works open with the reading of *Męgilat Esther* at Purim, both include a call by Esther for faith and trust in a God that comes to people's aid in times of trouble and the remarks of members of the Polish ruling elite at the inn in favor of the Jews and disparaging Germans. Some sentences and expressions in the play appear to be literal translations of sections

30 *Ḥatan ha-melekh ve-ester ha-šēnīyah* (Salonika: Khevrat Etz Hakhayim, 1888); *La segunda Ester: cuento istoriko*, revised and adapted by Shelomoh Yisra'el Shirizli (Jerusalem: Shelomoh Yisra'el Shirizli, 1905), an abridged version of the first work. I would like to express my thanks to Mr Ya'akov Khaguel for his assistance in translating these works.

31 A detailed description of the play and an analysis of the significance of the difference in title and designation of the heroine may be found in Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature*, 55–59.

32 *Ibid.*, 55 and 59.

33 *Ibid.*, 59.

34 For example, the name of Esther's fiancée is Eliezer in Rumsch's work and Elazar in Eppelberg's.

from Rumsch's work.³⁵ However, the play includes embellishments (not found in the Hebrew or Polish sources). For example, it strengthens the character of Esther by comparing her not only to Devorah the prophetess and the Biblical Esther but also to Judith (6), and to all the women of previous generations "who took positive action on behalf of the nation of Israel" (13); it describes in detail the complex and tragic relationship between Esther and her fiancée (19–20, 33–35, 64–67); and includes quotations from speeches given by both the king and Esther during Esther's coronation in favor of religious tolerance, human fraternity and civil loyalty (73–74). Elaborations such as these add clearly melodramatic elements, arouse actual associations and seek to enhance the apparently simple kernel of the story through the addition of thrilling aspects to a moral tale.³⁶

3 Hugo Freund [Jonas Lehmann]: *Malkat Polin: sipur mi-yemey Kazimir ha-gadol* [The Queen of Poland: A Story from the Days of Kazimierz the Great]

A longer work, more developed in terms of content, is N.L. Shevlansky's Hebrew translation of a novel by Hugo Freund entitled *Malkat Polin: sipur mi-yemey Kazimir ha-gadol* [The queen of Poland: a story from the days of Kazimierz the Great], published in Jerusalem in 1901.³⁷ Hugo Freund was one of the pen names of Dr Jonas (Jon) Lehmann (1865–1913), a son of Dr Meyer

35 See, for example, Rumsch, 40–41, and Eppelberg (1907 edition), 28; Rumsch, 48, and Eppelberg, 44; Rumsch, 73, and Eppelberg, 74.

36 On the characteristics of the historical story in Yiddish, see Feiner, *Haskalah ve-historiyah*, 332–338; Gershon Shaked, *Ha-sifrut ha-ivrit (1880–1970)*, 1: *bé-golah* [Hebrew literature (1880–1970), 1: In exile] (Jerusalem: Keter, 1978), 49–50; and Shmuel Verses, *Ha-targumim le-yidiš šel 'ahavat tsiyon le- 'avraham m'apu* [The Yiddish translations of Avraham Mapu's *'Ahavat tsiyon*] (Jerusalem: Akademon, 1989).

37 The title of the original work, 252 pages in length, is *Esterka, Königin von Polen: Historische Erzählung nach einer jüdischen Sage*, by Hugo Freund (Mainz: Joh. Wirth'sche Hofbuchdruckerei, 1907). The work appeared as volumes 49–51 in Lehmann's series *Jüdische Volksbücherei*, which for the most part consisted of works by the author's father. Since the translation appeared around six years earlier than the source text, it is possible to suggest that the work was first published in serialized form in the Jewish press. The Hebrew work is 148 pages in length, format 4°, and was printed in the press of Y.D. Frumkin. It is interesting that the name of the queen was erased from the title page of the Hebrew version (see also Shmeruk's bibliography in "Hamaga'im beyn hasifrut hapolanit le-beyn sifrut yidiš 'al-pi sippur esterka ve-qazimir ha-gadol melekh Polin").

(Marcus) Lehmann, prolific writer, founder and editor of the weekly Orthodox newspaper *Der Israelit* (Mainz). Jonas Lehmann was born in Mainz, studied physics, earned his living by publishing books and journals in Breslau and became famous as the author of popular plays and historical stories (similarly to his father).

The title of this work indicates that it too remains faithful to the traditional version of the legend according to which Esther does indeed become (or almost become) queen of Poland. An examination of the names of the heroes and the development of the story suggests that this version is almost certainly based upon a work by Jan Czyński, either using the French original (1838) or, as would seem more likely, a partial (1839) or full (1845, 1849) German translation. It is also probable that Ludwig Philippson's dramatic adaptation and/or a Hebrew translation of part of that played a role in the composition of *Malkat Polin*.³⁸ At the same time, it is possible to suggest that in the more distant background was Eugen Rispart's historical novel *Die Juden und die Kreuzfahrer in England unter Richard Löwenherz* [The Jews and the Crusaders in England under the rule of Richard Lion-heart] (Leipzig: Christian Ernst Kollmann, 1842), which depicts a forbidden love affair between the future king of England, Richard, and a young Jewess whom he saved from death at the hands of an incited mob in the milieu of the heroic death of the Jews of York.³⁹

The narrative of *Malkat Polin* involves a wide cast of characters, most of them non-Jews. At the center are the parties involved in a love triangle: King Kazimierz, Esther (not referred to by any diminutives) and Elisha the doctor

38 See note 23 above. On the Hebrew translation entitled "Ha-'alilah," see note 5 above. According to the author, a Jewish *maskil* and teacher from Białystok who received approbations for his work from Avraham Mapu and Kalman Shulman, the source of his story was *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums*, but he does not specify whether this was Philippson's drama or the other translated extracts of Czyński's work published therein. In my opinion, the source was the latter.

39 On this work and its literary and historical associations, see Nitsa Ben-Ari, "Rits'ard lev-ha-'ari ve-malkah ha-yehudiyah me-york: roman histori lě-bēney ha-ne'urim me-'et 'Eugen Rispart, 1842 [Richard the lion heart and Malkah the Jewess from York: an historical novel for young readers by Eugen Rispart, 1842]," *Olam katan* 2 (2005): 80–89. This novel was also translated to Hebrew by Miriam Markel-Moseson, see Shmuel Verses' edition, *Yedidato šel ha-měšorer: 'igērot Miryam Marqel-Mozeszon 'el Yehudah Leyb Gordon* [The poet's female friend: the letters of Miriam Markel-Moseson to Yehudah Leib Gordon] (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2004), 30–48. Of course, the possibility that Rumsch was familiar with this work should not be excluded.

(Esther's intended husband).⁴⁰ The love stories of these three, although supposedly taking place in the fourteenth century, in fact reflect actual problems faced by European Jews at the time when the works were written.⁴¹

The exile and persecution of the Jews of Germany provide the historical backdrop for the narrative. A "great and exalted Rabbi," the Rabbi of the community of "one of the cities on the Rhine River" (4), and his daughter, Esther, from the beginning of the work revealed to be fluent in the Polish language, are forced to flee to Poland. Aware of his new status as a refugee, the Rabbi refuses to compete with local Rabbis and deprive any one of them of his position; thus he decides to change his profession and becomes a ritual slaughterer. The kingdom of Poland is depicted as a backward country in which the nobles live a life of indulgence and debauchery, enslave the peasants and persecute the Jews. The only ray of light in this reality is the enlightened king, who is also the object of the nobles' envy and hostility. One representative of these nobles is Jan of the Wola dynasty,⁴² a sadist, constantly in pursuit of honor, and surrounded by a group of sycophants who seek out his presence and whose readiness to do his bidding knows no bounds. This nobleman also desires Esther; as revenge for her rejection of his advances and as a result of his boundless hatred of the Jews, he swears that "I will not rest until I have eliminated them from this land" (32). Surprisingly, this nobleman employs a Jewish chef named "Yankele,"⁴³ who later plays a role of the utmost importance in the plot of the story, informing Rabbi Yehosua and Esther that Elisha, whose whereabouts were unknown following his flight from Germany, is living in Poland and has become the leader of young Jews seeking to "garner strength against our enemies [the nobles] and to defend with all our might the rights granted to us by

40 It should be noted that in Czyński's work and its two translations/adaptations/ Esther's fiancée is named Ben Josef and her father Ben Himmel. In the work under discussion here, Esther's father is named Reb Yehosua (similarly to Eppelberg) and her fiancée, the doctor, is given the significant name Elisha. In Czyński's story, Rokiczana plays a significant role, whilst her character has been erased from the Jewish adaptations (perhaps in order to maintain the relatively limited framework of the story and also to highlight the innovation of this work in opposition to its predecessors).

41 On this topic see Shmeruk, "Hamaga'im beyn hasifrut hapolanit le-beyn sifrut yidiš 'al-pi sippur esterka ve-qazimir ha-gadol melekh Polin," 244–255 and the bibliographic references therein.

42 This noble is referred to by name in all versions of Czyński's story.

43 In Czyński's work Jankel is an innkeeper. This Jewish name, especially in connection to Czyński's book, cannot but remind the reader of the exalted character "Yankel" the innkeeper in Adam Mickiewicz's poem *Pan Tadeusz*.

our king's mercy" (20). Elisha enjoys the patronage of a Georgian Prince whose army is encamped in the vicinity of Cracow.

Esther and her fiancée are finally reunited following an extended period of separation. Meanwhile, the nobleman Wola plots, with the close co-operation of his associate, a Franciscan monk, a blood libel against Esther and her father that will enable him to achieve his ultimate goal, elimination of the Jews from the Polish lands. During a hunting expedition he "exposes" to the king the murderers of a Christian child, Rabbi Yehosua and Esther, and denounces the Jews in the style of Haman's denunciation, well known from the traditional *Purim shpil*:⁴⁴

Do you see Your Majesty? This is the result of the great mercy that has been shown to the Jews; this is the fruit of the great privileges bestowed upon this abominable people! Our king called the Jews to come to our land, and they came and multiplied, and now they dare to slaughter our small children, this is our reward for the mercy that we showed to them! (42)

The astonished king, inclined to believe Esther's logical claims concerning her and her father's innocence, is now forced to order their arrest and trial. Meanwhile, Elisha sets out upon a detective mission to reveal the truth. Encouraging "the peasants and the Jews to unite and fight together for their independence and existence" (55), he succeeds in persuading the peasant Gregorsky (the father of the dead child) to testify, thus revealing the plot to the king and the court of law.⁴⁵ The king offers his apologies to the innocent and reveals to Esther his love for her. However, the nobleman Wola continues to plot against the king, together with his friends and a representative of the Church, planning, among other plots, to poison him. In a further echo of *Męgilat Esther*, the Jewish chef reveals this plan to Elisha and the latter hurries to bring it to the king's attention.

44 On the element of the denunciation in the *Purim shpil*, see Khone Shmeruk, *Maḥazot miqr'a'iyim be-yidiš 1697–1750* [Yiddish biblical plays 1697–1750] (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1979), 41–43.

45 At a later stage in the story Elisha requests that the king release the peasants from their enslavement and is given a positive response. On the characterization of Polish nobles and peasants in Jewish literature, see Bartal, *Ha-l'o-yehudim ve-hevratam bē-sifrut 'ivrit ve-yidiš bē-mizrah 'eyropah beyn ha-šanim 1856–1914*, 66–78, and Shmuel Verses, "Beyn mēts'ut historit lē-ti'ur sipuri: beyn yehudim lē-polanim bē-kitvey Š.Y. 'Agnon [Between historical reality and literary depiction: between Jews and Poles in the writings of Sh. Y. Agnon]," *Galed* 11 (1989): especially 131–138.

At this point the narrative takes a less romantic and more realistic course. Esther debates how to respond to the king's declaration of love. Elisha reminds her of the character of the Biblical Esther, on account of whose actions "no evil was expected to fall upon her people [...]" (66). For his part—since "another love had taken root in his heart, and this love preceded his love for Esther, and was stronger and more powerful than it: his love for his people" (71)—he attempts to calm her, saying "I will go down to hell content of heart if I only know that I saved my people from destruction" (66). Later he even urges her to marry the king and renounce her own happiness for the good of her people and in order to help him to persuade the king to carry out a plan, the content of which he refuses to reveal to her since "you are a woman and your mind, as the mind of all women, will not possess the power to penetrate the goal that the man of spirit has set for his mighty initiative!" (92). However, Esther is not persuaded by his advice and threatens that she will not co-operate.⁴⁶ Shocked and amazed by "the manner of her speech and the coldness of her voice" (93), Elisha yields and reveals that he intends to ask the king to grant the persecuted Jews a region of land, one of those conquered in his war, as an independent state and that he, Elisha, will be its king. Esther responds to his plan with apprehension and attempts to dissuade him, employing the justifications that "one must not urge on the end" and "will the zealous surrounding Christian peoples keep silent upon the founding of such a kingdom in their midst?" (95–96). Elisha, however, is not prepared to debate the issue with a woman. He threatens that if she does not co-operate with him, "relief and deliverance [will] arise to the Jews from another place, but thou and thy father's house will perish" (97, Esther 4:14). Yet the king is unwilling to support Elisha's adventurous idea, sending him away from his presence.

Esther, who has still not responded to the king's offer of marriage, informs him that she is willing to become his wife, but that she does not intend to convert to Christianity. The king responds immediately: "say the word, command it, and I will also become a Jew" (99). Yet when his excitement subsides he explains to her that at least to the outside world, she must act as though she has accepted the Christian faith. Elisha, in his jealousy and frustration, plays a role in spreading the rumor that Esther has converted, even bringing the matter to the attention of Rabbi Yehosua on his death bed, thus hastening the latter's passing. In the king's close circle, hostility towards the monarch increases "since he raised up a woman of Jewish origin to the throne of Poland"

46 A similar confrontation on the background of the derision of the mental abilities of a woman appears in Shmuel Mulder's poem "B'eruriy'a bat rav Hanin'a ben Teradiyon" (1825), see Cohen, *Ha-ehat 'ahuva ve-ha-ehat senu'ah*, 240–247.

(111–112), but he himself does not concern himself with “what is taking place in his land and lived a life of joy and happiness in the companionship of Esther his wife” (112), granting the Jews additional privileges. Even Prince Boleslaw’s approach, feigning concern for Esther’s well-being, and his warning that the “ministers and the leaders of the kingdom” will not accept her coronation, is fruitless. The king desires to celebrate Esther’s coronation publicly, thus the head bishop demands that the ceremonies of Esther’s baptism and official coronation take place in a Church. Esther, ashamed, seizes the opportunity provided by an attempted assassination to flee the palace, aided by Elisha who stole inside in order to watch the ceremony and understood that Esther had remained a Jew. Disguised as a young man, Esther is transferred to a monastery in the city, but there too her identity is revealed and despite the protection offered by the Abbot, she is kidnapped and murdered when she refuses to convert to Christianity. She is buried in a Jewish grave. Her death leaves a perpetual mark on the king: he refuses to marry again and “sadness and grief were forever implanted within him and his deeds. He was always hunched over and depressed, his great spirit expired and his gentle soul could not be comforted for the loss of Esther all the days of his life” (147).

The content of this work differs significantly from that of the play and book discussed above. It is not always completely clear which characters are the heroes and which are the villains; regarding whom it is advisable to exercise caution and with whom one should co-operate for tactical purposes. Unlike the works of Rumsch and Eppelberg, which correspond to the mood of the popular historical novel, Lehmann’s version (in Shevlansky’s translation) appears to be an allegorical work with clear realistic, social and political characteristics. Just as in modern Yiddish literature from Poland, including the Esterke’s stories analyzed by Shmeruk, one finds discussions of the inherent difficulties involved in the possibility of increased closeness between Jews and Poles according to an ideal model from a shared distant past, so too in this work a young Jewish woman is faced with uncertainty regarding how she should act in this regard. How far should she allow her relations with the king to progress, and what, if at all, is the line that she must not cross?⁴⁷ To Esther, a refugee from Germany who succeeded in escaping the clutches of a cruel and greedy nobleman and was saved from a blood libel, it is clear that she will not cross the barrier of religious conversion, not even for the king’s love. However, the

47 See Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature*, 60–106. Conversion from free will was a topic discussed and variously appraised in the historical Jewish novel in Germany in the nineteenth century. See on this Ben Ari, *Roman ‘im ha-‘avar*, 87.

thin line that she treads on her way to becoming queen of Poland is slippery and return is impossible. Although at first she concedes to the king's pleas that she pretend to convert, later, by refusing to carry out the act of conversion publicly, she condemns herself to death as a religious martyr, not before seeing her father die of a broken heart and herself undergoing further ordeals.⁴⁸

In light of the period during which this work was published (and the familial background of the writer), it is impossible not to ascribe to it contemporary political commentary. At the time of its publication, Theodor Herzl was lobbying for the idea of a national Jewish home and meeting with kings, princes and political leaders in order to receive their support and aid. Thus one can see in the character of Elisha and his imaginary plan a somewhat grotesque reflection of Herzl and his public works. Moreover, the writer seeks to impart to his readers a clear message; he refers to two of the three oaths which, according to the sages, God caused Israel to swear (not to go up on the wall, not to provoke other nations and not to urge on the end [of days; the messianic age]), warning them against taking positive action to bring about the redemption. These claims were voiced in Jewish communities across Europe in opposition to the Zionist idea.⁴⁹ According to the writer's version in this work, Esther's method—the traditional tried and tested method of lobbying—is indeed the correct way, although clear boundaries must be set and never crossed. A presence in the king's palace acting on behalf of Jewish interests is right and proper, but aspirations to the throne of a kingdom and the provocation of a kingdom's people and its religious leaders can only end badly. The interesting innovation in the presentation of this conservative outlook is the use of a female character as the main heroine and proponent of this method.⁵⁰

48 On the motif of martyrdom in the historical Jewish novel of the nineteenth century, see Ben-Ari, *Roman 'im ha-avar*, 86.

49 An adage of the sages found in the Babylonian Talmud, *Masekhet Kētubot* 11a, based on the verse "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles, and by the hinds of the field, that ye awaken not, nor stir up love, until it please" (Song of Songs 2:7; 3:5; 8:4). On the various discussions of these oaths throughout the generations, including those that saw in them encouragement for Zionism, see Aviezer Ravitzky's survey of the various works on the topic in Ravitzky, *Ha-qets ha-meguleh u-medinat ha-yehudim: mēšihūt, tsiyonut ve-radikalizm dati be-yisra'el* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1993), 277–305. The work is available in English translation by Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman as *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

50 Compare to the similar messages in the novel *Akiva* by M. Lehmann (Ben-Ari, *Roman 'im ha-avar*, 82–86).

4 **Anonymous: *Esterke: di yidishe kenign fun poyln* [Esterke, the Jewish Queen of Poland]**

In a private letter from Basye Spektor (the Yiddish writer Mordkhe Spektor's wife) from Warsaw to her sister in New York, there is an indication of a novel in installment in the Warsaw daily *Unzer leben* under the title: *Esterke: di yidishe kenign fun poyln*. The novel was described as part of a competition between the local Yiddish daily newspapers for the readers' unsophisticated tastes.⁵¹ Unfortunately, I was unable to locate this source. More or less at the same time (1909–1910) an anonymous thin booklet under the same title was published by Y. Edelshten's printing house, Warsaw. In order to prevent any misunderstandings the publisher noted on the cover page that "this story has nothing to do with the feuilleton that was printed in *Unzer leben*." This story seems to be the most superficial of all versions of the story that are known to us. Because of the poor plot it is also impossible to recognize any previous version of the story that influenced the unknown writer. The only heroes mentioned by their names here are Esterke, her father, Leyb, who is the royal tailor; Ruvn (Reuben), Esterke's cousin; Antony, Esterke's janitor and the nobleman Wolan, a scoundrel court master, who is willing to do all evil in order to "put his hands" on Esterke. This character has some minor resemblance to the nobleman Wola in Czyński's versions of the story. Esterke herself is deeply in love with the king but feels like a "lamb in the desert with no shepherd" (p. 8), since the whole purpose of her presence in the royal palace in Łobzów is in favor of the Jews and their rights. Nevertheless, the current Esterke story has little to do with the times of the authentic story. It reads more as a contemporary detective story in which a mysterious murder occurs in the royal court; two Jews (and the whole community) are accused of being responsible for the crime, but thanks to some righteous people in the king's court and Esterke's father the mystery is solved; Wolan's cruelty is revealed and the Jews are saved. Apart of "the director of the secret police" and his agents (p. 43) that are part of the investigation process, there are other current events that echoes from the text, such as the ongoing discussion in the Polish society about the "Jewish question"; are the Jews loyal and reliable and do they deserve any equal rights, or any rights at all. A relevant

51 A letter from 27 July [1909], Yivo Archives, Pinski collection 204–10–532. On the competition between the newspapers see: Nathan Cohen, "An Ugly and Repulsive Idler' or a Talented and Seasoned Editor: S.Y. Yatzkan and the beginning of the Popular Yiddish Press in Warsaw," *Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe* 54–55 (2005), 28–53; idem, "The Yiddish Press and Yiddish Literature: A Fertile but Complex Relationship," *Modern Judaism* 28 (2008), 149–172.

insight into the current Jewish existence is R' Leib's, statement that "a nation without a fatherland is always wretched" (p. 11).

5 **Yankev Kopl Kogan-Dua's *Esterke: di poylisher Ester hamalke* [Esterke: The Polish Queen Esther] and Jonah Hayim Kronenberg: *Be-armōn melekh Pōlin* [In the King of Poland's Palace]**

In a note to the concluding chapter of his book, Shmeruk mentions a further Hebrew work—Jonah Hayim Kronenberg's work for young readers, *Be-armōn melekh Pōlin* [In the King of Poland's Palace] (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1950; second edition, 1966)—and asks, "What are the sources of this novel? Is it taken directly from Polish, or via Yiddish literature?"⁵² A partial answer to this question is to be found in a booklet of whose existence Shmeruk was apparently unaware: Yankev Kopl Kogan-Dua's *Esterke: di poylisher Ester hamalke* [Esterke: The Polish Queen Esther] (Warsaw: Groshn-bibliotek, 1930).⁵³ A comparison of the two reveals that Kronenberg's work is for the most part a (relatively accurate) translation of Kogan-Dua's booklet, with the addition of a number of episodes and some technical changes, based upon the drama by S. Kozłowski (on this see below), in the order of events, the names of some of the characters and the vocabulary.

52 Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature*, 107–108, note 2. Yonah Hayim Kronenberg was born in Piotrków Tribunaliski in 1897, son of a family of printers. In 1936 he arrived in Palestine and there continued his involvement in the publishing industry. His hobbies were Biblical commentaries and adaptations of children's stories from his youth. For further details, see Uriel Ofek, *Leqsiqon Ofeq lē-sifrut yeladim* [Ofek encyclopedia of children's literature] (Tel Aviv: Zemora Beitan, 1986), vol. 2: 575.

53 The booklet (64 pages in length, format 4°) was printed as part (no. 16) of the "groshn-bibliotek" enterprise, an initiative of the Warsaw daily Zionist newspaper *Haynt*, designed to distribute popular literature at cheap prices. This venture achieved great success with the general public. The name Y. Kogan-Dua was one of the many pen names of Yankev Kopl Dua (1898–1942), a Warsaw-born writer, translator and adaptor. Paralyzed from the waist down, he was unable to leave his home and devoted his time to writing dozens of books and booklets for the "groshn-bibliotek," as well as many serialized novels printed in *Haynt's* afternoon paper, *Hayntike naves*. His works for the most part concerned famous figures and historical events from the near and distant past. During the Nazi invasion, he remained in Warsaw and was apparently murdered there. For further discussion of the "groshn-bibliotek," see Nathan Cohen, *Sefer, sofer ve-iton: merkaz ha-tarbut ha-yehudit bē-varšah 1918–1942* [Books, Writers and Newspapers: The Jewish Cultural Center in Warsaw, 1918–1942] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2003), 209–213.

At the opening of Kogan-Dua's Yiddish booklet, the writer mentions the popular Polish folk-tale concerning the daughter of a tailor from Opoczno who captured the heart of the great King Kazimierz of Poland and the geographical sites associated with her name. He continues by citing the names of the historians Jan Długosz (and his anti-Semitic predisposition regarding the story), Tadeusz Czacki,⁵⁴ Ludwig Gumplowicz,⁵⁵ and Jan Kochanowski.⁵⁶ Likewise, he names the writers Aleksander Bronikowski, Jan Tadeusz Bulharyn, Aleksander Geysztowt Bernatowicz and Stanisław Kozłowski,⁵⁷ all of whom wrote literary works on the subject that, together with "certain Jewish sources" (4), provided source material for Kogan-Dua's booklet.⁵⁸

The narrative of Kogan-Dua's story begins in Opoczno with the forbidden romantic involvement of the fifteen-year-old Esterke, daughter of Reb Avrom the tailor, with Maczko, a local peasant. Throughout the story the heroine is identified in Jewish contexts as Esterke, as is customary in Yiddish, and in Polish contexts as Esterka, as is customary in Polish. On a number of occasions she is referred to as Esther by family members. Esterke's father discovers the forbidden relationship and threatens her with banishment from her home and ostracism, as a result of which she, in an act of repentance, resolves not to leave her house during the course of a year, although she continues to dream of escaping. In the meantime, rumors of the coronation of a new king, who intends to visit Opoczno, reach the *shtetl*. This king is renowned for his acts of

54 Shmeruk discusses Czacki and his approach to the story, see Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature*, 17 and 110.

55 A Cracow-born sociologist and Jewish historian (1838–1909) who, in his work *Prawodawstwo polskie względem Żydów* (Cracow: J.M. Himmelblau, 1867), devotes significant attention to the exalted character of King Kazimierz and his relations with the Jews. He rejects Długosz's anti-Semitic approach and expresses his sadness that in the present day no leader can be found who reaches the stature of this king (see 17–27, 52–54, 152–136).

56 The historian Jan K. Kochanowski, in his work *Kazimierz Wielki: Zarys żywota i panowania* (Warsaw: Bronisław Natanson, 1899), also rejected Długosz's interpretation of the king's relationship with the Jewish Esterka, describing her as simply one of his many lovers (see 68–70).

57 On each of these, see according to Shmeruk's index, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature*.

58 Kronenberg also includes a short introduction at the beginning of his book in which he relates the various legends concerning the character of Esterke, hints at the legend of her eyes (see note 6 above, Bar-Yitzhak, *Polin—agadot rešit*, 143–153) and discusses the different versions of her death. He notes that "historians have written about this Esterka from Opoczno and special books have been composed by various authors, Jewish and Christian, concerning her" (4), but (apart from Długosz) he does not identify any of them by name, not even Kogan-Dua.

kindness towards the Jews and is not accustomed, as his predecessors were, to abduct beautiful young Jewesses and hold them prisoner in his palace [!]. Esterke, for her part, is sorry to hear this, since she secretly desires to be taken away to the king's palace. During his visit to Opoczno, the king is so impressed by the external appearance of the community's elders, particularly the words "Long live the king!" (in Hebrew) embroidered on the borders of their garments, that he requests to be introduced to the tailor responsible for making their clothes. At his meeting with Reb Avrom and his family, the king is amazed by Esterke's beauty and she, "for the first time in her life felt this kind of intensity in her soul. She looked straight into the eyes of the king [...] she was ready now to fall upon his neck and kiss his rich, masculine lips... [...] her natural instincts told her that this man, named King Kazimir, desired her" (25).⁵⁹ In spite of Reb Avrom's attempts to safeguard his daughter and arrange a suitable marriage for her, she succeeds in fleeing her home. She exploits Maczko's love for her in order to receive his aid in realizing her plan, eventually also running away from him in order to reach the king's palace in Cracow. On her journey she encounters a Jewish banker, Levko, who shows her the way, but not before he rebukes her for her deviancy and asks her cynically if she intends to become the second Queen Esther (33).⁶⁰ At an emotionally charged meeting, the king invites Esther to remain in the palace, turning his back upon his legal wife and ignoring the growing hostility towards him at court and the warnings of Bishop Bodzanta.⁶¹

At this point, the writer breaks off the narrative of the story and embarks upon a historical discussion of whether the great privileges granted to the Jews by King Kazimierz were a result of his relationship with Esterke. Kogan-Dua claims, as did those historians not of Długosz's opinion, that there was no link between the two; indeed the privileges were granted before the couple had even met (41).

59 The sentence describing her desire to kiss the king was removed from the Hebrew version since this work was, as noted, intended for young readers. Likewise, "she embraced him and showered intense kisses upon him" (42) in the Hebrew became "[...] when she entrances him with her beautiful intense eyes" (92).

60 The historical character of Levko or Leybke, banker and money lender associated with the royal court, is discussed at length in Meir Balaban's work, *Toldot ha-yehudim be-gra'arov u-be-q'az'imiz' 1304-1868* [History of the Jews in Cracow and Kazimierz 1304-1868] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2003), vol. 1, 20-23.

61 Jankowski Bodzanta is also a historical figure. He was ruler and later Bishop of Cracow and Sandomierz during the reign of Kazimierz the Great.

Esterke moves into the palace in Łobzów, where she employs a Jewish maid-servant (Devoyre) and maintains a kosher kitchen.⁶² Her links with her fellow Jews have weakened, yet when it becomes known to them that she continues to uphold her religion and is willing to help them, the attitude towards her undergoes a change. Their relations reach a peak when a blood libel, to which Esther's name is also linked, is propagated in Cracow. As a result of her intervention, an investigation is conducted at the king's command and the guilty parties are caught and tried. The king then orders a public declaration disseminated in Cracow affirming that the Jews do not use the blood of Christians for ritual purposes.

On the occasion of the birth of his first son (by Esterke), Pelka, the king relocates her to the palace at Bochothnica, which he proceeds to visit frequently. There is no information on the fate of the king's official wife (who is never named). However, one sentence notes that his second wife was Rokiczina, who was "a bad and angry woman, from whom he separated immediately" (53). Over the course of the years, Esterke bears him another son and two daughters. The boys are raised as Christians and the girls remain with their mother. This situation leads Esterke to fear that her fellow Jews, for whom she has not ceased to pine, will turn their backs upon her as the mother of converts (yet not specifically as the king's mistress!); and indeed she is totally rejected by her family, to whom she has been sending money at regular intervals. Her father even claims that the Biblical Esther avoided bringing bastards into the world, yet "my daughter also has two sons who are converts" (55). Despite this Esterke remains a Jew and at a ball in honor of the dedication of Cracow University, even appears dressed in traditional Jewish garb, her response to the anti-Semitic factions that staged a play ridiculing Jews in an attempt to humiliate her. Esterke's relations with the Jews of Cracow improve: she embroiders a number of curtains for the Synagogue ark, donates money to study houses and even orders a Torah scroll to be written for the Synagogue of her home town.⁶³

Meanwhile the pressure on the king to abandon his Jewish mistress continues to grow. Representatives of the Church do not desist in their attempts to separate him from Esterke, even threatening him with excommunication. As a dutiful Christian the king is alarmed by these threats and yields to

62 It is interesting that the Hebrew version—apparently according to the translation of Kozłowski's play (note 4 above)—includes two maidservants (Ada and Rachel), but towards the end of the book Kronenberg mentions only Devorah, the maidservant in Kogan-Dua's work.

63 According to the tradition, such a curtain could be found in the town Kazimierz Dolny until the Second World War.

their demands. Esterke attempts to discover why the king has ceased to visit her. At the same time that the rumors of the enforced separation reach her, she is also informed that the king has been critically wounded during a hunting expedition. She tries to reach the Wawel Castel in Cracow but is refused entry. Once more she encounters Levko the Jewish banker who informs her that in his delirium the king calls for her continuously. Following the announcement of the king's death, Esterke returns to Łobzów and jumps to her death from the palace's tower; and there she is buried.⁶⁴

In Kronenberg's Hebrew translation, a substantial opening section has been added to the story, along with three episodes not found in the original Yiddish, which are apparently based upon Kozłowski's drama.⁶⁵ At the beginning of the work Kronenberg presents Reb Avraham the tailor, his wife Malkah and his hard-working daughters. Reb Avraham, championing the traditional adage that "a princess' glory is internal," is concerned by the fact that his daughters visit the houses of non-Jews selling items and delivering clothes and thus, despite his age and the fears of losing his source of income, decides to manage his business transactions with non-Jews himself. Yet on one visit to the son of a rich landowner, he is accompanied by his oldest daughter, Esterka, in order that she persuades him to give work to her father. She is successful, but at the same time the spark of love is ignited in the heart of the twenty-year-old young man, Maciek, and he lusts after the tailor's daughter.⁶⁶ The tailor's attempts to protect his daughter are of no use and the cunning young man succeeds in forcing her to meet him in secret.

Another addition in Kronenberg's work takes place when Esther arrives at the palace, involving three significant personages at the king's court: Kochan Rava,⁶⁷ Spitek and Andrei. The three do not look kindly upon the relationship which appears likely to develop between the king and Esterka and thus attempt to prevent her from entering the palace. Eventually she is helped by Kochan, although his true aim is to attain the beautiful young woman for himself. A further significant addition is a conspiracy in the king's court to reveal the alleged love between Esterka and Kochan (in reality Esterka resolutely

64 The motif of suicide first appeared in Shmuel Yankev Imber's poem *Esterke* (Vienna-Brno: Yidishe bukh un kunst farlag, 1919, first edition Stanisławów: s.n., 1911) and after this in the poem *In Kazmeż* [In Kazimierz] (1912) by Zusman Segalowicz. See Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature*, 78–82.

65 See note 5 above.

66 Kogan-Dua's Maczko is not of such elevated pedigree.

67 In Kogan-Dua's work, Kochan Rava appears a number of times as a faithful friend of Esterke and the king.

refuses to submit to Kochan's wooing), which would result in their expulsion from the palace, in order that the daughter of one of the courtiers be set on the throne. This episode, not found in the Yiddish, takes place during the ball celebrating the dedication of the university, and Kochan even threatens that if Esterka refuses to submit to him he will slander her to the king. During the ball Kochan poisons Spitek, but suspicion falls upon Esterka and her servants. When Kochan's hopes of obtaining Esterka are dashed, he takes his own life, but not before confessing his acts to the king.⁶⁸

In conclusion, it seems that, in a similar manner to Rumsch, in both versions of this work the writers refrain from granting Esterka any official status. Despite the title of the Yiddish work, in the text itself she is referred to as the king's beloved (*gelibte*). In the Hebrew version she is first mentioned in the foreword as a concubine/mistress, but later this title is only used by her enemies.⁶⁹ On the other hand, this work, mainly the Hebrew version, exploits the opportunity to draw attention to the social dimension of inter-generational conflict. The known and painful phenomenon of Jews denying their people and the attraction of Jewish women to partners of a different religion was given widespread expression in Yiddish literature at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁷⁰

Esterke: di poylishe ester hamalke, appearing at the beginning of the fourth decade of that century, highlights the problem slightly differently. Esterka is attracted with all her might to the world outside of Jewish society. Neither the ascetic punishment that she decrees upon herself not to leave her home during a whole year, nor the threats of her father, a typical representative of traditional Judaism, can conquer the desire rooted in the depths of her being to flee her home and step out into surrounding society, although not specifically to assimilate into it. Maczko the neighbor—whether a simple peasant or a noble—is not her end goal. Rather she exploits him as a means to break free of the wall that prevents her from leaving her cosseted surroundings and sets her sights directly on none other than the king himself. The king's willingness to accept her unconditionally and her life with him bring her, seemingly, to the peak of happiness, but at the same time cause her misery. She lives in almost complete isolation and impatiently awaits the visits of her beloved, the king. Unlike other young women who sought to integrate into the surrounding

68 In Kronenberg's book, the opening is to be found on pages 5–15, and the other episodes discussed on pages 59–63, 96–117, 125–132.

69 In the introduction to the Yiddish booklet, the author disparages the term concubine/mistress as connected to anti-Semitism and then immediately defines Esther's title as "the royal beloved" (4), which he apparently considered most appropriate.

70 See Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature*, 60–82.

society through clear identification with it, even at the price of sacrificing their religion and nation, Esterke is careful never to deny her faith and her people. Moreover, while living secluded in the palace she takes an active interest in the fate of her people and without any hesitation acts on their behalf, and also punishes herself by constantly wondering what they think of her. Another no less serious question, if and how to cope with the near and distant surroundings of the king that are so blatantly hostile toward her, concerns her less. Thus the egocentric Esterka, similarly to Freund-Lehmann's character, proceeds to her forlorn end. She too meets an unnatural death and her burial, symbolically, is far from both her original environment and that into which she sought to integrate.

7 **F. Ehrlikh [Yankev Kopl Dua]: *Esterke (di yidishe gelibte fun kenig Kazhimierzs dem groysen)* [Esterke (The Jewish Beloved of King Kazimierz the Great)]**

The most recent and longest Yiddish work concerning King Kazimierz and his Jewish beloved is “Esterke (di yidishe gelibte fun kenig Kazhimierzs dem groysen) [Esterke (The Jewish beloved of King Kazimierz the Great)],” a serialized novel printed daily in the afternoon newspaper *Hayntike naves* (Warsaw) from October 12th, 1934, until April 4th, 1935. According to the newspaper the author was “F. Ehrlikh.” This is in fact a pseudonym of Yankev Kopl Dua, the author of the booklet *Esterke: di poylishe ester hamalke* discussed above. As was noted, of the works discussed here this novel is the widest in scope and the most developed in terms of plot, but is afflicted by all the symptoms of a fantastical and dramatic *shund* (trash) novel.⁷¹ It begins in the days when the threat of the “black death” hung over the Polish kingdom. An old Jewish woman and her thirteen-year-old granddaughter, Esterke, from Opoczno, are visiting a nearby town and are caught by rioters seeking to take out their rage upon them. While the mob is abusing the two women, the king and his assistant Kochan Rava appear; the king puts an end to the violence and orders that the women be taken to the palace, where they are provided with medical attention and nursed back to health. Under pressure from the queen, Rokiczina, they are dismissed from the palace and return to the home of Esterke’s father, Nosen the tailor, in Opoczno. Three years later, Esterke is abducted by a local Christian youth with

71 For a discussion of *shund* (trash) literature in Yiddish and serialized novels, see Khone Shmeruk, “Lê-tolodot sifrut ha-‘šund’ be-yidiš [History of *shund* literature in Yiddish],” *Tarbiz* 52 (1983): 325–350.

whom she had secretly been romantically involved, and he entrusts her to the safekeeping of an old Polish man named Maczko [!]. During the king's tour of his kingdom, he reaches Opoczno and requests to meet with Esterke, whose beauty had so enchanted him three years previously. Upon being informed that the young woman has been kidnapped, the king and his assistant set out upon a mission to save her, releasing her from her captors and returning her to her father's home, but not before the king invites her to live at the Wawel Castel. Esterke, well aware of her status yet at the same time unable to conceal her excitement at the proposition, responds that she is just a poor Jewish girl but that if in the future she will be invited to the palace she certainly would not refuse.

Meanwhile, the lives of the Jews of Opoczno become steadily more difficult and embittered. Their Christian neighbors bring a false blood libel against Nosen the tailor, his daughter and two other Jews. Esterke flees the town and, at the end of her journey, during which she is forced to hide from her persecutors, presents herself before the king, pouring out to him her sorrows and those of her relatives. Obviously the king once again comes to the aid of the persecuted and saves them. He announces to his confidantes that the foolish idea that the Jews use Christian blood for ceremonial purposes must be uprooted from the minds of his subjects; but one of his advisors (Suchiwilk)⁷² openly opposes him. Esterke is now invited to remain in the palace, without any connection to her origin, and she agrees to this on the condition that the king will inform her concerned parents and calm their fears. In the course of these events, a crisis arises in the relationship between the king and queen, concluding with the final separation of the royal couple. The king's glorious happiness with his new partner does not last for long. The leaders of the Church and his anti-Semitic advisors exert upon him heavy pressure to divest himself of his beloved.⁷³ They attempt to persuade him that she is an envoy of Satan (who in fact granted her legendary beauty) and warn him against humiliation in the

72 Janusz Suchiwilk was the king's secretary and Archbishop of Gniezno. A character by this name appears in Kozłowski's drama (in the Hebrew translation) as working to better the condition of the Jews and to improve them (socially, economically).

73 In this connection the names of historical figures are mentioned, including Bodzanta (note 60 above), Bogoryja (1276–1376), Suchiwilk's uncle (note 71 above), his predecessor as archbishop of Gniezno and following this archbishop of Lvov; Jadwiga, the king's third wife; and Baryczka, the community's priest and preacher at the Cracow Cathedral. These figures appear in the same roles in Polish literature concerning Esterka and also found their way to Aaron Zeitlin's drama, "Esterke un Kazimir der groyser," *Globus* 5 and 6 (1932): 5–38 and 12–46.

eyes of his subjects and against intolerable provocation of God.⁷⁴ As a result of this situation, Esterke suggests to the king that for his sake, she should leave the palace, but he firmly refuses to accept this solution. Esterke sets out to visit her parents in her home town in secret, in order not to give the impression that she is leaving, aiming to return to the palace with a Jewish cook; until this time she has avoided eating anything cooked in the palace. The visit causes considerable commotion in the small town. The Christians view her as a witch and thus are very wary of her, while the Jews are dumbfounded to hear that she must carry out the will of the king and return to him. A profound argument erupts in the Jewish community concerning whether Esterke will become the king's mistress. Upon the failure of attempts to prevent her return to Cracow, the community gathers in the synagogue for a special assembly. The leader of the community argues that the present situation is a heavenly decree—she is a second Esther, who saved the Jews more than once—whilst the town's wealthiest man claims that this is a disgrace. Eventually the assembly allows Esterke to speak. In a moving speech she announces that she is Jewish and will remain so; she is not a sinner but does the will of the king for the good of her people. Her words cause great excitement in the community and many see her as the reincarnation of the prophet Devorah.

Following the disappearance of a priest named Father Braitshka and the arrival of a Dominican priest who lays the blame for this upon Esterke and her satanic powers, the level of agitation in the capital city and the king's court rises. When the Jews of Cracow appeal to Levko (the king's treasurer) for help, he claims that their very presence in Poland is a problem in the eyes of the nations and every mystery somehow connected to Esterke, for example the Black Death or the blood libel, becomes a pretext to attack the Jews. The atmosphere in the palace becomes increasingly tense. Bishop Bodznata attempts to poison Esterke's food and is joined in his plot by the shamed Rokiczina. At the conclusion of a tense and dramatic scene, largely thanks to the resourcefulness of Kochan Rava, Esterke is saved and Rokiczina is banished from the palace. In order to protect Esterke, a palace is built for her at Łobzów, replete with Jewish

74 See the medieval period. Jews were identified as partners or emissaries of Satan (see Reuven Bonfil, "He-yehudim ve-ha-satan bē-todé'ah ha-notsrit bē-yemey ha-beynayim [The Jews and the Satan in Christian consciousness in the medieval period]," in: *Sin'at yisra'el lē-doroteyah*, ed. Shmuel Almog [Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for the Furtherance of the Study of Jewish History, 1980], 113–122) and, relevant to the discussion herein, played a role in the anti-Semitic propaganda published in Catholic newspapers in the inter-war period (see Anna Landau-Czajka, "The Image of the Jew in the Catholic Press during the Second Republic," *Polin* 8 [1994]: 155–164).

servants and guards. In a fresh argument which breaks out among the Jews of Cracow concerning Esther's behavior, the community is divided between the elders, who censure her actions, and the youth (both male and female) who offer her their support.

Under pressure from his advisors and Esterke, the king marries Jadwiga of Głogów.⁷⁵ The new queen rejects the advances of the king and in his frustration he travels to Łobzów. At this stage, the maidservant of the new queen is introduced: she takes it upon herself to arouse in the king loathing for Esther as a result of her ugliness. Thus begins a part of the work replete with folkloristic motives of witchcraft, potions and disguises, which concludes with the victory of the good characters and the exile of the maidservant (the king intends to have her executed but Esterke intercedes in order to prevent this). A further attempt is made to dispose of Esterke by the women of the court. At a well-attended royal ball, a comic anti-Semitic performance is staged.⁷⁶ Following this, Esterke rises from her place and explains to all those present that Jews are not satanic creatures but the children of the one God. In a response to queen Jadwiga's repetition of the catchphrase that Jews are the descendents of Satan, the king declares that "only fools are descended from Satan" (February 15th, 1935). Prince Anton of Denmark, one of the attendees of the ball, decides to kidnap the beautiful Jewess and run away with her to his kingdom, but thanks to Esterke's Jewish maidservant (who was previously a servant in Levko's home) and Kochan, she is saved and returned to her palace. As a result of all these events, Esterke (who in the meantime has borne the king two sons) enters into a period of introspection and decides that she must become closer to her fellow Jews; if they refuse to accept her, she is willing to relinquish her love for the king. Once again she travels to Opoczno and is rewarded with a touching reception; everyone says that she truly looks like a queen. Jews from the area arrive in order to complain to her about the persecutions and injustices committed against them. Even her former fiancée has forgiven her for abandoning him. In her visit to the synagogue, she sees the ark curtain that she donated and hears the community leaders cancel the curse they had put on her and bless both her and her father for meriting a daughter such as her.

Upon Esterke's return to the palace, she begins once more to act on behalf of the persecuted Jews and the king grants them privileges. At this point, Esther becomes the center of a new court conspiracy. The leaders of the church and nobles accuse her of a theft of produce that has resulted in the starvation of the Polish masses, but the king refuses to believe these accusations. The threats

75 The third official wife of Kazimierz the Great was Jadwiga of Zagan.

76 See also Dua's previous work.

of the religious representatives grow stronger and eventually cause him to swear that he will no longer see Esterke. Yet despite his oath, he continues to meet her in secret and she promises that she will never conduct a relationship with another man. After some time, Esterke is informed that the king has been wounded during a hunting expedition. She hurries to visit him but only with Kochan's help is she able to overcome the enemies that seek to prevent her from reaching the king, who constantly calls for her, and who dies whispering "Esterke, come to me" (April 3rd, 1935). At the royal funeral, Esterke's carriage is the last in the procession. At the conclusion of the ceremony, she returns to her palace and kills herself by drinking poison. She is buried in the palace garden and on her headstone is written "Love is stronger than death."

Despite its sensational style, this novel clearly reflects the state of distress in which the Jews of Poland found themselves at the time of its printing. It expresses the feelings of frustration felt by Jews faithful to their country and its government who were exposed to outbursts of malicious anti-Semitism, the source of which lay in the religious establishment and which occurred at all levels of Polish society. At the same time, the novel depicts the continuous tensions within the Jewish community, especially in relation to the question of how to cope with the phenomenon of integration—in no way by assimilation—into the surrounding society amidst a feeling that this society regards the very presence of Jews negatively. In this respect the confrontation between the generations presented herein is of particular interest. While the representatives of the establishment and the parental generation reject any kind of closeness between Jews and their surroundings (including even disputing the practical value of these relations), the younger generation requires these links and perceives them as a means to uproot prejudices and engender direct acquaintance.⁷⁷

8 Conclusion

In terms of the literary works in Jewish languages centering upon the story of Esterka, the five novels discussed in this article constitute a form of introduction and conclusion to those discussed in Shmeruk's research. The sources of the first two works, written in Hebrew, are German (at least according to the

⁷⁷ The next novel that Dua began to print in the newspaper, immediately following the conclusion of this one, was entitled *Der yiddisher kenig in Poylin* [The Jewish king in Poland] and concerns the life of Shaul Wohl.

statements of the adaptors).⁷⁸ Rumsch's novel, the first complete literary composition in a Jewish language to focus upon Esther,⁷⁹ beloved of the king of Poland, also provides an indication of a possible use of Polish source(s). This work, and likewise that of Lehmann-Freund, the exact time of the composition of which is unclear, fit the genre of the Jewish historical novel imported from Germany and popular in Eastern Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. The next writers to concern themselves with Esterka (Shomer and Eppelberg) also used, as is known, German sources,⁸⁰ and only writers that came after them increasingly employed Polish sources. It should also be remembered that Rumsch even took pains to include in his literary work a critical survey based (for the most part) on Jewish historiography over the generations, including his contemporaries. Rumsch avoided flights of fancy and adventure in this work. As is fitting for an educator and *maskilic* writer, he sought to remain close to what appeared to him to be the boundaries of reality and historical truth.

The Esterke story from 1909–1910 belongs to the trivial detective thriller and has little to do with the historical novel and with previous sources. The last two works were written by the same writer, but as a result of differing motivations, as is clearly reflected in their content. The 1930 booklet was printed in a series suitable for all readers, most of the other works in which were biographies and monographs of figures and events from Jewish and general history.⁸¹ For this reason, Kogan-Dua (similar to Rumsch) prefaced his work with a historical-literary survey, but in opposition to Rumsch and his generation, Kogan-Dua based this on a range of Polish sources and only on “certain Jewish sources,” which he does not bother to detail. His later novel, which brings to a close the list of literary works concerning Esterka of Opoczno,⁸² was intended for readers of a cheap and sensational afternoon newspaper and appeared around two years after Aaron Zeitlin's mystery, “Esterke un Kazimir der groyser,” was

78 Czyński's work was also published in French and German before it appeared in the writer's native tongue, Polish (see note 23 above).

79 As opposed to A.D. Liberman's partial translation of Philippson's drama.

80 On Shomer's sources, see Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature*, 41–45. Regarding Eppelberg, see *ibid.*, 55–59.

81 See Cohen, *Sefer, sofer ve-'iton*, 209–213.

82 The character of Esterka continued (and continues today) to appear at the periphery of literary works, for example Ilan Shainfeld's work *Šedčlets: zikhronot* [Siedlce: Memoirs] (Tel-Aviv: Shufra le-sifrut yafah, 1998), 18–20. I would like to express my thanks to Dr Gavriel Aleksander for bringing this work to my attention.

printed in 1932.⁸³ Kogan-Dua's novel was serialized in a newspaper and constitutes, in terms of the intricacy of its plot and its vast array of characters, a form of popular-fantastic response to Zeitlin's complex and sophisticated work, which Shmeruk describes as going "deeper [. . .] in probing the Esterke-Casimir relationship in terms of the total complexity of Jewish-gentile relations."⁸⁴

In addition to the historical background and to the literary style and genre of each of the works that were discussed above, a comprehensive examination of the Esterka story reveals a recognizable and cyclic phenomenon in the history of Hebrew and Yiddish literature. As was the case regarding many other works, a Hebrew version of the tale of Esterka and king Kazimierz preceded its first appearance in Yiddish. Yet it was a Yiddish booklet which was to become the almost exclusive source for the Modern Hebrew version of the story (*Be-'armon melekh Polin*), although the author neglected to mention this fact.

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83 See note 72 above. For a further discussion, see Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature*, 98–106.

84 *Ibid.*, 98.