

Lithuania, early January 1942. *Einsatzkommando* 3 of *Einsatzgruppe* A, under the command of SS Colonel Karl Jäger, has completed the execution of approximately 137,000 Jews, among whom were 55,000 women and 34,000 children. This is the apocalyptic background. An incident among thousands is inscribed in the January 14, 1942 entry of the *Kovno Ghetto Diary*. It reads as follows: "An order to bring all dogs and cats to the small synagogue on Veliunos St., where they were shot." A footnote adds a complementary indication: "The bodies of the cats and dogs remained in the synagogue on Veliunos St. for several months; the Jews were forbidden to remove them."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Abraham Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust: The Kovno Ghetto Diary*, Cambridge, Mass., 1990, p. 67. This work was edited by Martin Gilbert who also wrote the Introduction. The historical and textual notes were compiled by Dina Porat.

## Did Agnon Write About the Holocaust?

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### I

The question that opens this discussion has become almost unavoidable. And although in this article we shall confine ourselves solely to Agnon, the question itself by no means concerns him alone. The historical and critical debate that has centered around the Holocaust in recent years has caused this question to be raised repeatedly with regard to contemporary writers, poets and other artists. In view of the horrendous catastrophe, unprecedented in character or scale, it has become close to an article of faith that neither Jewish thought nor Jewish and Hebrew literature of the generation that experienced the Holocaust whether directly or indirectly, could avoid responding to it or at least attempt to cope with its implications. Despite the freedom of the writer or artist to choose the focus of his work, silence or lack of response toward the Holocaust is not always tolerated, and the reader has grown to expect writers to address this subject in one form or another.

This general question appears to acquire special urgency in the case of Agnon. A Jewish writer, born in eastern Galicia (then under Austro-Hungarian rule), Agnon concentrated on portraying the

\* Unless indicated otherwise, all page numbers at the end of quoted passages refer to the original Hebrew. The two sources for Agnon's works in English translation in this article are S. Y. Agnon, *Twenty-one Stories*, edited by N. Glazer, New York, 1970, and the story "The Sign," translated by A. Green, in *Response* 19 (Fall 1973), pp. 5-31.

world of East European Jewry and its cultural legacy from the early days of his literary career. The imagination of the writer described by G. Scholem as "the last Hebrew classic" was shaped by the Jewish East European *shtetl*. This also determined the physical and spiritual contours of his writings throughout his career. Neither his immigration to Eretz Israel during the period of the Second *Aliyah*, nor his involvement in the Zionist enterprise, nor even the secular and critical trends that had been in evidence in Hebrew literature from the late nineteenth century, managed to attenuate Agnon's ties to the topography of his childhood or to weaken his deep commitment to the predominantly religious culture that thrived there.

As Baruch Kurzweil has convincingly shown, Agnon did not take part in the processes of "de-Judaization" in Hebrew literature, even though he did not escape the crisis of "certainty of faith." But, while he witnessed the decline of the Jewish *shtetl* in Eastern Europe or perhaps even foresaw its destruction, as implied in his masterpiece *A Guest for the Night*, Agnon did not renounce its world of values, earnestly hoping that its houses of Torah study would in time relocate to Eretz Israel. In fact, none would contest that the commitment to the legacy of his native town forms one of the most striking features of Agnon's *oeuvre*.

During World War II and the Holocaust it unleashed, Agnon lived in Eretz Israel, and, like other East European representatives of the local literary community, he was forced to "watch" from a great distance the mass murder of his people, the devastation of their centuries-old habitats and often the death of close family. Uri Zvi Greenberg, for example, chose to place the Holocaust at the center of his work, and his book-long poem *Streets of the River*, published in 1951, entered the canon of contemporary Hebrew literature as the national lament of the destruction. Other writers, such as Natan Alterman and Amir Gilboa, who came to Eretz Israel at a relatively young age, and who — unlike Agnon or Greenberg — were not perceived as committed to the world of East European Jewry, nonetheless also addressed the Holocaust in their works. Later, even native-born writers such as Haim Gury or Hanoah Bartov, who acquired their literary reputations already

during the war years, certainly made the Holocaust one of the abiding concerns of their *oeuvre*.

In recent years we have been witnessing a resurgence of preoccupation with this subject among representatives of the "second generation" of Israeli literati, such as David Grossman or Nava Semel. Needless to say, writer-survivors who came to Israel at the end of World War II or shortly thereafter (e.g., Abba Kovner and Aharon Appelfeld), left a decisive imprint on the fictional exploration of this subject, and their writings also impacted on native-born authors. Thus, the Holocaust as a subject has been in evidence in Israeli literature for nearly fifty years. For obvious reasons the issue of Agnon's position in this corpus acquires particular urgency.

In fact, a scrupulous examination of criticism of Agnon's works reveals that the question of his attitude to the Holocaust is raised in a variety of contexts. For the most part it comes under scrutiny in articles and studies dealing with specific works, which, according to the critic or scholar in question, contain direct or often implicit reference to the Holocaust. At the same time, however, no attempt has yet been made to examine all the relevant material and to analyze it in order to reach a conclusive assessment of the depth of Agnon's commitment and the nature of his approach to the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> This critical lacuna appears to be a direct consequence of Agnon not being generally perceived as a "writer of the Holocaust." This is in contradistinction to U. Z. Greenberg, for example. On the face of it, the Holocaust does not appear very often in Agnon's works, and not a single central text written since the 1940s is devoted to this theme. Surprisingly, with the publication of posthumous volumes during the last twenty years, we are not called upon to modify this assessment in any significant way, even though the theme of the Holocaust in these works acquires new dimensions. As in the past, the particular posthumous works that contain some references to the Holocaust have elicited critical responses, yet the

<sup>1</sup> The first attempt of this kind was undertaken by Sydra Dekoven Ezrahi; "Agnon Before and After," *Prooftexts*, vol. 2 (1982), pp. 78-94 (henceforth: Ezrahi).

thrust of the debate remained unchanged. The overall question regarding Agnon's treatment of the Holocaust is still to be formulated — despite the obvious necessity to place it on the critical agenda. This study is meant to fill this gap and, drawing on a comprehensive analysis of relevant texts, to determine the true place of Agnon's corpus in what has come to be known as "Holocaust literature."

## II

It appears that for Agnon the war years were "business as usual." Unlike U. Z. Greenberg, who enveloped himself in artistic and public silence (although he had already begun writing *Streets of the River*), Agnon went on writing as in the past. In September 1939, shortly after the outbreak of World War II, the novel *A Guest for the Night*, which had appeared in installments before the war, was published and was designated as the seventh volume in the edition of his collected stories. The eighth volume, a diversified collection of stories entitled *Elu ve-Elu* ("Of Such and Such"), appeared in 1941. In 1943 the novella *Shevu'at Emunim* ("Loyalty Oath") was published. The broadly conceived novel *Temol Shilshom* ("Yesteryear"), which Agnon had written during the war years, appeared in 1945, shortly after the end of World War II; it came out as the ninth volume of his collected works. Apart from these texts, Agnon published dozens of short stories in those years — in the daily *Ha'aretz*, in literary journals (*Moznayim*, for example), and in other publications.

We should bear in mind, however, that 1940 was a totally barren year for Agnon — extremely rare in his literary career. Apart from the re-publication of two stories ("Mi-dirah le-Dirah" ["From Lodging to Lodging"] and "Pat Shlemah" ["A Whole Loaf"]), Agnon did not publish anything during that period. Can this "silence" be attributed to world events, or do the reasons lie elsewhere? For the time being, this remains an open issue.

Symbolically, the period of World War II in Agnon's literary career commences with the publication of *A Guest for the Night*. Dwelling on the visit of the narrator to his native town after a

prolonged absence, this novel would be described later as a clairvoyant text, documenting Agnon's premonition of the destruction of the Jewish *shtetl* before it actually occurred. The book draws mainly on Agnon's month-long visit to his native town of Buczacz and other localities in Poland in August 1930. It was the writer's first and only encounter with the Jewish world in Poland in the inter-war period.

The novel itself was written in the second half of the 1930s, i.e., after Hitler's advent to power, and appeared in installments in *Ha'aretz* between October 1938 and April 1939, prior to the outbreak of the war. The entire work was published early in September 1939, a few days after the Nazi invasion of Poland and on the eve of the Soviet occupation of eastern Galicia, Agnon's native land.

The first publication announcement appeared in *Ha'aretz* on September 8, 1939, and two days later, another announcement described the book as a portrayal of "the great Jewry, attached to its land for generations, in the process of destruction, and the sorrow of its decline unfolding in its distinct splendor in the pages of *A Guest for the Night*. Although this blurb refers to the aftermath of World War I, its appearance coincided with the first reports of the occupation of Poland and the onset of the catastrophe (see, for example, the report in *Ha'aretz* of September 17, 1939, under the headline "Long Pogrom Against the Jews in Occupied Poland"), thereby lending the publication a topicality truly astonishing in its poignancy.

This coincidence also affected the critical reception of the book. Although the critics were well aware of the fact that the writing had been completed before the outbreak of World War II, and that the war referred to in the book was World War I, some ventured to "read back" the ongoing events into the work. In other words, *A Guest for the Night* seemed to match the expectations of at least several critics, who wished for or needed literary texts resonating with the ongoing catastrophe, even if the fulfillment of this expectation came at the expense of historical accuracy. A good illustration of this approach is a short essay by Rabbi Benjamin (*nom de plume* of Yehoshua Radler Feldman), which appeared in

*Moznayim* in the fall of 1939, a few weeks following the publication of Agnon's book:

A few more words about this book *cum* story.

Its pages gleam with the melancholy light issuing from the innermost recesses of the terrible Holocaust which envelops like a shroud of poisoned nails the shuddering body of Polish Jewry.

Should Stalin and Hitler, the loving and pleasant companions, who butchered it, disappear tomorrow in the skies of Poland, its Jewry will not remain what it was in the past. The convulsion was so powerful that its traces will remain deeply etched in its features; the nightmare and pain will be passed down from generation to generation, but the tyrants will not disappear tomorrow or the day after.

As if from the skies, by dint of what only may be called felicitous coincidence, the author alighted on his native country, Poland, like a guest for the night, shortly before the outbreak of the Holocaust, so that his eyes might take in for the last time the features of Polish Jewry before the onset of the horror. And perhaps for this reason his heart was aggrieved while he applied himself to his labors, and he lost his peace of mind when the disaster struck.

Melancholy light rises up from the Holocaust and bounds this sad book like a new frame.<sup>2</sup>

This approach, pioneered by R. Benjamin, who also articulated his views on the subject with singular forcefulness, was followed by others. One year later, on the eve of *Rosh Hashanah* in 1940, Zvi Scharfstein published an article in *Ha-Doar*, entitled "Rabbi S. Y. Agnon Returned to Shibush and Saw Its Destruction." The bulk of this piece is devoted to the exegesis of the concept of *khurban* [destruction], in the context of the town's devastation during World War I and in its aftermath, as implied by the subject matter of *A Guest for the Night*. In the conclusion, however, the author establishes a connection between the text and the *khurban* which was literally taking place before their eyes:

In his book Agnon erected a tombstone for Shibush, and through it for every Jewish town in Galicia — a tombstone whose soft tune

2 R. Benjamin, "A Guest for the Night" (Hebrew), *Moznayim*, vol. 9 (1-5), Spring-Fall 1939.

rends readers' hearts. It is a complete account of destruction: destruction of the soul and the body. This year Shibush was delivered into the hands of Communist Russia. The *Bet Hamidrash* [house of study] that Agnon sought to breathe new life into, surely became a heretics' club, where messages of slander are disseminated. Hitherto merely taciturn, Rabbi Chaim, one of the Thirty-six Righteous, must have lapsed into total silence, while the righteous doctor was put in prison on account of his Hebraism and Zionism. One more time the desolate Shibush underwent transformation and assumed a new shape, and all it bequeathed to us is its *pinkas* [community record or ledger] in which the portraits of all the community leaders and the substance of their souls have been engraved for eternity. Future chroniclers will unlock this treasure-house, entitled *A Guest for the Night*, composed by Rabbi S. Y. Agnon of Jerusalem. May it be rebuilt and reestablished speedily in our time, Amen.<sup>3</sup>

This trend is in evidence also in later years; thus, for example, in 1941, after the Nazi occupation of southeastern Poland, the critic S. Y. Penueli published a review of the book in a Jerusalem literary magazine *Yalkut Yerushalmi Le-Divrey Sifrut*. Although the text contains no reference to the link between the book and the ongoing events, Penueli prefaced it with a few lines (under the title "Zion to Diaspora") in which the very act of reviewing the book "in the light of the homeland" is construed as an expression of solidarity with the "landscape of the diaspora."<sup>4</sup>

In the same year Shulamit Karl published an article, "Destruction of a Jewish Town in Poland," arguing that *A Guest for the Night* by Agnon and the novel *By the Rivers of Mazovia* (by the Yiddish writer M. Burstein)

have brought to us, several years before this war, the tidings of the catastrophe which was to strike Polish Jewry. They sensed the approaching steps of the Holocaust, several years before it actually happened, and described in pain the destruction of the Jewish town in the inter-war years.<sup>5</sup>

3 *Ha-Doar*, 19 (no. 30), 1940-1941, pp. 676-677.

4 *Yalkut Yerushalmi le-Divrey Sifrut*, 1941/2, pp. 203-205.

5 *Mibifnim*, April 1942, pp. 103-108.

Similar remarks were also made by Benzion Benshalom in a collection entitled *Hebrew Literature Between Two World Wars*, which appeared in 1942. In a chapter devoted to writers in Eretz Israel, Benshalom has this to say, inter alia, about *A Guest for the Night*:

He shows us the Jewish town in Galicia in its decline, its decay, its dying. We knew full well that the Jewish town in the Polish diaspora had begun to fade and had gone into decline several years before this war, but when a great and gifted writer comes along and brings this process into sharp relief, bringing all his talents to bear on this task, and with the aid of all artistic powers at his disposal, he adds new dimensions to the picture, and sheds a different light on it. The portrait of the town presented by the author is elevated to the rank of a symbol and verdict. It must be stressed that the story had been written several years prior to the outbreak of the war, that is to say, prior to the Holocaust which uprooted the dwellings of Jacob.<sup>6</sup>

In all these readings *A Guest for the Night* is seen through the contemporary lens of World War II, particularly in connection with the tragic situation of European Jews. All the authors mentioned above were, of course, well aware that the writing of the novel in question was unrelated in any way to these events. Yet this did not prevent them from venturing topical interpretations of the text. Thus, in their hands, *A Guest for the Night* is turned into a lament for Polish Jewry, whose fate had already been sealed.

In particular, one is struck by the fact that most of the writers quoted above employ the explicit term "Shoah," which they associate with the book. R. Benjamin, whose review appeared at the very outset of the war, uses this term three times. This interpretation posits Agnon, as early as the first years of the Holocaust, as a writer offering his Hebrew — mainly Yishuv — audience a relevant literary text by means of which the readers are able to express their solidarity with broad sectors of diaspora Jewry facing imminent disaster.

6 *Hebrew Literature Between Two World Wars* (Hebrew), 1942/3, p. 40.

### III

Among the stories that appeared in the first wave of works following the author's one-year "period of silence," was "*Le-veit Abba*" ("To Father's House"), published in the summer of 1941. It was later included as the opening text in the series of *The Book of Deeds* in the collection *Samukh ve-Nir'eh* ("Near and Apparent").<sup>7</sup> At first glance, it appears to lie within the fictional province well known in Agnon's *oeuvre*, both thematically and in terms of its narrative technique: it is a very short story written in the first person, devoted mostly to the depiction of a phantasmagoric or dream-like journey by the narrator (described as a writer) to "the father's house." The story begins with the exposition of the narrator's estrangement from his father's house, progresses through an account of a hallucinatory voyage he experiences on his way to the destination he has set for himself, and ends with the encounter itself — profoundly moving though inconclusive — between the narrator and the object of his yearnings:

My eyes opened and I saw Father, holding his cup of wine, about to chant the blessing over the wine, hesitating, waiting.

Afraid that I might disturb the quiet of the house, I wanted to explain to Father, letting my eyes speak for me, telling him why I had delayed coming for so long. My eyes closed again. Struggling, I opened them. Suddenly, I heard a noise like that of a sheet being torn. Actually, no sheet was being torn, but one small cloud high above was being torn, and once it was torn the moon came out, splitting the clouds, and a sweet light shone upon the house and upon Father (*Twenty-one Stories*, pp. 63–64).

"To Father's House" can be seen as a sequel, a completion, or even a symbolic exposition of the world as described in *A Guest for the Night*. After all, it does, in fact, contain the model of the plot of its predecessor (the narrator's journey to his native town), as well as the implicit ideological message (recognition that a return to the world

7 *Gazit*, vol. 4 (May-June 1941), p. 1; see also *Near and Apparent*, Schocken Books, 1953, pp. 103–105.

of the *shtetl* is all but a "belated return"). Agnon's critics, to the extent that they dealt with this story, focused mainly on its surrealist *mise en scene*, pointing out the intellectual and psychological background it shared with the other stories in *The Book of Deeds*, in the context of which most of them happened to read it.<sup>8</sup>

If, however, the story is considered in the perspective of the specific circumstances in which it appeared for the first time, we may hazard a guess that Agnon's return to the literary resources utilized in *A Guest for the Night* after the book's publication was directly related to the historical events that took place at that time in Eastern Europe, and particularly in Poland. True, at that stage the systematic extermination of European Jewry was yet to come, and hardly anyone could imagine its dimensions. But from September 1939 onward Agnon knew full well that the German occupation of most of Polish territory, together with the Soviet occupation of east Galicia, the country of his birth, heralded the end of the Jewish community in Poland. Furthermore, the story in question appeared in the June-July issue of *Gazit* magazine. This coincided with the invasion of the Soviet Union by a million-strong German army (June 21, 1941), and the German occupation of all of Polish territory, sealing the fate of Polish Jewry, including the Jews of Galicia. Thus, the journey described in "To Father's House" can easily be construed as Agnon's metaphorical attempt to return to the landscape of his childhood, even though he was well aware that the return was truly "belated," impossible in fact, owing to the new political situation that had emerged in Europe between September 1939 and June 1941.

Agnon returns to the themes of *A Guest for the Night* in another story, which appeared two years later, after verified reports about the true dimensions of the Holocaust had reached Eretz Israel (November 1942). The story, published in April 1943 (the month of the outbreak of the Warsaw ghetto uprising), bore the title "*Bein ha-Bait le-Hatzer*" ("Between the House and the Courtyard"), known

8 Hillel Barzel, "Just Before Passover" (on Agnon's story "To Father's House") (Hebrew), *Hadoar*, April 16, 1954; Esther Streit-Werzel, "'To Father's House' by S.Y. Agnon," *Katif*, 11, 1975, pp. 81-108.

to Agnon's readers in its later version as "*Im Kenisat ha-Yom*" ("At the Outset of the Day").<sup>9</sup> In fact, a number of critics noticed the possible connection between the story and the realities of the Holocaust, even though no one took notice of the fact that the first version of the story appeared during the Holocaust (S. D. Ezrahi argues that "At the Outset of the Day," together with other stories, such as "*Ba-Derekh*" ["On the Road"] and "*Laylah min ha-Leiloth*" ["The Night"] "capture with nightmarish surrealism the terror of the times").<sup>10</sup>

Similarly to the opening scene of *A Guest for the Night*, this story also begins with the arrival of the narrator (accompanied by his daughter) to the town on *Yom Kippur* Eve. However, these two personae, described as refugees from persecution, are exposed to a chain of terrifying events ("nightmarish surrealism") from the moment of their arrival that, if anything, make it abundantly clear that "father's house" can no longer provide shelter to those who need it. First, the fire of the memorial candle seizes the dress of the daughter, leaving her stark naked. Vainly, her father searches "for torn pages to cover with them my little girl," but they are nowhere to be found. Likewise, his visit to the house of Alter the circumciser (who symbolizes the world of childhood) is an exercise in futility: it turns out that Rabbi Alter had died, his daughter had grown old, and the house is inhabited by old men and women. The narrator departs "in despair and empty-handed." He returns to the synagogue, where he finds his daughter enveloped in symbols of death, next to "the purification board on which the dead are washed before burial." At that point the nightmarish sequence of events appears to break down, and, like "To Father's House," the story ends with a phantasmagoric scene:

The [old] House of Study was full of Jews, the doors of the Ark were open and the Ark was full of old Torah scrolls, and among them gleamed a new scroll clothed in a red mantle with silver points. This was the scroll that I had written.

9 *Moznayim*, vol. 16, no. 1 (April 1943), pp. 12-15. "At the Outset of the Day" was included in the collection *Ad Hena* ("Thus Far"), 1953, pp. 171-177.

10 Ezrahi, p. 87.

My soul fainted within me, and I stood and prayed as those wrapped in prayer shawls and ritual gowns. And even my little girl, who had dozed off, repeated in her sleep each and every prayer in sweet melodies no ear has ever heard (*Twenty-one Stories*, pp. 259–260).

The narrator's apologetic comment at the conclusion of the story — "I do not enlarge. I do not exaggerate" — imbues the idyllic ending with irony and cannot undermine the impression that gathers momentum as the story progresses that the town is, indeed, desolate, its inhabitants are dead, and returning to it is no longer possible.

Another story written in this period, which can be related to the ongoing Holocaust is "*Ba-Derekh*" ("On the Road"), published in *Ha'aretz* in September 1944. Later Agnon included it in *The Book of Deeds*, thereby completely obscuring the circumstances of its writing, least of all the possible link to contemporary events.<sup>11</sup> Like "To Father's House," it describes a traumatic journey by the narrator (identified by his authentic name "Shmuel Yosef Son of Rabbi Shalom Mordehai Halevy") to the European diaspora. In the course of this journey, he finds himself in the midst of a veritable field of slaughter:

We reached a ruined building of great stones. On the walls inside, there were visible signs of congealed blood, from the blood of the martyrs who had slaughtered themselves, their wives and their sons and daughters, to prevent their falling into the hands of the accursed ones. And the smell of fire emanated from the ruin, for after the martyrs had slaughtered themselves, the accursed ones set fire to the synagogue over them. Above the sanctuary hung a heavy curtain. Once it was white, but now it was black. And marks of congealed blood were visible upon it: the blood of the martyrs (*Twenty-one Stories*, pp. 185–186).

11 See *Ha'aretz*, September 17, 1944. The story was included in the collection *Near and Apparent*, pp. 211–220. English translation in S.Y. Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*.

From a host of indications appearing in the text, such as the description of the events themselves, reference to liturgy and prayer arrangements, as well as certain linguistic traces ("the martyrs who were slaughtered, killed and burned with fire for the sanctification of the Name"), we can conclude that the story takes place during the Crusades and refers to the attacks against Jewish communities in Europe at that time. Thus, Agnon, like the poet Saul Tchernichowsky,<sup>12</sup> treats the destruction and obliteration of Jewish communities in medieval Europe as a metaphor for the realities of Jewish life in contemporary Europe. This was argued at the time by E. Urbach, as part of his general discussion on the collection *Near and Apparent*:

The two stories with which the author concludes the part *The Book of Deeds* are "On the Road" and "The Letter." The first appeared in 1944, i.e., at the time when the fate of the European diaspora was already known. The writer returns to the setting of the story "Between Two Cities." It is the evening of penitential prayers, and the narrator travels aboard a train which makes an unscheduled stop. The railway inspector announces that the train cannot move on. The passenger worries how he will reach a settlement, and, if he does, whether he will find a Jew there, since "all the communities have been destroyed and Jews have not returned." When he wakes, he hears human voices, belonging to Jews wearing modest and humble clothes. They tell him that "In days gone by all the places were covered with sacred congregations, but on account of our manifold sins and the malice of the Gentiles, all the congregations were burned and killed and destroyed and laid waste, and none were left but one Jew here and one there." *It is quite clear that the memory of decrees and persecutions from the Middle Ages dovetails with rumors that reached the writer about Jewish communities during World War II.*<sup>13</sup>

Chronologically, "On the Road" appeared after the publication

12 Cf. *The Worms Ballads* (1942), in *Collected Poems of Saul Tchernichowsky* (Hebrew), 1957, pp. 733–749.

13 Ephraim E. Urbach, "Chapters from *Sefer Ha-Medinah* and Their Place in *Near and Apparent*" (Hebrew), in S.Y. Agnon: *Studies and Documents*, eds. Gershon Shaked and Raphael Weizer, 1978, p. 212.

of "The Sign" in the journal *Moznayim* in the spring of 1944, in which Agnon reacts directly and openly for the first and only time during World War II to the extermination of European Jews, while referring specifically to the destruction of the Buczacz community. The circumstances under which the story was written are hardly surprising. In the middle of June 1943, the last survivors of the Buczacz ghetto were executed in the Jewish cemetery. The labor camp near the town was also liquidated at about that time. In the following weeks the Germans and the Ukrainians continued to seek out Jews in hiding both in the ghetto and in the nearby woods; those who were discovered were led in groups to the cemetery and murdered. In March 1944, immediately after the capture of Buczacz by the Red Army, 800 Jews emerged from hiding-places in town and in the woods. The Germans counterattacked, recaptured the town and murdered the survivors. By the time the Soviet troops reentered Buczacz in July 1944, less than 100 Jews remained.<sup>14</sup> We can only speculate as to what details reached Agnon, but we cannot rule out the possibility that reports of the final liquidation of the community during those months somehow were brought to his knowledge. His response is to be found in a very short story "The Sign," in which he describes an encounter between the narrator (identifiable as the author) and the *paytan* [liturgical poet] Solomon Ibn Gabirol, which takes place in the shadow of rumors about the destruction of the Buczacz community.

The doors of the Holy Ark opened, and I saw a likeness of the form of a man standing there, his head resting between the scrolls of the Torah, and I heard a voice come forth from the Ark, from between the Trees of Life [Torah Scrolls]. Now the man who I had first seen between the scrolls of the Torah stood before me, and his appearance was like the appearance of a king.

I made myself small, but nevertheless he saw me. He did not speak to me by word of mouth, but his thought was engraved into mine, his holy thought into mine. Every word he said was carved into the forms of letters, and the letters joined together into words, and the words formed what he had to say.

14 See "Buczacz" in *Pinkas of Communities: Poland*, vol. 2: Eastern Galicia (Hebrew), 1980, pp. 87-89.

He asked me, "What are you doing here alone at night?" And I answered, "My lord must know that this is the Eve of *Shavuot* when one stays awake all night reading the Order of *Shavuot* Night. I too do this, except that I read the hymns of Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol, may his soul rest."

I put my finger to my throat as the old cantor used to do, and raised my voice to sing, "O Poor Captive," in the melody he had written. I saw that Rabbi Solomon, may his soul rest, turned his ear and listened to the pleasant sound of this hymn of redemption. I got up my courage and said to him, "In our town, wherever they prayed in the Ashkenazic rite, they used to say a lot of *piyyutim*. The beauty of each *piyyut* has stayed in my heart, and especially this 'Poor Captive,' which is the first Hymn of Redemption I heard in my youth." I remembered that Sabbath morning when I had stood in the Great Synagogue in our town, which is now laid waste. My throat became stopped up and my voice choked, and I broke out in tears.

Rabbi Solomon saw this and asked me, "Why are you crying?" I answered, "I cry for my city and all the Jews in it who have been killed." His eyes closed, and I saw that the sorrow of my city had drawn itself to him.

I raised my eyes and saw his lips moving. I turned my ear and heard him mention the name of my city. I heard him say, "I'll make a sign, so that I won't forget the name." My heart melted and I stood trembling.

Once more he moved his lips. I turned my ear, and heard him recite a poem, each line of which began with one of the letters of the name of my town. And so I knew that the sign the poet made for my town was in beautiful and rhymed verse, in the holy tongue.

Now to whom shall I turn who can tell me the words of the song? To the old cantor who knew all the hymns of the holy poets? I am all that is left of all their tears. The old cantor rests in the shadow of the holy poets, who recite their hymns in the Great Synagogue of our city. And if he answers me, his voice will be as pleasant as it was when our city was yet alive, and all of its people were also still in life. But here — here there is only a song of mourning, lamentation, and wailing, for the city and its dead (*Response*, pp. 28-31).<sup>15</sup>

Agnon's critics attempted to link two other stories written in those years to contemporary events. Thus, some argued that the

15 "Hasiman" ("The Sign"), *Moznayim*, vol. 18, May 1954, p. 104. The story was included in the collection *Pitkhei Devarim* ("Fragments"), Schocken, 1977, p. 196. On the expanded version of the story see following.



story "The Lady and the Peddler" is an allegory in which the peddler represents the eternal Jew, whereas the lady named Heleni, who seeks to murder him and to drink his blood, represents Nazi Germany. Allegorical interpretation is borne out at least by the fact that the first version of the story appeared in 1943, when it was included in an anthology entitled *Ba-Sa'ar*, prepared by writers in Eretz Israel for Yishuv soldiers who had volunteered to serve with the Allied forces.<sup>16</sup>

Arnold Band went even further when he attempted to establish a link between the novel *Yesteryear* and the Holocaust. Band argues that the tragic and irrational death of Itzhak Kummer at the conclusion of the novel should be construed as a topical statement:

A possible answer to this question is suggested by the *Sitz im Leben* of the novel, most of which, we should recall, was written in the dark days of World War II when news of the meaningless slaughter of millions of Itzhaks in Europe reached Jerusalem.<sup>17</sup>

S. Y. Penueli also went to great lengths to link moral questions arising in the story "Tehillah" published in 1950, to the realities of the Holocaust:

The great question that the story seeks to answer is, *Is it possible for humankind to exist without God who oversees and reckons and remembers and chastises and pays in kind*. Our generation has to know it, because it is in our generation that the human sin has been committed of the great, mass murder of millions of human beings, and payment in kind did not come.<sup>18</sup>

Forced arguments of this kind only reinforce the impression of the plight in which Agnon's critics find themselves in view of what

16 S. Y. Agnon, "Ha-Adonit ve-ha-Rochel" ("The Lady and the Peddler"), in *Ba-Sa'ar* (anthology compiled for Hebrew soldiers by Eretz Israel writers), Tel Aviv, 1952, pp. 84-93. Also in this context see, for example, Avraham Bick, "S.Y. Agnon and His Parable on Germany," in *Reflections and Images: Essays on Israeli and World Literature* (Hebrew), 1965, pp. 127-134.

17 Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1966 (henceforth: Band), p. 447.

18 S. Y. Penueli, *Studies in S.Y. Agnon* (Hebrew), 1960, p. 170.

seems to be an inadequate reaction of the admired writer to the Holocaust.

In fact, generally speaking, Agnon preoccupied himself little with the Holocaust during World War II, and his reaction to it occupies a rather marginal position in his *oeuvre*. This holds true even if, in addition to "The Sign," other stories discussed previously in this article are also construed as an artistic response, oblique as it may be, to the trauma of the Holocaust.

Explanation of this phenomenon is twofold: social and poetical. One argument holds that the inadequate awareness on the part of the Yishuv in Eretz Israel of the true dimensions of events in Europe during the Holocaust, as well as Agnon's reaction, derive, in part, from the prevailing outlook of the Jewish community in Eretz Israel. (Interestingly, during the Holocaust Agnon wrote his "Palestinocentric" novel, focusing on the beginnings of the organized Jewish community in the country.) According to the second explanation, the minimal response of the writer to the ongoing events had to do with his poetics: in contradistinction to the poetics of Brenner or U. Z. Greenberg, Agnon always favored belated artistic response — often many years after the events.

#### IV

After the war ended, Agnon, like the majority of the Yishuv, went through the shocking experience of encounter with the surviving remnant; through literature, documents, written and oral testimonies, and actual encounters with survivors, the true dimensions and substance of the catastrophe visited upon the Jewish people during the Holocaust were revealed. Since the late 1940s this collective experience has certainly been articulated in Israeli literature; the most prominent texts in this regard are the novella *Chuppa ve-Taba'at* ("Canopy and the Ring") by Haim Hazaz (1948), the long poem *Shirei Ir ha-Yona* ("Songs of the City of the Dove") by Natan Alterman (1958), and the novel *Pitzei Bagrut* ("The Brigade" in the English version) by Hanoch Bartov (1965). Marginal works by Agnon also bear witness to this encounter.

Agnon appears to have tackled the post-Holocaust reality for the first time in the story "The Night," published in 1951.<sup>19</sup> In it he relates the story of a dramatic encounter between the narrator and his relative, a Holocaust survivor ("We thought he had perished in the ovens of Auschwitz") against the background of the mass immigration of the early 1950s:

The streets thronged with people, especially the new immigrants who arrived from all countries. For many years they languished in death camps, or wandered through forests, mountains, fields and vales and lakes, without seeing as much as a light of a candle.

However, as the story unfolds, the ambivalent attitude of the narrator toward the survivor is brought into focus. The appearance of the relative, which threatens the established routine of the narrator, arouses, at first, his resistance and rejection, causing him to try to get rid of him. As time passes, however, he is overcome with feelings of guilt which spur him to make a pathetic, though ineffective, effort to locate his relative so as to lift his spirits and make up to him for his sufferings.

Critics offered two different interpretations of this story. Band views this layer of Agnon's short text in terms of "grappling with his guilt feelings toward his well-being in a period of refugees and death camps."<sup>20</sup> M. Granot takes Agnon to task on this issue from a different standpoint:

In other words, the narrator lays bare his most hidden thoughts, which give reason to believe that he is trying to distance himself from the memory of the Holocaust and transform a total catastrophe into "troubles," so familiar to the Jews, to which they can be reconciled, and then go back to one's daily routine. The story clearly expresses the narrator's desire to nullify the memory of the Holocaust, a desire issuing from Agnon's outlook which is reflected in the entirety of his *oeuvre*.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> The story was published for the first time in *Ha'aretz*, April 20, 1951, and later included in the collection *Thus Far*, pp. 207-216.

<sup>20</sup> Band, p. 364.

<sup>21</sup> Moshe Granot, *Agnon Without a Mask* (Hebrew), 1991, pp. 16-17. Iconoclastic in intent, this study is meant to smash the "myth" of Agnon; the writer's

More references to the presence of the survivors are to be found in various stories included in the posthumous collection *Pitkhei Devarim* ("Fragments").<sup>22</sup> In these unfinished stories, which hitherto existed only in manuscript form, Agnon deals either explicitly or indirectly with the Holocaust theme. One of them, entitled "The Photograph," was written in reaction to an announcement in *Ha'aretz* under the title "Who Knows My Parents?" It featured a photograph of a little girl accompanied by her appeal to the public to help her retrace her origins. The photograph was found in Agnon's private archives, and, according to the editor of the book, Emunah Yaron, there is an indisputable connection between it and the work in question. In the story itself, the narrator appears as the guardian of the girl, a Holocaust survivor who had been brought to a monastery as an infant until her adoption by a lonely Jerusalemite woman. Most of the story is devoted to the narrator's failed attempt to help the girl locate her parents — whose names she doesn't even know — by publishing her photograph in newspapers

so that perhaps someone would recognize from her photograph to whom Amitzah [the girl's name] bears resemblance, for Hitler swallowed up her father and her mother, her brothers and sisters, and all her relatives, at the time she was still suckling and could not ask what their names were (p. 165).

However, the narrator's plan to help the girl is not put into practice for what appears to be a trivial coincidence; the printer who had agreed to prepare the etched zinc plate of the girl's photograph finds himself preoccupied with preparing for print the works of painters participating in the "winter exhibition." Thus, the rationale for the narrator's failure lies not in his personality but in the social order, in the callousness of a society whose warped order of priorities places art above life, especially the lives of Holocaust survivors.

attitude to the Holocaust is one of the themes explored by the author (henceforth: Granot).

<sup>22</sup> See note 14.

In another story in this collection, "Mr. Halperin, Brother of Mr. Halperin," Agnon constructs a situation known from *The Book of Deeds*, at the center of which is an accidental encounter between the narrator and a Holocaust survivor named Halperin, who relates to him the story of his life:

And so he would carry on reminiscing until he came to the very first events that overtook him during the first war and then he would speak of all that had occurred between the first and second war and of what occurred during the days of the second war, when he had hoped that the Russians would save him and his wife and sons from the Germans, though in the end he lost his wife and sons and nearly perished in the forests of Siberia. Assailed by one misfortune after another, it is difficult to grasp how he endured all these hardships and stayed alive (pp. 193-194).

As in the previous story, the narrator is called upon to help search for relatives and to locate the friend of the interlocutor from the days of his youth who bears the same name — Halperin — and about whom he had heard from the narrator himself. However, in the course of their search, a third party informs Mr. Halperin and the narrator who accompanies him that the other Mr. Halperin had left to welcome his daughter's daughter, the last survivor of the family that had perished in the Holocaust:

At the end of Nazi rule Hitler seized Dr. Halperin's daughter and her husband, and did to them what he had done to six million Jews; when he learned that the baby of his only daughter had survived he did not rest and did not desist, and moved the whole world to locate her (p. 191).

As the story unfolds it becomes increasingly clear that Mr. Halperin is but the double of his namesake, as both the survivor and the non-survivor are portrayed by the author as victims of the same total national catastrophe which spared no one.

To these two stories we should add a third, which contains a reference to the Holocaust, even though it does not constitute the central theme of the text. For the most part, "Fragments" is constructed as a dialogue between the narrator and Ezra Terir, his

long-time friend, who reminisces about their days in Germany. However, reference to events in Germany in the remote past leads, associatively, to the Holocaust era:

I would give the whole universe to the person who could tell me whether this baby girl lives or not. I had saved her from a Gentile who kissed her, and I fear that perhaps another Gentile came and delivered her to the ovens in Auschwitz (p. 108).

This leads to generalization:

Since his conversation had led to one such Jew, he mentioned all kinds of events great and small, sad and joyous which had occurred in those villages among those Jews. Not many of them survived, for those who did not die by the hand of heaven, died on account of Hitler (p. 114).

The drift of this conversation leads the speaker not only to brooding reflections on the German soul, but also to harsh criticism — a rare occurrence in Agnon's writings — of the prevailing tendency toward reconciliation between Jews and Germans.

Reference to these texts — both those printed in the author's lifetime and those published posthumously — constitutes a conclusive evidence of the fact that "Auschwitz" (rendered by Agnon, probably deliberately, in an unconventional Hebrew spelling) both as reality and as symbol, was very real for Agnon. Moreover, these texts offer convincing evidence of the author's special sensitivity toward the survivor singed by the fire of the Holocaust. Nonetheless, we should also bear in mind that although Agnon did devote some attention to these themes, he did not subject them to full-fledged artistic treatment. Encounters with survivors, or with the fresh memories of the Holocaust hardly transcend the bounds of a marginal reference (as in the story "One Night") or of literary experiment (as in "The Photograph"), and never reach the status of a true work of art. Agnon was aware of this at the time he decided not to publish several stories, which, more than any other work of his, display his unmistakable intent to find a suitable fictional vehicle for a direct treatment of the Holocaust or its

survivors. There is no doubt that he recognized the limits of his artistic powers as far as a literary approach to this theme was concerned.

## V

For the reading public, Agnon appears to make a general and significant statement on the Holocaust for the first time in the book *The Fire and the Wood*, published in 1962.<sup>23</sup> Although he published this collection almost against his will and felt ill at ease with it, the authorial intent comes through quite clearly. Baruch Kurzweil was the first critic to bring it into sharp relief:

One large theme binds together all the stories, and various fragmentary epic plans, beyond time and place: the theme of extermination, the modern *akedah* [the sacrifice of Isaac], which modifies the epic perspective, and prevents the epic project from taking shape in line with the plan conceived by the author.<sup>24</sup>

Kurzweil goes to great lengths to substantiate his argument, an exercise often verging on acrobatics. Thus, he chooses to omit from his discussion those passages in the book that do not fit into his overall conception, or offers speculative interpretation of other passages whose relevance to his argument is tenuous at best. At the same time, however, his diagnosis of *The Fire and the Wood* is certainly illuminating, and, though not totally applicable to the entire collection, it certainly brings into focus its abiding concern.

The theme of the Holocaust is explored in three central texts included in the book, all of which were written, or at least conceived shortly after the Holocaust: "*Korot Bateinu*" ("Our Family Chronicles"), "*Lefi ha-Tza'ar ha-Sakhar*" ("The Trouble's Reward") and "The Sign." Each one of these works has its own history. Thus, "The Trouble's Reward" appeared for the first time in *Ha'aretz*, on

23 *The Fire and the Wood* (Hebrew), 1962. This collection appeared as the eighth volume of *The Collected Works of S.Y. Agnon*.

24 Baruch Kurzweil, *Studies of S.Y. Agnon's Stories*, 1966 (hereafter: Kurzweil), p. 312.

September 23, 1947, i.e., a little over two years after the end of World War II. Sections from *Our Family Chronicles*, including the programmatic prologue which explicitly links the text with the Holocaust, began appearing in 1947, as part of *Ha'aretz Almanac* for 1947. Additional sections of the book appeared in *The Fire and the Wood*. More sections were discovered after Agnon's death, and the complete version appeared posthumously in book form in 1979. Needless to say, posthumous publication accords the text a new status, necessitating a separate discussion.<sup>25</sup>

The third story, "The Sign," appeared, as we have already mentioned, during the war; this, however, was the first, very short version, barely one page long. An expanded version, included in the collection under discussion, appeared in the section "With Myself" ("*Im atzmi*"), and takes up thirty pages. We should also bear in mind that although the title chosen by Agnon for the collection — "The Fire and the Wood" — alludes to the sacrifice of Isaac, it derives from the opening story "The Trouble's Reward," and its implications extend to the entire collection. As Baruch Kurzweil commented: "Everything around us has turned into fire and wood, and our people has become as a lamb offering."<sup>26</sup>

In his "apology" at the conclusion of the collection, Agnon asserts that

My story "The Trouble's Reward" is the first of my stories about our teachers the holy *paytanim* [liturgical poets], may they rest in peace, whose *piyyutim* resonate both with praises of the Holy One Blessed be He, and with the sorrow of his children (p. 325).

However, the story in question should be examined in its own right, while taking into special consideration the circumstances under which it was written. The main character in the story is a fictional medieval *paytan*, who bears the symbolic name Zidkiah (derived from *tzedek*, "justice"). A righteous man through and

25 S. Y. Agnon, *Our Family Chronicles* (Hebrew), 1978. See also the article by this author, "Composing Family Chronicles" (Hebrew), *Ha'aretz*, July 13, 1979. For a discussion of the book in its entirety see following.

26 Kurzweil, p. 318.

through, this *paytan* appears to have lived during the Crusades, when Jews, as the author hints here, were subjected to ceaseless persecutions. The grim reality moves him to consider what would be the most suitable literary form in which to respond to events. He settles on the *akedah*, a well-known literary device in the tradition of Hebrew *piyyut*. Thus Agnon:

Mr. Zidkiah sat and reflected on the justice of the Holy One Blessed be He toward Israel and on the justice of Israel toward the Holy One Blessed be He, who endure all the misfortunes inflicted upon them without even flinching and who stretch out their necks to be slaughtered in the name of His uniqueness...and he turned his thoughts to Isaac our father, the offering of God, the first of the sacrificed, who offered himself on the altar in order to obey the will of his father in the heavens. He reached out for a pen and commenced pouring sacred and awesome rhymes pertaining to the sacrifice, as it is written in the Torah and as it is studied in the *midrashot*. And so he would sit and rhyme as did the poets of the sacred who would offer their hearts and songs to His Blessed awesomeness, until he wrote the entire story of the *akedah* in awesome and sublime rhymes (pp. 8-9).

Although Agnon appears to dwell here on historical materials, it is difficult to imagine that he wrote these lines in 1947 without bearing in mind the realities of the Holocaust. Essentially, this text follows up "On the Road," written during the Holocaust and set specifically at the time of the anti-Jewish riots of 1096. Although, as E. Urbach argued, the timing of the publication establishes a clear link between the text and contemporary events. This conclusion is also based on the assumption that, in writing the story in question, Agnon was inspired by Abraham Meir Haberman's work *The Book of Anti-Jewish Edicts and Disturbances in Germany and France: Narratives and Liturgical Poems* (Hebrew), published in 1945. The book consists of an extensive selection of narratives and liturgical poems composed by contemporaries in response to the wave of anti-Jewish edicts and savage attacks unleashed against Jewish communities in these countries, including a number of texts stylized as *akedot*, or sacrifices. In the preface to his book, Haberman himself sought to establish a link between anthologizing these texts

for the first time for readers in Eretz Israel and the realities of recent Jewish existence in Europe, while dwelling on the problems posed by literary response to the horrors of the Holocaust:

These days it is incumbent upon us to read again these ancient texts. We have not expected that the Middle Ages would come back to haunt us. We thought, what happened then cannot happen again in our time. But, we were in for a bitter disappointment. The Middle Ages are back with us, on a greater scale, and with even greater ferocity.

Although our historical sense remains keen, no expression has yet been given to that which has befallen us in the recent past, and, it turns out, it is still too early to do so. Those whose dead lie before them, and whose hearts are heavy with pain, are unable to articulate their grief, no matter how much they wish and need to do so.

Meanwhile, let us delve into these ancient pages, which often seem to reverberate with the echo of recent events. Let us draw from them the strength to bear the pain, and the consolation, minute as it may be, to sustain us: our enemies have sought to destroy us, but we live and exist, now as before.<sup>27</sup>

At first glance, Agnon's story addresses the dilemmas with which the artist has to grapple in times of calamity, as Haberman articulates this question in his preface. Viewed in this perspective, the story in question elaborates on the issues raised in the first version of "The Sign," in which the *paytan* Ibn Gabirol is depicted as the author of a liturgical poem with an acrostic meant to commemorate the name of the town laid waste in the Holocaust. In this sense the story may be construed as *ars poetica*, in which the contemporary author traces the travails of a medieval Jewish poet in his efforts to grapple with the catastrophe visited on his people. At the same time, however, it should also be viewed as an expression of Agnon's commitment to the ideational significance of *kiddush hashem* [martyrdom for sanctification of God's name]. After all, composing a narrative structured as an *akedah*, and certainly the specific work written by Ribbi Zidkiah, as depicted in the story,

27 A. M. Haberman, ed., *Book of Anti-Jewish Edicts and Disturbances* (Hebrew), 1971, p. XI.

articulates a religious worldview in which the sufferings of the Jewish people, including martyrdom, are portrayed as a declaration of faith, in the spirit of the underlying message of Isaac's sacrifice.

It follows that in writing this story, which amounts to an apotheosis of a medieval Jewish *paytan*, composer of *akedot*, Agnon lent his voice to the traditional Jewish response to collective calamity; furthermore, he implicitly construes it as a legitimate response to the destruction of European Jewry during the Holocaust. This interpretation, whereby Agnon adopts the norms of martyrological narrative response, is further borne out by the first episode in the story "The Stool and the Throne," in which the narrator instructs his daughter — clearly as part of an educational ritual — in the norms of *kiddush hashem*. Despite the fact that the episode in question is linked to the medieval period (by means of a background description of a painting of Isaac's sacrifice, found in the city of Mainz during the pogroms), the story itself was written in the 1950s, stylized as an autobiographical piece, and scattered throughout are indications that the narrator is keenly aware of the Holocaust. Thus, we may conclude that the approbation of the value of *kiddush hashem* was not made in a vacuum and was aimed at the realities of the Holocaust.<sup>28</sup>

Although Agnon chose "The Trouble's Reward" as the opening story of the collection, it appears that the main text relating to the Holocaust in *The Fire and the Trees* is the story "The Sign." The quantitative expansion of the story from the first to the second version also produced far-reaching changes in the text: of a total of forty-two chapters in the new story, only the last seven are devoted to a description (modified as compared to the first version) of the phantasmagoric encounter between the narrator and the *paytan* Shlomo Ibn Gabirol. The preceding thirty-five chapters recount in detail the narrator's experience as he comes to grips with the destruction of his town Buczacz during the *Shavuot* festival. With

28 See "The Stool and the Throne" (especially the chapter "*Ha-oked ve-ha-ne'ekad*") in *Within the Walls* (Hebrew), 1975, pp. 128–130. See also Hillel Weiss, *Study of "The Stool and the Throne" by S. Y. Agnon* (Hebrew), Ramat Gan, 1985, pp. 46–50.

the exception of the scene of the liturgy for *Shavuot* Eve, which also appears in the first version, in the second version Agnon dwells extensively on customs of the holiday as it was celebrated in the narrator's home in Jerusalem and the synagogue nearby, weaving into them memories of the holiday customs in Buczacz.

The physical setting of this description is recounted with precision: the city of Jerusalem and, in even greater detail, the Talpiot neighborhood where Agnon himself lived. Furthermore, autobiographical elements are brought into sharp relief so that the narrator and Agnon the writer become indistinguishable. The prominence of autobiographical details lends the second version of "The Sign" the air of an autobiographical confession, which allows Agnon to scrutinize in detail, sincerely and directly, more than in any of his other writings his own coming to terms with the "trauma of the Holocaust."

The news about the destruction of Buczacz, sketched very briefly in the first version, is described extensively and completely in the text under consideration. There is no doubt that in the spring of 1944 — the initial reports on the gradual liquidation of the Buczacz community notwithstanding — information was scant. Those living at an immense physical and mental distance from the killing fields were most certainly limited in their ability to absorb it and its implications were certainly limited. This explains the laconic and somewhat reserved phrasing: "Buczacz is the name of my town and I do not know whether it still exists." Furthermore, Agnon employs a rather euphemistic term — "troubles" — to describe the current fate of his native town.

The second version, as we recall, appears to have been written in the 1950s, when the author knew with certainty about the death of the six million, let alone the end of Buczacz. Although the events described in the second version of the story take place during the Holocaust (the day when "rumor was heard about the town and its dead"), the decisive language employed in it attests to the gap between the time-frame of the story and the time of its writing. The difference between the two versions, both in the quality of information available and in its perception, is directly attributable to this gap. Following are several passages from the second version,

which also reverberate with the commemorative prayer for the martyrs of the Holocaust:

Tens of thousands of Israel, none of whom the enemy was worthy even to touch, were killed and strangled and drowned and buried alive; among them my brothers and friends and family, who went through all kinds of great sufferings in their lives and in their deaths, by the wickedness of our blasphemers of God, whose wickedness had not been matched since man was placed upon the earth (*Response*, pp. 6-7).

Six million Jews have been killed by the Gentiles; because of them a third of Israel are dead and two thirds are orphans. You won't find a man in Israel who hasn't lost tens of his people. The Eternal had a great thought in mind when He chose us from all peoples and gave us His Torah of life. Nevertheless, it is a bit difficult to see why He created, as opposed to us, the kinds of people who take away our lives because we keep His Torah (*Response*, pp. 22-23).

The candles which had given light for the prayers had gone out; only their smoke remained to be seen. But the light of the memorial candles still shone, in memory of our brothers and sisters who were killed and slaughtered and drowned and burned and strangled and buried alive by the evil of our blasphemers, cursed of God, the Nazis and their helpers. I walked by the light of the candles until I came to my city, which my soul longed to see (*Response*, p. 26).

In contrast, Agnon consistently portrays the receipt of reports on the destruction of European Jewry in general and of Buczacz in particular as the polar opposite to the idyllic existence in Eretz Israel. The latter is articulated above all by means of the account of the orderly and harmonious routine enjoyed by the narrator and members of his household, who celebrate the *Shavuot* festival down to the minutest ritual prescriptions. The story also contains an explicit reference to the house in which the narrator lives permanently in the Talpiot neighborhood, as well as to the garden he planted around it. Both elements are symbols of stability and rootedness. Moreover, in a number of chapters the narrator appears to digress from the main subject of the story and dwells at length on the history of his neighborhood. He connects this to the history of the development and building in Jerusalem as a whole. These sections implicitly convey the author's esteem for Zionist activism

and its daring confrontation with the Arabs as associated with building up the country. The narrator lists the advantages of living in Eretz Israel as compared to diaspora existence with regard to securing and protecting the physical existence of the Jew:

On the contrary, with every sorrow I used to say how much better it was to live in Eretz Israel than outside the Land, for Eretz Israel has given us the strength to stand up for our lives, while outside the Land we went to meet the enemy like sheep to the slaughter (*Response*, p. 6).

Here Agnon posits a clear dichotomy between Buczacz, the city destroyed, and Jerusalem, the city built, as symbolizing the broader opposition between the diaspora and Eretz Israel. Moreover, a link is established in the text between the renewal of Jewish existence in contemporary Eretz Israel and the continuing existence and effort to sustain Jewish religion — signified by the *Shavuot* festival, which is also the holiday of the giving of the Torah. Some readers may be astonished, or even critical, of the emphasis the narrator puts on the zealous observance of the ritual and liturgy of *Shavuot* in all its detail, as rumors about the town of Buczacz and its dead circulate in the background:

I came home and greeted my wife and children with the blessing of the holiday. I stood amazed to think that here I was celebrating our holiday in my home, in my land, with my wife and children, at a time when tens of thousands of Israel were being killed and slaughtered and burned and buried alive, and those who were still alive were running about as though lost in the fields and forests, or were hidden in the holes in the earth.

I bowed my head toward the earth, this earth of Eretz Israel, upon which my house is built, and in which my garden grows with trees and flowers, and I said over it the verse "Because of you, the soul liveth." Afterward I said *Kiddush* and the blessing "Who has given us life" and I took a sip of wine and passed my glass to my wife and children. I didn't even dilute the wine with tears. This says a lot for a man; his city is wiped out of the world, and he doesn't even dilute his drink with tears (*Response*, pp. 9-10).

This kind of rethoric, employed, it should be noted, not only in

this passage, but throughout the entire story, lends modern guise to the traditional concept of "khuban and redemption," as it appears in the Bible, in Lamentations, and in *midrashim*.<sup>29</sup> The story balances the Holocaust of European Jewry with the regeneration of the Jewish community in Eretz Israel and the establishment of the State of Israel, described as "the beginning of our redemption," while, at the same time, national independence is perceived as a guarantee for the continuity and safeguarding of Judaism. After all, continuing observance of the prescribed religious ceremony in Jerusalem constitutes a real and sole substitute for religious life in Buczacz which, from now on, will exist in memory alone:

So I closed my eyes and summoned my town to stand before me, the town and all its inhabitants, the town and all its houses of prayer (p. 303).

Whereas in "The Trouble's Reward" Agnon appears to uphold the traditional martyrological conception enjoining acquiescence to divine judgment and a willingness to submit to trial and sanctify God's name without any qualms, in "The Sign" the author makes his stand on the side of Zionist Orthodoxy that pressed for the active return of the Jewish people to an orderly life in its homeland and the realization of its mission as the people of the Torah as the correct "response" to the Holocaust. This is borne out by the author's allusion to such a prayer for the Holocaust martyrs in which the idea of sanctifying God's name (articulated in the version of commemorative prayer for the martyrs of the Crusades) is replaced by a expression of hope for the return of the "scattered of Israel" to Zion.

In his discussion of the overall reaction of religious Jewry to the Holocaust, Eliezer Schweid elucidated both the sociological context and the ideological significance of this position:

Jewish theologians outside the camp of *haredi* Orthodoxy construed the establishment of the State of Israel above all as a historical

29 Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*, New York, 1984, pp. 3-5.

development restoring the balance. Certainly, establishment of the state after the Holocaust did not provide a full answer to the questions posed by it. However, it was viewed as a consoling truth, the consolation of return to life. From the standpoint of religious Zionism, the establishment of the state after the Holocaust demonstrated the reality of divine assistance to the independently launched venture of national redemption, and that in times as these the Jewish people were duty-bound not to await the mercy of Heaven, but to assume national responsibility and act accordingly. What is more, the state provided religious Zionism with a defined space to exercise the responsibilities of collective religious leadership and with opportunities to struggle for the return of the Jewish people to the fold of religious leadership, and life according to Jewish faith and the Torah.<sup>30</sup>

## VI

Agnon's posthumous works, which have appeared since 1971, add two more books to the corpus of writings touching upon the Holocaust: *A Teeming City*, published in 1973, and *Our Family Chronicles* (parts of which appeared earlier in *The Fire and the Wood*), published in 1979. The story "The Stool and the Throne," which appeared in part in Agnon's lifetime, and in an expanded version after his death, also belongs to the works in question. "Covering the Blood," published from the manuscript in 1975, contains, inter alia, historical and theological reckoning with regard to the Holocaust.<sup>31</sup> Other than the lively discussions provoked by the publication of "Covering the Blood," other books failed to generate critical response, and certainly their Holocaust concerns were not adequately addressed. These posthumous works amount to a considerable addition, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to the Holocaust corpus: not only did Agnon's *oeuvre* grow by nearly 1,000 pages written after the Holocaust (*A Teeming City* alone is over 700 pages long), but the readers were confronted with a new,

30 E. Schweid, "Vindication of Religion in the Trial of the Holocaust" (Hebrew), *Yahadut Zemanenu*, vol. 5, 1989, p. 22.

31 Included in the collection *Within the Walls*, pp. 104-151.



original and unique literary maneuver, which casts Agnon's writings connected with the Holocaust in a different light.

Plans to publish *A Teeming City* were afoot already in the early 1950s, and parts of it did, in fact, appear at that time. However, only with the publication of the full version of the book in 1973, could the broad conception that guided Agnon in writing it be assessed. The author himself stated his intentions in the preface:

This is the book of the chronicles of the city of Buczacz which I wrote in sorrow and grief so that our sons who will come after us will know that our city was filled with Torah, wisdom, love and the fear of God, and life, grace, mercy and charity since its very beginnings and to the day that the *shikuts hameshumam* arrived, as well as his unclean ones and his madmen who razed the city to the ground. The Lord will avenge the blood of His servants and will revenge himself on his oppressors, and He shall redeem Israel from all its troubles.

This well-phrased opening statement describes the text, in the words of one critic, as "a memorial book commemorating the uprooted Jewish community."<sup>32</sup> Thus, the book in question was written in the aftermath of the destruction of Buczacz, the author's native town, and was intended as a portrait to be preserved in memory, so that its Jewish and human legacy could be passed on to coming generations. As in other works, the traditional motif of "khuban and redemption" appears here too. The speaker, who laments the destruction of the town (inflicted by *hashikuts hameshumam*, an appellation used frequently in Jewish traditional sources to signify a Gentile plotting or actually carrying out destruction of the Jewish people; according to Daniel 12:11), articulates the desire for revenge but, even more strenuously, the hope for redemption as well (based on Psalms 22:22).

The link between the stories of Buczacz and the Holocaust also appears in several places in the book. In this context, Agnon repeatedly resorts to the expression *hashikuts hameshumam*, which functions as the central leitmotif in the book. Thus, for example,

32 Yakov Rabbi, "Torah, Faith and the 'Pitfall of Charity': On *A Teeming City* by S. Y. Agnon," in *Al Hamishmar*, October 12, 1973.

when describing lamps in the great synagogue of Buczacz, Agnon writes:

This is the story of the polished chandelier that was shrouded in darkness. When it returned to our town it lit up again and kept casting light, but when the *hashikuts hameshumam* came with the band of his accursed unclean ones the light went out (p. 27).

The same expression is used in the account of the life and death of entire families, the faithful of Buczacz. Thus, the portrait of the family of Rabbi Yokeyv in the chapter "More About the Students of Our Old *Beit Midrash*," whose four generations "lived blessed lives," concludes with a brief description of the end of the fifth generation: "Some of them were buried alive, while others burned alive."

How did it come to pass?

When the *hashikuts hameshumam* rose up to wreak havoc with the world, his accursed unclean underlings entered our town, and ordered our brethren, the town dwellers, to dig a pit for themselves. After they had dug the pit, they threw five hundred of them alive into the pit, and buried them alive.

The "accursed unclean ones" then proceeded to assemble the survivors at the town's square "and set them on fire, so that all of them went up in flames" (p. 206). On a number of occasions in the book we come upon a posture of justifying the use of writing as an act of remembrance. The author seems to say that this was thrust upon him by the historical circumstances in the aftermath of the Holocaust. The conclusion of the story "*Ha-Mashal ve-ha-Nimshal*" ("The Parable and Its Solution") is a good example:

Now that the *pinkas* was burned and Buczacz had been destroyed and several thousand of Israel were killed, among them the residents of our town, of whom some were buried alive in graves they had dug themselves, and some remained unburied, and some the oppressor drenched in fuel for the fire before having them burned one by one, limb by limb.

And since the *pinkas* was burned and Buczacz was laid waste and its latest misfortunes obliterated its earlier history, I told myself I

shall write down what occurred in a book and doing so I shall preserve the memory of the holy congregation who through their death sanctified their life, as their forefathers sanctified their lives in the Torah which is our life (pp. 437–438).

In *A Teeming City* Agnon appears to continue the tradition of Jewish writing (most common in medieval Ashkenazi Jewry) of “memorial books” (*Memorbücher*). These constituted an historical record of sorts for particular communities. These books, Y. H. Yerushalmi writes, were kept for centuries in the archives of the community and into such volumes were inscribed not only the names of famous rabbis and communal leaders, but records of persecutions and lists of martyrs to be read aloud periodically in the synagogue during memorial services for the dead. Most *Memorbücher* were confined to the past of the local community. Others were wider in scope.<sup>33</sup>

An outstanding example of this type of literature is the memorial book for the Nuremberg community, compiled in a continuous fashion by its members over a period of nearly 100 years (from 1296 to 1392): apart from lists of names and texts of prayers in Hebrew and archaic French, the book contains descriptions of martyrology in Germany and France from the First Crusade in 1096 up to the “Black Death” in 1349. This tradition has been revived on a large scale in our time with the appearance of hundreds of community books in Hebrew and Yiddish since the end of World War II. Written mainly by community members, they aimed at documenting the history and life of various communities engulfed and destroyed by the Holocaust. That Agnon was well aware of this literary genre is borne out by the fact that his library in Jerusalem contains a sizable collection of community books, including *The Stryi Book*, *The Mir Book*, *The Radom Book*, and many others. Even before the writing of *A Teeming City*, Agnon himself took an active

33 Y. H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Seattle, 1982, p. 46.

part in the publication of *The Memorial Book of the Buczacz Community*, edited by Israel Cohen, commemorating his native town in the customary format of community books.

Similar to the countless works in this genre, *A Teeming City*, despite being a product of a lone author, presents a broad range of literary materials: stories, anecdotes and vignettes, historical chronicles, folktales, biographies, family chronicles, as well as extensive information on local life, customs and traditions. Furthermore, Agnon scrupulously adheres to the chronological-thematic structure, indicating an unmistakable documentary intent of his work. Thus, the first book relates the “story” of Buczacz; the second dwells on “our first teachers/rabbis in Buczacz”; the third book focuses on “the last generations”; whereas the fourth, “Stories of Buczacz” comprises texts that could not be accommodated within the preceding chapters.

An apologetic stance is evident in the bulk of the text; it clearly aims at fleshing out the harmony between the traditional values of the Jewish community (described in a nutshell in the opening section as “Torah, wisdom, love, piety, life, grace, compassion, and charity”), on the one hand, and the realities of its existence, on the other. Now and then the narrator interrupts the flow of the story and dwells on the old social order as a paragon of virtue, a beacon for Jewish society at present and in the future. Thus, in the chapter “The New Study House” he says:

Our ancestors knew what God our Lord demanded of our people.  
And if they had given their souls for the customs, all the more so we,  
their sons, and sons of their sons, must accept and uphold them.

Although the author does not flinch from revealing “the other side” of the Buczacz community, this hardly affects the general apologetic stance evident throughout the book. Thus, toward the end of the story “Yekeli,” he says: “I leave the scandals which had occurred in the house of Israel alone” and “Happy is he who holds himself in check while telling a story.” A remark of this kind indicates that Agnon was aware of the fact that a story like “Yekeli” deviated from the declared tendency of the book to present the Buczacz

community in the fullness of its splendor, a symbol of the perfection of Jewish life in Eastern Europe.<sup>34</sup>

Differences in the scope, quality and themes notwithstanding, it appears that the spiritual and esthetic considerations animating the second book, *Our Family Chronicles*, bear a strong resemblance to those which preoccupied Agnon in his writing of *A Teeming City*. The latter was conceived as a chronicle of the author's native town of Buczacz, its history, life and culture; on the other hand, *Our Family Chronicles* records the vicissitudes of his family, including paternal genealogy and, in part, maternal genealogy. The chronicle itself consists of ten short stories, stylized as pious tales, presenting in a highly abbreviated fashion the story of the family ancestry. Although the chronicle is incomplete, it stretches over a period of some eight centuries. This literary venture was also conceived by Agnon as an act of remembrance, aimed at preserving the family legacy in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Malka Shaked, who has researched the Hebrew novel of family saga in the twentieth century, has this to say about the book in question:

This work should be approached in the context of the Hebrew family saga, although it must be kept in mind that it was written after 1948. These circumstances place *Our Family Chronicles* in a category of novels dealing with family chronicles, written under the inspiration of the trauma of the Holocaust.<sup>35</sup>

The fact that the Holocaust bears strongly on *Our Family Chronicles* is not only because Agnon wrote it shortly after the end of the Second World War. Its relevance is stated explicitly in the prologue to the book (pp. 63–64), in which the narrator (indistinguishable from the author) explains the book's background, the principles of its structure, and its overall intention.

In the opening section the narrator reveals that during his visit to

34 See an article by this author, "Analysis of the 'Ceremony of Sabbath Eve Prayers' as a Key to Interpreting *A Teeming City* by S.Y. Agnon," *Teud'a*, 5, Tel Aviv, 1988, pp. 273–291.

35 Malka Shaked, *Links in the Chain: Hebrew Novel of Family Saga* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1990, p. 251.

Poland his uncle Azriel Ya'akov had entrusted to him "writings which our holy ancestors, may they rest in peace, had left him, and in which they had recorded their events." Even if there is convincing proof that the described meeting between Agnon and his paternal uncle did, in fact, take place in Tarnopol in August 1930, we have no solid evidence confirming that writings of this kind were entrusted to him. In any event, more relevant to our subject is the narrator's remark later in the story; claiming that he had neglected these writings for years, he says: "It hasn't even occurred to me to show them, let alone publish them." Only recently has he come to the conclusion that these materials deserve attention. Therefore he decided to publish them on the grounds that

Now, after all that the enemies have done to us, who turned the entire diaspora into graves, and ravaged the graves of our ancestors, I say I shall erect a memorial to my ancestors through these texts that they had written.

In other words, the Holocaust was the historical moment that prompted Agnon to record his family chronicle. Thus, the destruction of European Jewry, including the author's family, is presented as the *raison d'être* of this book. Thus, writing is conceived not as a mere "search for the time lost," but as an artistic act meant to preserve in memory, through the medium of the written word, the civilization that perished in the Holocaust.

No less important than the decision to record the family history is the repeated emphasis — especially in the prologue, but throughout the book as well — on the authenticity of the materials used in it as a literary resource. This emphasis is effected by an autobiographical stylization of the opening section and particularly by the claim, be it true or fictional, whereby the genealogical records underlying the book had been entrusted to the author by his uncle Azriel Ya'akov.

This is further substantiated by the unequivocal statement of the narrator later on in the book: "I have preserved the entire text of the scroll of our family genealogy intact and those who wish may examine it." On another occasion the narrator describes his

contribution to the book as mere transcribing: "...That I have transcribed from the transcribers" (p. 90).

These claims are true at least in part. *Our Family Chronicles* is not a work of fiction in the strict sense of the term, as it draws heavily on the authentic family tradition which Agnon completed, developed and stylized to the best of his literary talent. Thus, Agnon seeks to create a clear impression, even if true only in part, that he does not write mere belles lettres about events that could have occurred but also turns his artistic powers to record actual events.

The consciousness of national catastrophe that prompted Agnon to write *Our Family Chronicles* also determines his attitude toward his materials. This is borne out by a series of statements by the narrator both in the opening chapter and throughout the text. For example: "What are we compared to such ancestors. We and our life." Or: "This generation cannot raise itself to accomplish what they accomplished" (pp. 63-64).

The unmistakable tendency to total glorification of family ancestry amounts to the relinquishment of any attempt to render them realistically as human beings. Agnon's sole aim is to present these figures as embodiments of certain values or as examples of conduct reflecting social and moral mores of Jewish life, particularly as actualizations of the ethos of traditional Jewish society in Eastern Europe. The family ancestors are portrayed in different chapters of the book as believing Jews, applying themselves diligently to the study of the Law, careful in observing the commandments, and zealously upholding and preserving traditional customs: dedication to prayers and fasts; meticulous observance of all, even the minutest, Sabbath precepts; bringing up children in the spirit of the Torah and the commandments; refraining from mixed marriages; dedication to such social duties as ransoming captives and arranging Jewish funerals for those who were killed away from home; as well as deep attachment to Eretz Israel. Thus, Malka Shaked concludes, in contradistinction to the Hebrew family saga that focused on the disintegration of the family, Agnon brings us the story of the triumph of the family, which successfully weathers even the harshest historical tribulations: "The entire story

commemorates the existential and moral fortitude of the family, turning it into a fable of grandeur."<sup>36</sup>

The link between the story "The Stool and the Throne" and the Holocaust is less obvious. This work, described by G. Scholem as "metaphysical autobiography,"<sup>37</sup> has the narrator (identified with the author) relating the story of his soul before his birth and the story of his life since birth. As Meshulam Tochner puts it, "The mythical-scholarly experience, beheld by Agnon's soul before his birth, is, in fact, also its experience after it was born."<sup>38</sup> Thus, while the first part of the descriptive narrative (constituting the second episode of the story) encompasses national history through the prism of miscellaneous *midrashim*, the second part (the third episode) is devoted to anecdotal commemoration of the Jewish diaspora experience with Galicia and Buczacz as its focus — similarly to the two works discussed previously (*A Teeming City* and *Our Family Chronicles*).

The rationale for the entire fictional edifice is offered in the first episode of the story, which contains a number of explicit references to the Holocaust. However, the main thematic preoccupation of this episode is a symbolic account by the narrator who is about to leave his house and return the "keys" to its owners, an account providing a background to the autobiographical relation further on. "The Stool and the Throne" therefore is above all the spiritual testament of Agnon the writer at the end of his life. At the same time, however, the proximity in time of the writing of this story to the previously discussed works, the structural and ideological similarities, let alone motifs relating to the Holocaust, make it possible to view this text also as an integral part of the artistic

36 *Ibid.*, p. 257.

37 G. Scholem, "S. Y. Agnon — The Last Hebrew Classic?" in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, New York, 1976, p. 115.

38 Meshulam Tochner, "The Meaning of 'The Stool and the Throne,'" in *The Meaning of Agnon* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1968, p. 157. Tochner views the story, in which the author stressed the experience of religious piety and scholarship as the groundwork of his spiritual matrix, as "the most sincere declaration of Agnon's views and beliefs concerning the image of the narrator in his stories." *Idem.*, pp. 154, 167.

enterprise of Agnon after the Holocaust, commemorating the Jewish past.

In light of the above, we may conclude that in the last two decades of Agnon's life preservation of the memory of the Jewish culture destroyed in the Holocaust was one of the chief spiritual and artistic aims of his work. To accomplish this task, Agnon availed himself not of the belletrist form such as the novel or modern short story, but resorted to the more traditional forms of expression: the community memorial book, family chronicle, anthology of *midrashim*. In Agnon's hands all these genres acquire a strong autobiographical flavor: personal history, told by the narrative "I" ("The Stool and the Throne"), family history (*Our Family Chronicles*), and the story of his native town (*A Teeming City*).

According to the critic Dan Miron, a common structural-thematic orientation animates these works, namely the return to the "midrash-pinkas model. In fact, in the 1950s and 1960s Agnon devoted most of his creative energies to the stories incorporated into series based on this model." In choosing this orientation, Miron argues, Agnon abandoned the novelistic impulse, as evident in the uncompleted novel *Shira*.<sup>39</sup> We should note that G. Scholem put forth this argument much earlier, when Agnon was still alive; drawing on his work published in the daily press and periodicals, he noticed a significant change in the underlying orientation of Agnon's later writings in two senses:

There is first of all the predominant wish to emphasize the ritual aspects of Jewish life. Formerly, Agnon took them largely for granted. Now, however, there is an almost morbid effort on his part to stress each and every detail of ritual in his narrative, an effort that scarcely favors the progress of the particular story being told. *We observe a frenzied endeavor to save for posterity the forms of a life doomed to extinction. It is a somewhat sad spectacle* [emphasis added].

The second tendency now coming to the fore has to do with a curious widening of Agnon's retrospection. He no longer tells the

39 See Dan Miron, "Domestication of the Foreign Genre" (Hebrew), in *Yediot Aharonot*, April 25, 1986.

story of the last four or five generations, but goes back much further. Thus he may pretend to be editing the family papers of his ancestors and thereby covering important episodes in Jewish history over the last 400 years; or he may even undertake to tell the story of his own soul in its transmigrations since the days of Creation. There is no longer the unfolding of a story, but rather the undialectic juxtaposition of events told in separate paragraphs, each under its own heading.

The author's dialectical attitude toward his own experience and toward his tradition, which was so predominant in his other writings, has been abandoned, and that, I would almost say, is a great pity....<sup>40</sup>

Thus Scholem, drawing on the texts known to him (including, presumably, some chapters of *A Teeming City*), draws our attention to a rather radical transformation of Agnon's poetics: the abandonment of the classical fictional format as the framework for a narrative of Jewish life in favor of a fragmentarily constructed chronicle characterized by an undialectical approach toward its materials. In other words, the old Jewish order is no longer approached by means of complex narrative works, abounding with psychological and ideological tensions, as in *A Guest for the Night* or *Ha-Nidakh* ("The Outcast").

It is obvious that Scholem is critical of this new tendency in Agnon's prose, since in his view, by reducing the literary valence of his later works, Agnon turns them into texts with little more than ethnographic importance. It appears that by contrasting the style of earlier works, which came into its own "before his consciousness registered the full impact of the blow of the destruction of European Jewry," with the texts written late in his life, Scholem offered a balanced assessment of the latter. And although he does not make the point explicitly, he does seem to imply the existence of a link, even if indirect, between the texts discussed here and the Holocaust.

While devoting himself to the "literature of remembrance" in the aftermath of the catastrophe — even without addressing the subject

40 G. Scholem, pp. 115–116. The article was published for the first time in 1967 in English and German, shortly after Agnon was awarded the Nobel Prize.

directly — Agnon did not abstain in those years from undertaking historical and theological soul-searching with regard to the Holocaust. The most relevant text in this context is the story “Covering the Blood,” which appeared in the posthumously published collection *Lifnim min ha-Khomah* (“Within the Walls”). It comes as no surprise that the critic Gershon Shaked described this story as “Agnon’s social testament.”<sup>41</sup>

This lengthy short story employs a broad historical and geographic perspective. It deals with Jewish life in the Jewish town in Eastern Europe, World War I, Jewish life in America (New York figures for the first time in Agnon’s writings as the scene of events), the Holocaust, and, finally, the establishment of the State of Israel. The story unfolds through an almost uninterrupted monologue by an old man named Hillel — a modern Job — who recounts his tormented life to the narrator-witness whom he meets by chance in the streets of Jerusalem. Hillel’s story incarnates the totality of the Jewish experience in the twentieth century. In this sense “Covering the Blood” is a fictional discourse on the meaning of modern Jewish history, yielding a grim picture of the Jewish condition. In this context not only the Gentiles (as one of the decisive factors in Jewish history), but the Jews themselves come under criticism.

For obvious reasons this sweeping account of the Jewish fate in recent history also encompasses the Holocaust: after World War I the story’s hero, Hillel, emigrates from Europe to America; years later he is sent to Eretz Israel by an American Jew in order to deliver money to his fellow townsmen who had survived the Holocaust. In the course of his long searches, Hillel discovers that a Jerusalem organ grinder bearing the name of Adolf, who also owns a monkey and a parrot, whom he knew from his military service in World War I, was, in fact, born in his native town:

Adolf told me that he is the same Adolf, native of the town whose inhabitants were all killed by Hitler, not one of them survived, and of those who went to Eretz Israel, some died of hunger in World War I, and some were killed by Arab shells during the conquest of the country (p. 95).

41 G. Shaked, “Covering the Blood as Agnon’s Social Testament” (Hebrew), in *A Different Aspect of S.Y. Agnon’s Oeuvre*, Tel Aviv, 1989, pp. 114–191.

Hillel himself also appears to have come too late as Adolf is about to die. The only person entitled to the American’s donation is Adolf’s nephew who, at the time of the encounter, is in Syrian captivity. But even if he were released, it is doubtful whether he would be able to enjoy the windfall; acting on the uninformed advice of the manager of a local bank, Hillel invested the money in securities and their value depreciated. All that Hillel can pass on to Adolf’s nephew are the meager possessions left behind by his uncle: the beggar’s organ, the parrot and the monkey — the tools of a wanderer.

“All that the future has in store for the surviving remnant,” concludes Gershon Shaked, “is not redemption but a new exile. The eternal wanderer will go on wandering endlessly, without respite.”<sup>42</sup> In Agnon’s view this implies that Jewish history is on the brink of an abyss: considering the total destruction of European Jewry — no one remains from the annihilated community — and that the State of Israel is presented as a broken reed (both in the political-security and economic sense), and not as a place that can guarantee continued Jewish existence.

However, Agnon’s treatment of the Holocaust is not confined to the plot itself. No less interesting is the character Adolf, a thoroughly assimilated Jew, formerly a sergeant in the Austrian army, who had acquired a reputation of a sworn philanderer and had befriended numerous Gentile women. Toward the end of his life, Adolf appears to repent for his past:

Once, finding him deeply depressed, I asked him what was wrong and he told me that he’d seen in a dream a *shikuts* from Hitler’s gang assailing a Jew and killing him in a most bizarre manner, and the same Jew was his murderer’s nephew and the same *shikuts* was the son of the lady, borne of her union with Adolf. And even during the daytime he would have visions in which more often than not something of the said evil events were recapitulated. And sometimes, as the monkey angrily stares and stretches its paws at him he fears that perchance his soul has been reincarnated in the body of the monkey while still alive and that the monkey is seeking to avenge itself against him on behalf of all the residents of his town who were

42 *Ibid.*, p. 111.

killed by the same brute that the lady had borne him. Even worse than the monkey is the parrot who he fears will accuse him; "Murderer, it's you who brought about that the Jews of the city were slaughtered by the same murderer who was the fruit of your sin" (p. 96).

This passage indicates an attempt on Agnon's part to relate the catastrophe visited upon the Jews during the war to their acts or faults in the prewar period. The very choice of name for this particular character is peculiar. Parallels between Sergeant Adolf and his namesake Adolf Hitler come to the fore in their biographies. Like Hitler, the Jewish Adolf was a noncommissioned officer in the Austrian army; like him, he emerged from the war destitute:

Briefly put, difficult days came upon him. He had no choice but to go begging from door to door. At any rate, he took pride in that he didn't do what Hitler had done and did not wait at the doors of nuns for them to hand him a bowl of gravy (p. 82).

By weaving this fictional anecdote into the text, Agnon appears as at least contemplating the controversial idea that the Holocaust, similar to preceding calamities, issued from God's punishment for sins committed by the Jews — mainly the sin of assimilation. Incidentally, this view has been adopted by the extremist wing of Orthodox Jewry, for whom, as shown by Eliezer Schweid, this argument provides a rationale for the continuing validity of religion after the Holocaust.<sup>43</sup> Gershon Shaked writes:

According to this analogy, the destruction of European Jewry is to be understood in terms of moral failings (be it conscious and deliberate or unconscious) of the victims, just as the future of Jews in Eretz Israel does not bode well for the same reason. Guilt of the people can be construed as a theodicy of sorts of the good God betrayed by His iniquitous people.<sup>44</sup>

43 E. Schweid, *Struggle till Dawn* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1991, pp. 177–178.

44 *A Different Aspect*, p. 110. Granot, pp. 19–20, puts it bluntly: "The conclusion the reader draws from the story is mind-boggling: Do you wish to know the cause of the rise of Nazism and the destruction of the Jewish people? Well, it's easy: the reason is assimilation, marital relations with gentiles and mixed marriages.

Despite its undeniable artistic qualities, Agnon's readers can be expected to be greatly embarrassed by "Covering the Blood." The Jewish condition after the Holocaust is characterized in this story as marked by total physical and spiritual debilitation, without any prospect for regeneration. The contrast with the diagnosis of the Jewish condition as presented in the story "The Sign" is striking: in the latter Eretz Israel is portrayed as safeguarding the continued physical existence of the Jewish people and its religion. In this context the restoration of Jewish political sovereignty may be construed as a sort of consolation, a redressing of the wrongs present during the Holocaust. However, even more puzzling is Agnon's effort — made after he had examined the martyrological option — to adopt the position of Jewish fundamentalist Orthodoxy, whereby the Holocaust was inflicted as divine punishment for the sins of the chosen people. At the conclusion of the prologue to *A Teeming City*, Agnon spoke explicitly of the "troubles" of Israel and not its "sins" ("and He shall redeem Israel of all its troubles"). He replaces the expression used in the biblical verse that he quotes ("And He shall redeem Israel of all its sins" — [Psalms 25:22]) with the term used in Psalms 130:8 ("And He shall redeem Israel of all its troubles" [emphasis added]).

Was Agnon inconsistent in his shuttling between the different ideological options open to religious Jewry after the Holocaust (sanctification of the name, religious Zionism, justification of God's judgment)? Or should the contradiction between the texts in question be construed in terms of the predicament in which a Jewish writer, particularly one with a religious outlook, finds himself when seeking for an explanation for what, perhaps, remains inexplicable?

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In late 1961, the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* published an essay by Agnon entitled "The Fist of Evil."<sup>45</sup> In the first part he discusses the book

This is the terrible punishment inflicted on us by God for the sin which cannot be expiated." Granot proceeds to criticize Shaked on the grounds that "the critic does not so much as offer a word of protest against the insane solution proposed by Agnon to the question of the Holocaust." *Ibid.*, p. 100.

45 The essay appeared on November 24, 1961, and was reprinted in the collection *Me-atzmi El Atzmi* ("From Myself to Myself"), pp. 390–392.

by American journalist William Schirer *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. It had been published earlier that year in Hebrew translation and met with a wide-ranging response among the reading public in the country. In Agnon's opinion, Schirer succeeded in his book to offer "both vivid and abstract presentation of things I wanted to know, as well as things I had hidden from my view at first, like all my contemporaries." This leads him to recall in the second part of the essay some memories from the late 1920s and early 1930s. He brings up the blindness of many of his contemporaries (among whom he counts himself) and the perspicacity of a few individuals with regard to the danger posed by the Nazis to the Jews even then. However, his great appreciation for Schirer's work is somewhat tempered by the following reservation:

I think about Czechoslovakia, and if I may judge from what I have read till now, the author is equally skillful and knowledgeable in his treatment of other issues. But it seems to me that he has not dealt sufficiently with the catastrophe visited upon Jews by a single infernal soul spawning its evil to all corners of the world. We learn from gentile writers that when they set about to record historical events they ignore, deliberately or not, those events affecting the Jewish people.<sup>46</sup>

Just as the essay as a whole testifies to the awareness of Nazism and World War II, the passage above reflects the author's recognition of one's duty to address the Holocaust of European Jewry. In other words, this rare piece of criticism by Agnon is, among other things, a testimony about himself. As such it confirms the Holocaust as Agnon's central spiritual and artistic concern.

It seems that those of Agnon's critics who viewed the Holocaust as a marginal, even negligible, preoccupation of the writer, are mistaken. Reverberations, even if somewhat muffled, of the trauma did leave their "signature," even during the Holocaust — certainly in the first version of "The Sign," as well as in a number of other texts. After the Holocaust the subject gathers considerable momentum and is clearly in evidence in a continuous body of writing

46 *Ibid.*, p. 390.

stretching over a period of nearly twenty-five years. Thus, alongside numerous recently discovered fragmentary pieces testifying mainly to the author's groping for direction, we have the stories of *The Fire and the Wood*, the memorial books of *Our Family Chronicles*, and *A Teeming City*, as well as "The Stool and the Throne" and "Covering the Blood." By sheer quantitative reckoning, these works run to roughly 1,500 pages of text, over half of Agnon's output during the period in question.

However, while the sheer size of this corpus is in itself an eloquent testimony to the scale of the subject and therefore its importance, its contents also reveal the dimensions of Agnon's spiritual and esthetic predicament in addressing it; unfinished stories, ideological contradictions, even return to traditional literary genres (family chronicles, memorial books, *midrash* anthology) employed by the author for the purpose of "commemorating forms of life doomed to extinction." And although these writings can be seen as Agnon's crowning achievement, possibly even his unique contribution to the Holocaust literature as a whole (mainly the book *A Teeming City*), it nonetheless appears that, in opting for this particular format, Agnon renounced the alternative of confronting the reality of destruction and its meaning through art.

We should therefore accept the possibility, notwithstanding the historical fallacy entailed by this type of interpretation, that the novel *A Guest for the Night*, whose pages "gleam with the melancholy light of the innermost recesses of the terrible Holocaust," as R. Benjamin put it, will be received in the distant future as an epic of the decline and extinction of the Jewish *shtetl* in Eastern Europe, an epic which Agnon strove to create, and his readers apparently longed for since the end of World War II.