

based on a Yiddish folktale printed in a small booklet in Warsaw in 1855. Interestingly enough, this early work enjoyed a warm reception from Brenner himself, who took it upon himself to publish it, and even praised it in one of his highly influential literary essays.

Agnon's search for lost times took on a tremendous increase in strength during his long sojourn in Germany, which lasted between 1912 and 1924. During that period he became very close to Martin Buber, the precursor of the so-called "Jüdische Renaissance", which revolutionized the attitude of young and assimilated German Jews towards the world of their forefathers, and particularly towards Eastern European Jews (the *Ostjuden*) and to their cultural legacy. As early as 1916, Agnon collaborated with Aaron Eliasberg, the director of the Jüdischer Verlag, in publishing an anthology titled *Das Buch von den Polnischen Juden*, a collection of texts intended to open up new avenues for the understanding of Polish Jewry, and that decidedly created a new, more favorable image of the Jew from the East.

It is not surprising, then, that Agnon's own works of that period were oriented towards the world of Polish Jews. By 1919, soon after the end of World War I, he produced a cycle of tales called "Polin", in which he tried using myth and legend to construct a narrative of Jewish life in Poland through the centuries, from its beginnings during the reign of King Leszek at the end of the ninth century. Prior to the Hebrew publication, some of Agnon's tales were published in German translation, mainly in Buber's periodical *Der Jude*, where they received a very warm response on the part of German Jewish readers. In the same year, Agnon published "The Rejected" ("Hanidah"), a long short story in which he dramatized in a highly innovative way the historical struggle between Hasidim and the Mitangdim (their rabbinical opponents), and how it is carried on within a particular family and in the psyche of one individual in the town of Buczacz around the year 1815. Both "Polin" and "Hanidah" were published in *Hatekufah*, a leading Hebrew quarterly, founded in Moscow, but at that time already appearing in Warsaw, under the editorship of David Frischmann.

On his return to Palestine, Agnon's writing and rewriting on Polish Jewry remained one of the main aspects of his literary world. It is rather symbolic that one of his first publications soon after his return was a new version of "Polin" titled *Polin: Sipurei Agadot (Tales of Poland)*, issued for the first time in book-form. However, Agnon's greatest literary achievement in this phase of his life was a series of three novels, all of them written in his home in Jerusalem within the span of some ten years. Although each of these novels was written and published separately, and each belongs to a different novelistic genre, in looking at them retrospectively they may be conceived as a meta-

narrative representing a panoramic view of Polish Jewry in its eastern Galicia version through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I would even define them, at least tentatively, as Agnon's "Galician trilogy."

In a letter sent on June 1927 to Salman Schocken, Agnon announced the completion of his first full-length novel: "Blessed be the Lord who gave me strength to complete my big story (i.e. novel) *Hakhnasat Kalah (The Bride Canopy)*," he wrote to Schocken. "...The content of my story takes place between the years 1820 and 1821 in the town of Brody and its vicinity." Originally, *Hakhnasat Kalah* was published in installments as a long short story (under the same title) composed by Agnon during his long German sojourn and very much under the impact of what Gershom Scholem called "the cult of the East". Based on a nineteenth century Hasidic tale (as shown by Avraham Holtz), *Hakhnasat Kalah* in both versions is centered around the figure of a very pious and rather naive Hasidic Jew by the name of Re Yudel, from the town of Brody, who on the order of the Apter Rav (Re Abraham Yehoshua Heschel), travels around his native land in order to amass dowries for his three unmarried daughters. In Jerusalem, Agnon turned this long short story into a two-volume travelogue, using the plot of the earlier work as a frame in which he installed numerous folklore tales and anecdotes providing a dense picture of pre-modern Jewish society in eastern Galicia. The novel was first published by the newly established Schocken Verlag in Berlin in 1931, gaining Agnon wide critical recognition not only as an innovative Hebrew novelist but also as the creator of a great Jewish comedy, in which irony and wit made it possible for him to reconstruct the bygone world of tradition without falling into the trap of nostalgia and sentimentality.

Four years later, in 1935, Agnon was already able to submit to his publisher a second novel, in which he sprang forward to the beginning of the twentieth century, the years of his own adolescence in Buczacz. To be more precise the work covers the time between 1904 and 1907, a period when tremendous social changes were taking place in the world of Galician Jewry. This rather short, realistic novel, called *A Simple Tale (Sipur Pashut)*, is shaped in the form of a family novel, and as such it provides a sophisticated analysis of the social transition from tradition to modernity in a small town called Shibus (an equivalent of Buczacz). This is demonstrated through the mental crisis of a Jewish youth by the name of Hirshel Horovitz, who is tormented by an unwanted marriage forced on him by his family, and by his social milieu both of which ignore his emotional needs as well as his right to act according to his own free will. The outcome is rather devastating: the protagonist is

³ Ibid., p. 206.

trapped in an emotional and moral crisis, and finally loses his sanity. The American critic Arnold Band sums up: "The society observed in this story is that of middle-class Jews in a small town of eastern Galicia at the turn of the century... At a distance of almost thirty years, he [Agnon] looks back upon a world he left and tries to describe it in terms of the highly individualistic vision and voice which are uniquely his."⁴

The third novel, *A Guest for the Night* (*Orea'h Nata Lalun*) – published in 1939 – takes us straight ahead to the early thirties. Unlike the previous two novels, this book is the immediate product of the writer's one-month visit to the Republic of Poland in August-September 1930. Agnon's itinerary included Buczacz, and also some other locations – such as Brody, Tarnopol, a chain of small ex-Galician towns, as well as Chelm, Samoszcz and Lublin. Back in Jerusalem, Agnon wrote a first-person novel of 589 pages in which he transformed his own sentimental journey to Poland – documented in many of his letters – into a symbolic exposition of Polish Jewry in the inter-war period. By and large, the novel is a gloomy report on a decaying Jewish community (again referred to as Shibush), victimized by World War I, stricken by poverty (very much a product of Poland's economic crisis of the late twenties), faced with a diminishing population and undergoing a deep religious and moral crisis. The publication of this novel in German translation (*Nur wie ein Gast zur Nacht*, 1964) was one of the leading elements in the Swedish Academy's decision to declare Agnon Nobel Laureate for Literature for the year 1966. Anders Österling, speaking for the decision committee, said: "But perhaps his greatest achievement is his novel *Guest for the Night*, which tells of a visit to the war-ruined city of his childhood, Buczacz, and the storyteller's vain attempts to assemble the congregation to a service in the synagogue. Within the framework of a local chronicle, we see a wonderful perspective of destinies and figures, of experience and meditation. The lost key to the prayer house, which the traveler finds in his knapsack only after his return to Jerusalem, is for Agnon a symbolic hint that the old order can never be rebuilt in the Diaspora, but only under the protection of Zionism."⁵

In the years after the Holocaust, Agnon's major literary goal was to write his own *Memorbuch* ("memorial book") dedicated to his hometown Buczacz in the tradition of Jewish memorial books produced in honor of various communities in the aftermath of the catastrophe which became known at the end of World War II. This is well explained in the writer's short introduction to *A City and the Fullness Thereof*, published posthumously in 1973: "This

is a book on the annals of the town of Buczacz which I have written with sorrow and with agony for the sake of our children and our children's children so that they would know that our town was full of *Torah* and wisdom and love and piety and life and grace and chastity from the day it was founded until the unclean and crazy enemy came and brought about its destruction." [my trans., D.L.] A huge mixture of historical material, stories, anecdotes, chronicles, folktales, biographical sketches and the like, Agnon's *A City and the Fullness Thereof* provides a variegated portrait of Buczacz, unique in its type, being the last great attempt on the part of the writer to reinvent his native town, whose remaining Jewish inhabitants were killed by the end of June 1943, and thus to save it from potential oblivion.

Though spending his life mainly in Jerusalem, and in spite of his personal commitment to Zionism (the semi-autobiographical narrator in *A Guest for the Night* ends his journey to his native Poland with the symbolic act of re-settling in Jerusalem), Agnon never ceased to approach his Eastern European origins and turn them into a work of art. In a speech delivered in 1935, the pre-State Labour leader Berl Katsnelson – a close associate of Agnon's – said the following: "We have been granted two forces: memory and oblivion. We cannot do without both of them... An innovative and creative generation does not throw to the garbage the heritage of previous generations. It examines it and checks it, it takes it nearer to itself and keeps it away... And sometimes it plunges into piles of junk, uncovers things forgotten, rubs off the rust, reviving an old tradition that may well nourish the soul of the innovative generation."⁶ [my trans., D.L.] Nothing more accurately reflects the drama of consciousness of modern Israel and its search for identity than those lines, which express the revolutionary drive of Zionism to create a brave new world, and its irresistible commitment to the Jewish past, primarily associated with life in the Diaspora. Looking at this arena, Agnon's writings, so well attuned to his Polish Jewish legacy, stand as a challenge to anyone who chooses to look back in anger, thus providing Israeli culture with a deep sense of continuity in an era of upheaval, innovation and change.

⁴ Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 240.

⁵ *Les Prix Nobel en 1966* (Stockholm: Nobel Foundation, 1967), p. 56–57.

⁶ Berl Katsnelson, vol. II of *Ketavim* (Tel Aviv: Impremerie Royale P.A. Notstedt & Söner, 1947), p. 390.