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### **Hebrew Literature and Israeli History**

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Ladies and Gentlemen, Gvirotai ve-rabotai

The best-known Israeli author worldwide, Amos Oz, once said about his country: “This nation was not built on the valour of the army, it was founded on books.” And anyone aware of the role which literature has been playing throughout the turbulent history of the Jewish people and into the present, will doubtlessly agree with him. In a country with over seven million residents, writers are recognised and much-respected figures. They voice their opinion on cultural and political issues and contribute extensively to public discourse. Authors such as Amos Oz, Zeruya Shalev and David Grossman sell well over 80,000 copies of any new title and the weekly bestseller list features older and younger writers, serious and trivial literature, historical novels along with thrillers.

One tendency is conspicuous: More and more Israelis read books in the national language, namely in Hebrew. Indeed, the renaissance of the Hebrew language is to my mind one of most fabulous accomplishments of the Zionist movement. The Hebrew language which for generations was merely a written language, that of the Scriptures and the liturgy, read at best, but hardly spoken, was awakened as it were from its beauty’s sleep and newly moulded in the Jewish Altneuland, to use Theodor Herzl’s name for the new home in Palestine. Indeed, Hebrew has become the language of daily life in Israel, the language which unites immigrants from Russia, Yemen, Germany and the United States, a means of communication as well as the natural fabric of literature. The re-birth of the Jewish people in their homeland was to go hand in hand with the resuscitation and the renewal of the Hebrew language. This idea was propelled

by ardent Zionists and propagated as early as 1879 by Elieser Ben Yehuda, the so-called father of modern Hebrew. Ben Yehuda who set out to compile the first authoritative Hebrew dictionary, spoke in favour of a new and simple style, free of anachronisms and imprints of the cult and religious service. The affirmation of Hebrew as a national language and the rejection of the Yiddish language underline the fact that Hebrew was considered an integral means in shaping the new identity, that of the New Jew, the Israeli in his homeland.

“Elik was born of the sea” – this opening sentence in a novel by Moshe Shamir typifies the hero of modern Hebrew literature. The figure of the New Jew, the Sabra, native of Israel, dominates the first phase which has come to be known as the Generation of 1948. Born somewhere along the shore of the Mediterranean, the Sabra-hero exemplifies the total breach with the past, with the Diaspora-world of the fathers. The new hero embodies the hope for a normal life of a free people in their own country. His love for his homeland, its landscapes and nature is paired with an uncompromising devotion and the willingness to sacrifice. In his way of thinking as in his physical appearance the new hero is diametrically opposite the Diaspora-Jew. Elik, Shamir’s fictitious protagonist, and many of his contemporaries in real life represent the New Jew: he is good looking, sun-tanned, upright and self-confident. The Israeli who ploughs the fields or founds a settlement in the middle of the desert, healthy, proud and diligent, cherishes action more than words. Always ready to be there for the others, for the community, he is likewise on call to defend his country. Truly, the emergence of this idealized hero may be seen as an attempt to distance oneself consciously from the image, or better said stereotype, of the Diaspora Jew. The topoi characterising Diasporic existence, namely passivity, weakness and the vulnerability of an ethnic minority, were rejected and replaced by notions like fearlessness and the vitality of a majority in its own homeland. The figure of the courageous and pragmatic hero was the Zionist answer to a long Jewish history of persecution, humiliation and dependence on the will of

others. In Yishar Smilansky's novel "The Days of Ziklag" (1958), which tells the story of an army troupe during the War of Independence, we hear the following words spoken by one of the characters: "The love for the Jewish people! But who loves that people? We too (Israelis) avoid and flee everything Jewish. We abhor everything which smells of Jewishness, beginning with the study of Jewish history with its adversity and misery, ending with the slaughter-knife and the deep-drawn Jewish sigh; everything to do with Diaspora accent, habits and the Yiddish language. We distance ourselves explicitly from any sense of belonging, not only from anything smelling of religion and tradition, but likewise from anything which one may describe as a Jewish feeling, including the singing of the cantor in the synagogue, the smell of fish (obviously gefilte fish) and the burial rituals."

Indeed, the New Jew, the Sabra, was to redeem the dignity and self-respect which allegedly had been lost in the Diaspora. This was to be achieved by turning a new, blank page in the history book. Elik, Moshe Shamir's hero whom I mentioned before, was metaphorically speaking carried ashore on the waves of the sea, as though he was emerging out of nowhere. In line with secular Zionist ideology, the Sabra discarded religious rites and considered the Bible not a religious tract, but a guide through the countryside, at best a history book – that of the Land of Israel.

The enthusiastic reception of literary works associated with the Generation of 1948 is closely linked to the expectations of the readers in those days. The target-audience, the addressee of this literature, were longing for a new hero totally different from the uprooted Diaspora Jew. Despite the popularity of these literary works glorifying the New Jew and culminating all too often in a cathartic-like sacrifice of the hero, some critical voices were occasionally heard. One of them, no doubt the most vehement, was that of Baruch Kurzweil, a religious Jew from Moravia. Hebrew literature was a literature created in the void, a decadent, levantine literature, he argued and

explained: the constriction of the cultural horizon due to the loss of “the emotional landscapes of European cultures”, and the conscious circumvention of and estrangement from the values of Judaism doomed Israeli literature to failure. This literature, nurtured by secular Zionism, displayed neither quality nor promise, so Kurzweil, for a generation that renounces its forefathers and disclaims its heritage can only produce a stale, lifeless literature, lacking in spiritual and poetic energy.

As it were in defiance of this pessimistic prediction, Hebrew literature thrived and prospered, becoming an integral component of life in Israel. In contrast, German-written works by authors like Max Zweig or Jenny Aloni were hardly acknowledged. “One may leave one’s homeland behind, but one can never abandon one’s mother-tongue,” the Munich-born Shalom Ben-Chorin wrote. The tragedy of German writers who found refuge in Israel seems to be encapsulated in this sentence. For they remained unknown in Israel, marginalized in the local literary scene, foreigners to Hebrew culture. Most of them never mastered Hebrew to the degree which could have enabled them to write their literary works in this language. Ironically, their readers, well-wishers and academic interpreters happen to live in the country they had left, in Germany or Austria respectively.

The literary works of the first phase are exemplary of a “littérature engagée”. They reflect the ideals of the new state, the notions of secular Zionism, and extol the affirming, enthusiastic pioneer and builder. The image of the male and female youngsters, both anonymous and thus representative, who offer their lives to the nation on a silver platter, in Natan Alterman’s pathos-suffused poem, played a paradigmatic role in the lives of more than one generation of Israelis. The newly acquired political awareness and the restored confidence of the collective body, were eulogized by poets and prose writers alike, whereby the first person plural, the “we”, the voice of the group, was the decisive voice. Characteristic in many respects is Amir Gilboa’s poem in which

we read: “Suddenly a man rises up in the morning, and beholds, he is a people. He begins to walk, and greets whoever crosses his way, saying Shalom.”

The writers, not the politicians, were the ones who gave vent to their doubts and moral scruples soon after the foundation of the state in 1948. Israeli society changed rapidly from a pioneering family to an established state with an ever-growing beurocratic apparatus. The first years saw the mass immigration of Jews from the Diaspora, survivors of the Holocaust in Europe, as well as hag-ridden oriental Jews from various Arabic countries. The demographic transformation was accompanied by ethnic and social tensions. However, the most dramatic change occured in the relationship between Jews and Arabs who no longer lived under British mandatory rule, but were separated from one another. The War of Independence dissociated these two people. Borders were drawn, territories demarcated, and the Palestinians impelled to find a new home elsewhere. Some Israeli writers did not conceal their disappointment in view of the political development, especially the fact that the Zionist project failed to offer a solution to the Arab problem. Israel’s sovreignty came to be taken for granted, its existence understood as a matter-of-course, but, perhaps surprisingly, also the following recognition: A people without a territory (the Jews) who immigrated to a country in order to become a nation were forced to realize that against their wishful thinking that the country was **not** devoid of people. Moreover, wars could be won, but the Palestinian problem reamined acute and insoluble.

The moral dilemma which underlies the Arab-Israeli conflict is impressively delineated in the prose of Yishar Smilansky, primarily in his masterly written stories *Hirbet Hizea* and *The Prisoner*. In *The Prisoner* (1948) Yishar describes the conflicting emotions of Israeli soldiers who capture an old Arab shepherd during a military operation. What should the Israeli soldier do with that prisoner, and what are the consequences inherent in any option – this is the major theme of Yishar’s story. It may in fact be considered an early example

for the need to look at the reverse side of power and to give expression to guilt-feelings.

The difference in the attitude of the Israeli towards the Arab can best be assessed in light of pre-state Hebrew literature. In some works written during the 1920s, the Arab appears as the true native, whom the Jewish settler wishes to resemble. Longing for the togetherness of Semitic brethren, the early writers romanticized the Arab who defends his honour and possesses an erotic aura. Still, this image did not endure. In the more recent Israeli prose, the Arab, or, to be more precise, the Palestinian, is often depicted as a helpless victim, a displaced and persecuted person. At the same time, the oppressed Arab appears as a menacing, often demonic figure. In the works of left-wing Israeli authors like David Grossman, the political-moral dilemma is a vehicle for examining the so-called Zionist narrative. So too in Abraham Yehoshua's story "Facing the forests". The story features an old Arab whose tongue had been severed and who therefore is unable to speak and tell the tragic story of his village which had been conquered and erased by Israeli troops.

In the course of the 1950s Hebrew literature gradually unchained itself from the fetters of social realism and a way of thinking which applauded the collective voice. The poet Yehuda Amichai may serve us as example. Amichai, a native of Würzburg, arrived as a child in Palestine of 1936, and began publishing soon after the War of Independence in which he participated. His poetry written in a seemingly simple style, is nonetheless a masterly fusion of modern, daily Hebrew with the language of the Scriptures and the rabbinic literature. Besides taking up universal themes, such as love and family, Amichai's poetry deals with the Israeli predicament, with war, loss, and bereavement. One of the striking features of his oeuvre is the often critical, even ironic tenor of the lyrical voice. A descendent of a German Jewish orthodox family, Amichai has an account to settle with the Almighty. "God has mercy on kindergarten children,/ less so on schoolchildren./ And for the adults he has no

mercy at all". No less surprising is his view of Jerusalem. The poet debunks the myth spun around the Holy City: "Jerusalem is full of Jews, used by history/ Second-hand Jews with small faults", and he ends his poem with a line taken from the national hymn to which he, the poet, adds only one single word, thereby turning the original meaning topsy-turvey: "And the eye looks to Zion and weeps".

Amichai was not the only one, others too scrutinized the premises upon which the state was founded, challenging the Zionist-socialist ideology of the founding fathers. "Utopia" realized came to be seen as Utopia lost. Benjamin Tammuz dealt with the the failure of the Zionist project to transform Jews into an earth-bound "normal" people. In 1965 Yoram Kaniuk published the novel "Chimmo King of Jerusalem": The story of a fatally wounded young soldier who is no more than a blinded, truncated stump. Yearning to die and be redeemed of his suffering, only his mouth still reminds one of the perfection which once earned him the title King of Jerusalem. Kaniuk offers a terrifying account of the horrors of war, the first in a series of ever-new violent bloodshed. In his prose-works Amos Oz demystified life in the Kibbutz, unveiling the hardships and all too often loneliness of its members. "Our lands betray us", writes Oz. Indeed, as time went by it seemed clear that the so much longed-for feeling of security in one's own country was but an illusion. In the early works of Amos Oz and Abraham Yehoshua, both full-bred Sabras, the anxieties of the individual and his nightmares are projected onto the landscape. Ironically, the Israeli who believed whole-heartedly that he had finally gotten rid of the ghetto-mentality, feels besieged and estranged in his own country.

The greater the discrepancy between the Zionist vision and its implementation, the stronger the longing for the early Yishuv, the pre-State period, and consequently its idealization. The motif of this nostalgic return to a lost paradise can be found in prose works which depict a more or less carefree childhood in Palestine. Furthermore, the cracks in the monolithic construction of

the New Jew fueled the search for the individual identity and the recall of one's roots. And these led inevitably to the rediscovery of the Jewish past, the past that had been suppressed and silenced. As the years went by, it was the figure of the Jew (as opposed to the Israeli) that captured the imagination of many a writer. It was the Diaspora Jew who was gradually seen as the embodiment of a spirituality and warmth which had been lost in the hedonistic, materialistically oriented Israeli society. Truly, the model of the New Jew turned out to be an illusory, inadequate construct.

Moreover: The mass immigration confronted the Sabra with a manifold Jewish identity, or identities, with traditions long forgotten or repressed as those of oriental Jews, or with traumatic experiences of Holocaust survivors. It took a while for native Israelis to realize that those who lived through the horrors of the camps did **not** go like sheep to slaughter, and that the survivors were in no way inferior to the self-assured Sabra. The European world left behind and primarily the cataclysm of the Holocaust seem to engross the imagination of Israeli writers the more they recede in time. Among the survivor-writers, Aharon Appelfeld, who experienced the war as a lonely child wandering through the woods, is unique in his obsessive description of a world lost forever. In unsentimental, powerful prose, Appelfeld describes a pre-war Jewish community that shut its eyes to reality; men and women who wander alone or in small groups across Europe, hoping to be saved, and others who fail to escape death. Tellingly, Appelfeld's survivors remain strangers in their new home, in Israel. They fail to embark on a new life. Instead, they are haunted by the past, or consciously indulge in memories of earlier days. Some even reject any hope for a new beginning, glorifying instead their years in the forests or in the camps, which they consider to have been their finest hour.

Some Israeli writers, like Yoram Kaniuk, focus on the emotional scars of the survivors. Authors belonging to the so-called Second Generation depict the problems and tribulations of children whose parents kept silent, unable to



verbalize what they had been through. A milestone in Israeli fiction is David Grossman's *See Under Love* (Stichwort Liebe). This ambitious novel does not only grapple with the Holocaust, but likewise addresses the inadequacy of language – and, for that matter, literature – to encounter this chapter in Jewish history.

Confronting the Holocaust and discovering the Jewish past inevitably sensitized the Israelis to the “otherness” of diverse groups who for a long time had been marginalized in local society, if not ostracized. Recent years have seen a variety of novels dealing with the hardships and discrimination of Oriental immigrants, those who settled in overcrowded transit camps or in development towns. Eli Amir, for example, narrates in his autobiographical novel *Scapegoat* the story of an oriental boy who finds his place among Sabra classmates at the price of alienation from his own family.

Another social group that has recently attracted attention is that of religious and ultra-orthodox Jews, a group that was ignored by the dominant secular Zionist narrative. Male and female authors who have turned their back on the restrictive orthodox milieu in which they grew up, describe a hermetic world, dominated by outlandish habits and rituals totally foreign to modern Israeli life.

Indeed: The Other in his various configurations has ousted the mythologized, self-assured Israeli from his dominant position. Truly, this Other has moved from the margins of Hebrew literature to the centre stage. Along with stories about various ethnic minorities, the voice of new immigrants from the Soviet Union or Ethiopia has made itself heard. Beside these religious and ethnic minorities, women have made a sweeping entrance into male-dominated Hebrew literature. The list of female writers who began publishing in the last three decades is impressive, especially in view of the fact that the main issues of Israeli life – war, army life, professional success, political involvement – were thought to have been the exclusive domain of male writers. The fiction of young

Israeli women-writers addresses political and historical issues, social and ethnic themes as well as so-called feminine concerns, such as love, sexuality and motherhood.

While the literature written before and shortly after the foundation of the State is often seen as “litteratur engage”, literary critics today consider contemporary young writers to represent the first “private generation” in Hebrew literature. These writers seem to be less preoccupied with collective and political themes than with subjective concerns, materialistic gratification and immediate pleasure. Whoever is familiar with current Israeli writing knows that this conjecture is inaccurate and misleading. With some writers the political is implied between the lines. Others, like Etgar Keret, handle it with less pathos than previous generations, but with equal urgency. Orly Castel-Bloom, the leading author of the postmodernist wave, writes about the erosion of values in Israeli society as about daily life under the threat of terror attacks.

I would like to conclude my talk by addressing the reception of Israeli literature in Germany. Are Hebrew novels accessible to a German reader? Yes, indeed. But more than that! The number of translations into German far exceeds that of any other language. In other words: more Hebrew literature is available in German translation than, for example, in English, despite the fact that in the United States alone the Jewish community embraces over five million members, who - theoretically speaking - could be taken to be potential readers of Israeli literature. Regardless of the literary evaluation of Ephraim Kishon's humoristic anecdotes, there is no doubt in my mind that he played a major role in paving the way for Israeli literature in Germany. Today, German readers can enjoy all the prose works of major writers like Amos Oz, Abraham Yehoshua or David Grossman. Also available are translations of Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the great Hebrew classic and to this day the only Hebrew writer to have been honoured with the Nobel Prize for literature. Hebrew prose in translation is published by the leading German publishing houses, which, in fact, follow eagerly the

developments on the Israeli bookmarket. Missing on the German bookshelf are unfortunately the works of the earlier writers (Yosef Haim Brenner, to name but one example) as well as volumes comprising Hebrew poetry. On the whole, the story of modern Hebrew literature in Germany is unquestionably a success story, perhaps one of the most fortunate adventures of a bilateral relationship which has only begun.