

The Rebellion of the Daughters

JEWISH WOMEN RUNAWAYS IN
HABSBURG GALICIA

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Rebellious Daughters and the Literary Imagination

FROM JACOB WASSERMANN TO S. Y. AGNON

PRESS REPORTS about Jewish women runaways in Galicia left their trace on works of contemporary authors, playwrights, and even filmmakers, a point that has hitherto gone entirely unnoticed by literary critics and historians. In 1913, the silent film *Der Shylock von Krakau* (now lost) was released with a script by the Austrian author and critic Felix Salten, the author of *Bambi*, and its protagonist portrayed by the Austrian actor, Rudolph Schildkraut. The film tells the story of Isaak Levi, a money lender and God-fearing Kraków Jew, whose daughter runs away to Berlin with her lover, a Polish count and a client of her father. Abandoned there by her lover, the daughter had become a beggar to support herself. After many years she returns to Kraków, only to find her father cold, bitter, and old. The father rejects the lost daughter, but finally forgives her on his death bed.¹ As a Viennese Jew, Salten would have been very familiar with the Galician runaway stories, which made Kraków a logical setting for an Eastern European version of the Venetian Shylock.

In 1902, the noted German Jewish author Jakob Wassermann (1873–1934) published a story titled *Der Moloch*.² The book tells the story of Arnold Ansonge, who while living in the Moravian village of Podolin meets Samuel Elasser, a poor Jewish peddler, and learns from him that his thirteen-year-old

1. Warnke and Shandler, "Yiddish Shylocks in Theater and Literature," 99; "Der Shylock von Krakau," *Neue Freie Presse*, November 28, 1913, 15; "Der Shylock von Krakau," *Kinematographische Rundschau*, October 19, 1913, 108, 110.

2. Wassermann, *Der Moloch*.

daughter Jutta was kidnapped by Felician nuns and held in a convent against her will. Upon hearing this, Ansoerge decides to help Elasser to get his daughter back, especially since the law alone had failed to achieve the justice he deserved. Ansoerge's friend, Maxim Specht, is convinced to join the mission, and in order to pressure the authorities he keeps sending articles to the Viennese press about this disturbing convent story (*Klostergeschichte*). Ansoerge later travels to Vienna for the same purpose, but while in the big city—the modern-day Moloch—he is lured by the worldly pleasures it offers and forgets his original commitment to seek justice for Elasser. Afflicted with guilt after his life takes a turn for the worse, Ansoerge compensates Elasser with a significant sum of money and subsequently commits suicide.

Samuel Elasser's story was based on that of Israel Araten. Wassermann copied details of Araten's repeated failures to obtain his daughter from the Viennese liberal press, especially the *Neue Freie Presse*, without acknowledgment, and placed them in the story after changing the names of the main characters. These details include all of Israel Araten's allegations against the convent and the authorities, his lobbying efforts at government ministries, and his meeting with the emperor. They even include the search in Kęnty and the infamous sentence attributed to the minister for Galician affairs: "The secular authority ends at the convent's walls."³

3. *Ibid.*, 40. Other details include the intention of the convent to drag the case out until the daughter reaches the age of fourteen, the father's allegation that he heard his daughter crying and sobbing in the other room, the nun's assertion that the daughter was sick and unable to see her father, the father's request that his daughter be allowed to see her ailing mother and the response of the Mother Superior that she will see her in heaven, the medical examinations of the court doctor and the university professor who both found her perfectly healthy. When Elasser came to the convent after seven days as suggested by the convent superior, he was told that his daughter disappeared from the convent two days earlier. Wassermann writes that early on, Elasser discovered that his daughter was taken to Galicia and transferred by two nuns to Łagiewniki by Podgórze, and subsequently to other convents, including in Kęnty, Wola Justowska, Bieńczyce (spelled here Binczice), Morawica, and Wielowicz. See Wassermann, *Der Moloch*, 21–28; 39–40. All those details are copied from the *Neue Freie Presse* articles on the Araten affair published in 1900 on February 6, 14, 15, 16, 18, 24, 25; March 6, 30, 31; April 6, 12, 13, 26, 29; May 6, 19; July 7, 8; October 17; 21. For example, Wassermann, *Der Moloch*, 23: "[D]ie Mutter des Kindes liege schwer darnieder und wünsche die Tochter vor ihrem Tode noch einmal zu sehen. Durch diese List gedachte er das Herz der Oberin zu rühren. 'Sie wird sie im Himmel wiedersehen,' antworte die Oberin mit feierlich erhobener Hand und mit langsamer, zu peinvollem Laüschen zwingender Stimme." *Neue Freie Presse*, February 14, 1900, 5: "Mit tränen in den Augen stehte der alte Mann das Kind an, es möge zu seiner Mutter zurückkehren,

Scholars have noted Wassermann's habit of borrowing from others without proper acknowledgment.⁴ In this case, the Galician-born publicist and historian Simon Bernfeld (1860–1940), reviewing *Der Moloch* in the Hebrew press, wrote, "The case of Israel Araten is woven into our story in all its simplicity, without any poetical shading, as if Wassermann took the details of the case from some newspaper and affixed them here."⁵ According to Bernfeld, the Moloch is not a metaphor for the city and its false attractions, as other critics had interpreted it, but rather for the failed promise of liberalism to solve social injustices, specifically those directed against Jews. A supporter of Jewish nationalism, Bernfeld was disappointed by contemporary liberalism, which was unable to stop the tide of anti-Semitism. Neither Wassermann nor Bernfeld writes anything about the girl, they focus instead on the failed search for her and the injustices committed by the church and the state authorities. Like Israel Araten, they blame factors outside the Jewish community for her unfortunate fate.

A different approach to the Araten affair was taken by Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1887–1970) who was born and raised in Buczacz, Galicia. Agnon was likely familiar with the Araten case as it unfolded, since in 1904 he published a short poem on the problem of female education as we saw in chapter 3. Moreover, at one point a rumor spread that Michalina was in the train station in Buczacz, and later in the convent in the neighboring town of Jazłowiec. Like the contemporary Hebrew newspapers, Agnon looked for the root of the problem of the rebellious daughters within Jewish society.

In his 1950 novella "Tehilla," Agnon tells the story of an elderly, pious Jewish woman, Tehilla, living in the Old City of Jerusalem in the early twentieth century. Before she dies, Tehilla asks a young writer to compose in Hebrew her life story, which she proceeds to recount in Yiddish.⁶ The purpose of this request is to ask the forgiveness of her former fiancé, Shraga, who died many

die krank daniederliege und sich noch dem Anblicke der Tochter sehne. Da bemerkte eine der Nonnen mit sanfter Stimme und in milden Tone: 'Das Kind wird ja seine Mutter im Himmel wiedersehen.'"

4. Cf. John C. Blankenagel, "More Unacknowledged Borrowing by Jakob Wassermann."

5. Simon Bernfeld, "From the Literature (A Literary View)," *Ha-Zeman*, June 4, 1903, 7–9, esp. 7 [Hebrew].

6. Interestingly, Tehilla tells the writer: "I shall tell you in Yiddish and you will write it in the Holy Tongue. I have heard that they teach the girls how to speak and write in the Holy Tongue. So you see, my son, the Blessed Holy One in his loving-kindness conducts His world better in each succeeding generation." See S. Y. Agnon, "Tehilla," 31.

years ago; she plans to have the written account buried with her, presumably so that Shraga can read it in the world to come. Her father had broken off their arranged engagement after he discovered that Shraga was a Hasid. Because Tehilla's father had not asked Shraga for forgiveness for the shame he had caused him, she attributed a succession of tragedies that befell her to Shraga's curse. Those tragedies included the death of her husband and her two sons, and an unclear incident involving her daughter. Tehilla doesn't specify what happened to her daughter, only that "an evil spirit" entered her, and she went crazy.⁷ A careful reading of the story reveals that the daughter's fate is one of the major themes of the novella, if not the major one.

The character of Tehilla appears to be based in part on Israel Araten, who settled in Jerusalem in the early twentieth century and died at a ripe old age. Agnon scatters hints to the historical origins of the story in several places, especially in the words of the other characters in the story. One of them is the grumpy rebbetzin (rabbi's wife), whose father had been engaged to Tehilla's daughter. The writer, who is also the narrator of the story, is curious about Tehilla and keeps begging the rebbetzin to tell him more about her:

And if I do tell, she answered, will it make things easier for me or for her? I don't like all this tale telling [. . .] But one thing I shall tell you, the Blessed Holy One took pity on that saint [the rebbetzin's father and Tehilla's prospective son-in-law], and so he put an evil spirit into that apostate, may her name be blotted out.

She then tells him what happened to her righteous father, whom she describes as a "real" rabbi:

[S]o the matchmakers in the country were all eager to match him off. There was a certain rich widow. When I say rich, I mean she was very rich. She had only one daughter, and if only she hadn't had her! She took a barrel of gold coins and told them, those matchmakers, if you match him to my daughter, then he gets this barrel, and if it's not enough I'll add to it. The daughter was not worthy of that righteous saint, because he was a saint, and she, may she be damned, was an apostate, just as her end proved about her beginning, because she ran away and entered some nunnery and changed her religion. And when did she run away?—when they were leading her to the bridal canopy. Her mother wasted half her wealth on her in order to get

7. *Ibid.*, 42.

her out of there. She got as far as the Emperor, the wretched mother did, and even he couldn't help her at all, because anybody who once enters a nunnery never comes out of there any more. Do you know who that apostate is? The daughter of—hush, she's coming.

Tillie [i.e., Tehilla] came in with a pot of food in her hand.⁸

The rebbetzin was the only person who had personal knowledge of what happened to Tehilla, but the distraction caused by the latter's entrance leaves the readers to draw their own conclusions. The parallel to the Araten affair in this paragraph is quite obvious: Araten's riches, his daughter's engagement, his monetary spending in an effort to find her, and especially the meeting with the emperor, which no other parent of a runaway merited. Unlike Wassermann, Agnon uses the Araten affair in an artistic fashion and builds around it an elaborate literary structure, in which Tehilla's shameful secret—the religious conversion of her daughter—is the cloud that cast its shadow over all of it.

Another character in the story, the sage, is a son of a mother who knew Tehilla abroad, and Agnon puts in his mouth another hint. Realizing the writer's curiosity about Tehilla, the sage says:

What she was outside the Land of Israel I do not know apart from what everybody does: that she was very rich indeed and conducted big affairs, but finally her sons died, and her husband died and she went and abandoned all her affairs and came up to Jerusalem. My mother, may she rest in peace, used to say, "When I see Tehilla I see that there are things even worse than widowhood and loss of children." But mother never told me what these things were, so I do not know and now we never shall know; for all those who knew Tehilla abroad are already dead, and Tehilla never has much to say.⁹

The sage doesn't mention a daughter, so it is clear what he meant when saying "there are things even worse than widowhood and loss of children." But not mentioning the daughter explicitly helps Agnon to keep the secret that Tehilla was so careful not to tell anybody.

As the story progresses, Tehilla, unlike the rebbetzin and the sage, adds context to the story of her daughter:

8. *Ibid.*, 23–24.

9. *Ibid.*, 28.

Business was good and we conducted our household decently. We took good teachers for our sons and a gentile governess for our daughter, for in those days God-fearing people kept the Jewish teachers—except those who taught Hebrew—at their distance, because they were held to be atheists.¹⁰

Tehilla continues to describe the effect her sons' "good teachers" had on the household: "Since they were alone in the world, they used to eat at our table on the Sabbath. My husband, too occupied with business to study regularly, enjoyed having such guests who spoke to him Torah." Agnon then puts the cards on the table and lets Tehilla tell the last part of her life story to the writer, exposing her paradoxical and unrealistic expectations and their results:

While my husband lived I had already been helping him in his affairs, and now that he was dead I threw myself entirely into business [. . .] I thought to myself, all my toil I am toiling for my daughter, so the more wealth I acquire the more I shall benefit her. The affairs increased so that I had no time for my home apart from Sabbaths and Festivals, and even then half the day was spent in synagogue and half in receiving guests. To all appearances my daughter did not need me, since I had taken teachers for her and she was busy with her studies and I received many praises about her. And even the Gentiles who mock at us for speaking an outlandish tongue used to praise my daughter, and said that she spoke their tongue with the best of them. And above all, the Gentile teachers made much of her and invited her to their homes. I called the matchmakers and they found me a bridegroom renowned for his knowledge of Torah and an ordained rabbi.

But I never had the privilege of leading them to the canopy, for an evil spirit entered into my daughter and she became crazy.

And now this is what I ask you, my son, write to Shraga that I have forgiven him for all the troubles which have come upon me on his account; and write to him that he too has to forgive me, since I have already been stricken enough.¹¹

Agnon magnifies here the blindness of Tehilla, demonstrating the complete misunderstanding of cause and effect with regard to the issue of female

10. *Ibid.*, 38.

11. *Ibid.*, 43. See also Rachel Manekin, "Tehilla's Daughter and Michalina Araten," *Haaretz*, Literary Supplement, June 27, 2003 [Hebrew].

education, even after so many decades. His depiction of Tehilla throughout the story as a God-fearing innocent woman turns out to be written with not a little irony, as Tehilla's exaggerated piety and superstitious beliefs come at the expense of a sober and realistic view of the effects of the education she gave to her daughter.

Other contemporary literary works focused on the plight of Galician village girls like Debora Lewkowiecz. In 1907, a Yiddish melodrama was published in Kraków called *Tate mames tsures: Lebnsbild in 4 akten* ("Father's and Mother's Sorrows: A Life Picture in 4 Acts").¹² The popular play by Max Gebel was based on the true story of a young Jewish woman, the daughter of a tavern-keeper in a small Galician village, who fled from her parents' home on the first night of Passover, then converted to Christianity and married her Polish lover in 1889. In the theatrical version the Jewish woman elopes with her lover after her mother reveals to her the identity of her groom-to-be, a Jewish yeshiva student, and the date of her impending marriage. Unlike the story on which it was based, the play ends happily for the Jewish audience, with the young woman returning to her family and her faith.¹³

A similar story is related by Agnon in the chapter "Solomon Jacob's Bed" of his novel *Hakhnasat kalah* (translated into English as *The Bridal Canopy*).¹⁴ The narrator tells the tale of a village tavernkeeper who quickly arranged a match between his daughter and a yeshiva student after he and his wife learned of their daughter's romance with a Pole. The story is told from the viewpoint of the naïve yeshiva student, who knows nothing of the background to the engagement. The parents invite him to their house for the Passover Seder. After being affectionately greeted outside by the bride's father, the shy young man meets the girl for the first time:

12. Gebel, *Tate mames tsures*.

13. The Galician publicist Gershom Bader relates in his memoirs that he was personally acquainted with the young woman on whom the play's heroine was based. He emphasizes that "whole books" could have been written about Jewish girls who fell in love with gentiles and married them, a natural outcome of the education they received in their homes. Girls lived a double life; at home with "fanatic and uneducated" fathers and brothers, and outside in a free and intelligent atmosphere. Their stories ended in tragedy, with the girls escaping to convents or causing other problems. In either case "they were lost to the Jewish people." See Bader, *Mayne zikhroynes*, 333.

14. S. Y. Agnon, *The Bridal Canopy*, 68–79.

While he stood so, his betrothed came out of the kitchen and stood before him pink and pretty, her plaits in her right hand and a smile on her lips. Shifting her plaits to her left hand she greeted him, and as her plump hand gripped his, a quiver passed through him so that his tongue shriveled up, and he lost his power of speech. He bowed his shoulders even more, bent his hand and gripped the back of the Gemara [Talmud] firmly with his fingers. Said his betrothed, Put away your Bible and sit down; and she took it out of his hands gently and set it on the table.

In came his mother-in-law-to-be, in festive array, veiled and adorned like a dowager, with felt shoes on her feet which had grown swollen during the winter while she stood out in the open to prevent her daughter meeting that gentile.¹⁵

The contrast between the Talmud student and the daughter can't be greater, and things get even more awkward later in the evening:

And Solomon Jacob read out of the same Hagada as his betrothed, holding his breath so that she shouldn't feel his presence, while she, far from being frightened by him, was actually touching him.

After the meal the parents get ready to go to sleep, but the two young people start reading the Song of Songs as is customary on Passover night. Agnon uses the verses of the Song of Songs to drop hints about the girl's relationship with her Polish lover:

The candles began guttering. There was a whistle outside. The wench started but immediately went on reading in a sweet and happy voice, "Tis the voice of my love; behold he cometh." And Solomon Jacob, keeping his finger on the place, went on interpreting in accordance with Rashi, "The poet returns to the beginning like a man who stops short and returns saying, I never told you the beginning. Behold he standeth behind our wall, peering through the window, peeping through the lattice chinks." And so they read until they finished the book.¹⁶

When in his bed, Solomon Jacob, who was used to sleep on a bench in the house of study, admires the many pillows and crisp sheets, while whispering verses from the Song of Songs:

15. Ibid., 74.

16. Ibid., 75.

"Behold thou art fair, my love, and our couch is likewise fresh; the voice of my love that knocketh, open to me; they have taken my veil from me, I did not know my mind." [...] But ere he entered the bed he heard the housewife weeping. Had the evil eye gained sway, God forbid, over his betrothed? Solomon Jacob turned his face toward the window and saw the housewife standing with arms outstretched, howling and wailing and weeping, while his father-in-law-to-be ran half naked after a coach which was dashing off as though driven by furies. Suddenly the crack of a whip rent the air. His father-in-law-to-be came stumbling back, his hand over his cheek, crying, There's no daughter, no daughter. Solomon Jacob's betrothed had fled with her gentile lover.¹⁷

Agnon describes the helpless parents and their pain, but while their daughter was the source of that pain, neither the play by Gebel nor the novel by Agnon depicts the young women in a negative light. On the contrary, the authors reveal to their audience the unbridgeable gap between the reality in which the heroines live and the future lives that their parents have arranged for them. The village woman in *Tate mames tsures* is a free spirit who reads philosophy and believes in a love that transcends religious and national differences, a love that symbolizes the "spirit of the new times." She knows that her mother belongs to a generation that is incapable of understanding this. Nevertheless, she loves her mother deeply and torments herself with the knowledge that her choice will break her mother's heart. After her mother reveals the identity of her intended bridegroom, she breaks down in tears:

Mameni! What are you talking about?! That yeshiva student, that idler? [...] No, no, mamele? What are you saying? How can you even imagine a thing like that, that I, so young. . . You did not ask me, with the son of Zalman Peseles? . . . No, this cannot be. I am so miserable.¹⁸

In Agnon's story the daughter is a sensuous, determined young woman with a strong physical presence, in sharp contrast to the wretched appearance and shy demeanor of the Talmud student. She attempts to create some sort of bond with him after the Passover Seder has concluded, but it is clear to the reader that the bond cannot hold. The responsibility for the failed engagement,

17. Ibid., 75-76.

18. Gebel, *Tate mames tsures*, 5.

implies Agnon, lies not with the young woman but with the Talmud student. In commenting upon the unhappy ending, the narrator asks:

Solomon Jacob, who studied the Bible a great deal and the Talmud a great deal and spent his life in the House of Study, and derived not even as much as his little finger was worth of pleasure out of the world—why was he punished so much? Because he never learnt anything except Torah. My sons, it is a man's duty to know writing and other tongues, and anyone who does not know writing and other tongues is called contemptible; as our sages of blessed memory remark in the Talmud about the verse in Obadiah, "Thou art extremely contemptible," because they know neither writing nor other languages. And they also say elsewhere in the Talmud that a disciple of the wise has to know to write.¹⁹

Both authors portray the young village women as modern women who know what they want and who are not willing to lead the sort of life their mothers led. They understood, as did the reviewer of Bertha Pappenheim's tract mentioned in chapter 1, that Galician Jewish women did not convert because they were uneducated women who had become physically attracted and emotionally attached to Polish peasants among whom they lived. In Gebel's play, the heroine elopes with a tax superintendent; in Agnon's story, the daughter's father is a well-to-do tax collector and tavernkeeper. Such women did not dream of tending livestock or of working the soil alongside their peasant husbands in order to escape from their parents' Jewish homes. They expected a husband who could appreciate what they appreciated. Like their urban counterparts, they had emotionally and spiritually left Judaism long before they converted; the prospect of living a life chained to what they considered to be a boorish idler ultimately pushed them out of their home.

A writer who understood well the dissonance in the life of Jewish educated village women was Poland's national playwright, Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907). His play, *Wesele* ("The Wedding"), first performed in 1901, describes the wedding of the Kraków poet, Lucjan Rydel, with a young Polish woman from the village of Bronowice, near Kraków.²⁰ Marriage to village women became fashionable at the turn of the century among Kraków literati, who

19. Agnon, *The Bridal Canopy*, 76–77. Especially since Agnon says in the beginning (p. 71): "But the Holy and Blest One does not withhold the reward of any youth," and then ends it with what appears to be a terrible divine injustice, something that demands an explanation.

20. Wyspiański, *The Wedding*.