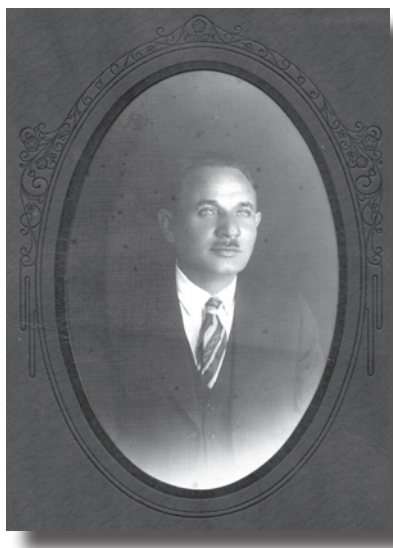


# The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Hebraist: The Life and Dreams of Aron Shimon Shpall<sup>1</sup>

*Shuly Rubin Schwartz*



*Aron Shimon Shpall, n.d.*  
(Courtesy Peggy K. Pearlstein)

The story of mass Jewish migration from eastern Europe to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been recounted in great detail from numerous perspectives, including economic dislocation, cultural disorientation, separation from family, and loss of status. Among the immigrants were a small number of staunch adherents of the Hebrew movement whose adjustment to America took a specific path. Such individuals, influenced by the ideals of the Russian Haskalah movement, were dedicated to the strengthening of Jewish culture in Yiddish, Russian, and especially Hebrew. Devoted to the goals of the Hibbat Zion (Love of Zion) movement, they looked toward Palestine to realize their dreams, but only a small

number of them succeeded in immigrating there. Many, because of politics, money, opportunity, or family ties, relocated to the United States. A unique window into the challenges of such immigrants can be found in the life of one of these individuals, Aron Shimon Shpall.<sup>2</sup>

Already in eastern Europe, Shpall belonged to this small group of Hebraists that saw itself as a cultural elite dedicated to promoting the Hebrew language as part of its broader devotion to the national-cultural revival of the Jewish people in Palestine. As a result of increasing impoverishment, violence, and government discrimination, many of these Jews left eastern Europe, particularly just before and after World War I. Some migrated not to Palestine, but to the United States, bringing with them a strong sense of mission and commitment to the dissemination of Hebrew culture, language, literature, and education. They debated whether or not they constituted a “movement” or whether the group should consist of elite writers and educators or should strive to influence the American Jewish population at large. But they came together in New York in 1917 to establish the Histadrut Ivrit of America, an organization dedicated to encouraging the knowledge and use of the Hebrew language, the publication of Hebrew books and periodicals, and an interest in Hebrew culture.<sup>3</sup>

Not all Hebraist immigrants lived in New York. Some traveled the country in search of employment, and many ended up in small towns and cities as teachers in Talmud Torahs. These independent educational institutions, based on the eastern European *heder metukkan* (improved heder), offered intensive supplementary education on Sundays and on weekdays after public school. Dedicated to educating children who would be fully at home in both American and Hebrew culture, these schools became the normative form of Jewish education in the first four decades of the twentieth century. The Hebraists introduced the *ivrit be-’ivrit* (Hebrew in Hebrew) method, i.e., the translating of the Hebrew of the Pentateuch or the Hebrew textbook into other Hebrew words rather than into Yiddish or English.

In this way, they—to use the phrase coined by scholar of American Hebraism Alan Mintz—“kidnapped” Jewish education in the service of the Hebrew movement. Suffering from isolation and loneliness as they attempted to convey their love of the Hebrew language to uninterested children of immigrants, these far-flung American Hebraists saw themselves working in the trenches to enrich the Jewish cultural lives of the younger generation of American Jews.<sup>4</sup>

Settling in New Orleans in 1922, Shpall was one such individual. In addition to his work as a Jewish educator, Shpall over several years authored numerous letters and other papers.<sup>5</sup> Thanks to this correspondence—most of which was written in a beautiful, literary Hebrew—the reader gains an intimate view of how one individual consciously worked to make Hebrew not only a dynamic force in Jewish life but also, as Mintz has described it, “the living tissue of daily life.” Through Shpall’s writings, one gains insight into how he fortified his passion for Hebrew despite the challenges and personal disappointments of living in the United States instead of Palestine; settling in New Orleans, a community far from the center of Jewish life in America, in a city where only 10,000 of 400,000 residents were Jews; and serving as a teacher after having been a high school principal in Russia.<sup>6</sup>

Aron Shimon Shpall was born in Belozerka, Russia, on 18 February 1875. According to the family genealogy scroll that he updated, he was “educated in Torah and Hasidut,” and his father was a poor teacher. By the age of fifteen or sixteen, Shpall was forced to leave home to support himself, and like many yeshiva boys, he found work teaching in various villages. He notes that he enjoyed his work in each community, and this early, positive experience no doubt influenced him to pursue a career as an educator. Eventually, Shpall



*Shulamith Shpall, n.d.*  
(Courtesy Peggy K. Pearlstein)

found work in a progressive Jewish school. As an adult, he lived in the town of Kremenets, married Shulamith Guber, and reared four children.<sup>7</sup>

Before World War I, Kremenets was a town of about thirty thousand people, of which more than one-third were Jews. Since the non-Jewish residents lived mostly in the outskirts of town and in the mountains, Jewish residents of the town and its suburbs felt it to be predominantly Jewish. Kremenets had long been associated with the ideals of the Haskalah, for Isaac Baer Levinsohn (1788–1860), one of the founders of the Russian Haskalah, was born in Kremenets and returned to live there from 1823 until his death in 1860. In 1907, a co-ed *heder metukkan* opened in town. It provided a more modern Jewish education, and its students soon became the most active members of the local Zionist movement.<sup>8</sup>

Shpall earned a living first as a Hebrew tutor, teaching Torah to students privately and in small groups. He eventually became the principal of a Russian gymnasium<sup>9</sup> for Jews. Among the well-known intellectuals in the town who promoted cultural Zionism and aliyah, Shpall spoke and wrote in Yiddish and Russian as well as in Hebrew. But he was most passionate about the revival of the Hebrew language and, according to the Kremenets memorial volume, Aron Shimon Shpall's home "was the first in which Hebrew was the spoken language." Shpall spoke Hebrew to his three daughters and son. Although Shulamith shared her husband's interest in Hebrew, she spoke and wrote in Yiddish, thus ensuring that her children would know both languages well.<sup>10</sup>



Polish passport of Aron Shimon Shpall, issued 2 June 1921  
(Courtesy Shuly Rubin Schwartz)

When Poland governed the area after World War I, it outlawed Zionist organizations, yet Zionist activity continued undiminished underground. During this period, several Zionist leaders were subjected to sudden arrests.<sup>11</sup> According to family lore, Shpall was among them. Although he was freed, he surely anticipated another arrest and feared that he might not gain release a second time. As he explained, he decided to leave because of “persecutions by the Bolsheviks and the Poles, and other terrible disasters that befell us in our town of Kremenets.”<sup>12</sup> Shpall’s brother and sisters, who had left previously and settled in Denver, Colorado, sent him the necessary travel expenses and affidavits, and Shpall and his family received Polish passports on 21 June 1921.<sup>13</sup>

For reasons that are unclear, the family did not leave immediately, and Shpall had to request that his visa be ratified again by the American consul in Poland. He wrote in Hebrew and included an English translation, for, as he explained, he wanted to write the letter himself and to his great regret was not fluent enough to compose a letter in English.<sup>14</sup> In his request, Shpall mounted a series of arguments to promote his case. He invoked Talmudic logic, noting that his visa had already been approved on 2 June and, according to “our Jewish laws,” “What is resolved can’t be revolved.”<sup>15</sup> He explained that, “I am going to Colorado, a province not populated very much, and my settlement there will have no bad influence upon the material life of the inhabitants.” Clearly aware that immigrants to the United States needed to demonstrate that they would be productive members of society, Shpall further reassured the consul that his family is “very well educated” and will certainly be “valuable citizens” in time. Finally, he noted that as an experienced teacher with the status of a “privileged person,” he hoped that he would be granted permission to immigrate with his family.

Despite this formal appeal, Shpall felt conflicted about leaving Kremenets, an emotion that he later captured in a letter to his children:

Our homeland is dear to us. Even dearer to us is the city that we were born in and that we spent years of our lives in. We have extra affection for our family, and the home of our parents is the dearest of all. However, all the time that we live in our homeland and among our family, we don’t recognize their worth. We look at all that is happening and it seems natural... But it is different if things change, and we need to separate from our native land, and our birthplace and our father’s house.<sup>16</sup> Then feelings of affection are awakened within us. . . We do not have longings for our motherland, because the land where we were born was like a mean stepmother to us. She embittered our lives and saddened our souls. If not for the 3 million of our brothers who live there, it could be overturned along with Sodom and Gomorrah<sup>17</sup> and the world would have lost nothing. But beneath this, we have longings for the city of our birth, but not the whole city, rather just the Jews who live there.<sup>18</sup>

Saddened at the thought of separating from the Jewish community where he spent “the best years of life,”<sup>19</sup> Shpall experienced further emotional turmoil as a passionate Zionist forced, by circumstance, to immigrate not to Palestine but to the United States. As he described in his diary:

Yes! I dreamt sometimes of leaving this country, but for the sake of an entirely different country; of *that* country, to which I am bound historically, love for which I had sucked in with my mother’s milk, for the restoration of which I have worked all my life.

I dreamt of leaving this country for the sake of *that* country, which although I never was there, every corner of it is well known to me and loved by me; each name, as of those places, that are mentioned in the Bible, so of the new colonies there, sounds so sweet in my ears. “Hebron,” “Jerusalem,” “Bethlehem,” “Petach Tikva,” “Rishon l’sion,” “Merhabiah.”<sup>20</sup> How beautiful, how charming are these names! There, to Palestine, had my heart always attracted me... And suddenly, America! What does the name say to my soul? What relation to me has Denver, Colorado, where I am going to?<sup>21</sup>

Shpall described the two groups of emigrants that he encountered on the first leg of their journey: the pioneers en route to Palestine and those immigrating to the United States. “And I belong to the second category! To the small one. I become insignificant in my own eyes.”<sup>22</sup> But listening to others, Shpall realized that “many of the ‘Americans,’ like me, longed for Palestine, but for various reasons they could not attain their desire. On the other hand among the ‘Palestinians’ were such as would willingly go to America, but that being impossible, they go to Palestine.” Speaking to his fellow travelers gave Shpall needed perspective:

It became clear to me that everybody would rather remain at his old home. Nobody *desired* to go, but everybody had to go. We all run, or, to speak more correctly, we flee. And when somebody flees, there is no question: “Where to?” Where your feet carry you! Where you have the possibility! “Save, who can!”

Yet there was a marked difference between the two categories. The Palestine pioneers were happy, joyful. The peace of God *השכינה* seemed to radiate from their countenances. Each of them had worked in his own way for the Zionist ideal, and now when it is destined that they be driven from their home, they go to Palestine to realize with their work, *with their life*, that ideal. An end to the diaspora! They depart from slavery to freedom. *מעבדות לחרות*

The “Americans,” on the contrary, go from one slavery to another, from one diaspora to another. This is perhaps the reason, why they are so depressed!...

At last we all began to deplore the dreadful position of the Jews in Russia and Ukraine, the ruin of the greatest and best part of Jewry, upon which all Jews of the world put their hope, as upon the vanguard of our revival in Palestine. We came to the following conclusion: The last events in Russia and Ukraine, that had ruined in a terrible manner the largest part of the Jewish people, *must open the eyes* of all the Jews in the world to understand that (*only* then) we can be secured in the future from such ruin, *when we will have our own land*.

All our hopes now should be turned to Palestine and America. As in the first, so in the second we need pioneers. In the first—to build up the land, in the second—to wake up our American brethren to give material for the building.

Thus we made up a compromise: Everybody's voyage is not in vain. We all will be engaged in furthering our national aspiration. In different ways, we will work for *one* purpose.

Our good humor awoke. Our faces cleared up. We promised each another [*sic*] not to haul down our national flag...

And with the song "Hope" [Ha-Tikvah] we arrived at Warsaw. There we bade each other a hearty farewell. The Palestine pioneers went to the Palestine office, and we, as American pioneers, to the "HIAS."<sup>23</sup>

Shpall's thinking evolves during his journey, as he copes with the anger, disappointment, envy, and pain caused by both emigration and the reality of immigrating to the United States. Shpall comes to terms with his lot by recognizing that in extreme times, one goes where one can and makes the best of life's circumstances. Rationalizing that some pioneers would work the land in Palestine, Shpall would work the mind and the spirit in the United States, influencing American Jews to support the Jewish national-cultural ideal.

Upon arrival in the United States on 6 May 1922, Shpall and his family went directly to their sponsors, his brother and sisters in Denver, Colorado. Given Shpall's aspirations, he soon grew restless in Denver. Shpall traveled to New York, where he met the Hebrew poet, Ephraim E. Lisitzky, principal of the New Orleans Communal Hebrew School. Lisitzky invited Shpall to teach in his school, and, accepting his offer, Shpall moved his family to New Orleans. He served first as teacher and later as assistant principal of the school until his death in 1935.<sup>24</sup>

Jews first settled in New Orleans in the early nineteenth century—a generation earlier than in Denver—and the first synagogue was organized in the 1820s. By the interwar period, despite its relatively small number of Jews, the city had a full complement of Jewish charitable, benevolent, and social organizations for men and women; about half a dozen synagogues; a Jewish hospital, the Touro Infirmary; and a weekly paper, *The Jewish Ledger*, which began publication in

1895. The communal Hebrew school was organized in 1910, but its early years were marked by frequent changes in personnel and sponsorship.<sup>25</sup>

Despite these Jewish amenities, cultural life in New Orleans was meager, and Shpall's decision to settle there no doubt rested primarily on the chance to work with Lisitzky in promoting Hebrew culture. Lisitzky, a noted Hebrew poet and educator, was born in Minsk in 1885 and immigrated to the United States at age fifteen. After trying out various learning environments and trades, he became principal of the Milwaukee Talmud Torah in 1916. Two years later, he moved to New Orleans to serve as principal of the New Orleans Communal Hebrew School. One of a core group of Hebrew poets in America at that time, Lisitzky remained in New Orleans for the rest of his life. Under his direction, the school developed the reputation of being one of the best of its kind in the United States.<sup>26</sup>

In an article<sup>27</sup> on Hebrew education in New Orleans, Shpall described Lisitzky as a well-known Hebrew poet and distinguished teacher. Shpall notes that Lisitzky introduced the *ivrit be-ivrit* method of teaching<sup>28</sup> to the school and "achieved results in New Orleans that no one believed possible." In New Orleans, which Shpall described as being "in a remote corner far away from the center of Jewish life," Lisitzky and his teachers educated American-born children to speak, read, and write Hebrew fluently. The rigorous high school curriculum included instruction in the Hebrew language, grammar, language usage and style, Bible, Prophets, history, Aggada, rabbinics, and Hebrew literature. Students took both written and oral exams. According to Shpall, Lisitzky and his faculty succeeded because they saw education "not as a source of income but as sacred work."<sup>29</sup> They did not limit their work to teaching in the school; they dedicated themselves to education broadly. They offered adult education classes in the evenings, established a Young Judaea chapter to enhance the Zionist cultural education of the children, and encouraged the students to be involved in the Young Israel synagogue located next door to the school.<sup>30</sup>

What emerges from careful consideration of the curriculum is a school dedicated to an enlightened, traditional education. Students studied sacred Jewish texts, and Lisitzky tied the school to a synagogue, thus rooting it in traditional Jewish living. In Shpall's article one feels both his personal pride in the school and its accomplishments and his regional pride that this school put his city on the map Jewishly: "Thanks to this school, New Orleans has become the Jewish national spiritual center of the south." An exaggerated assessment, perhaps, but one that surely reflects Shpall's understanding of his work as being part of a larger project: the flowering of the nationalist-cultural movement in the United States, a movement that reached its height during the interwar period. This also helped Shpall justify his decision to work in the school and make a life in New Orleans, Louisiana.<sup>31</sup>

Despite his pride in and devotion to the school, Shpall, like Lisitzky,

furthered his national-cultural passions by remaining involved in the larger Hebrew and Zionist movements of the day. He kept up with Zionist affairs and continued to serve as a Hebrew correspondent even after he emigrated, contributing to *Ha-Zefirah* from the United States.<sup>32</sup> Shpall cultivated a group of friends who shared his Zionist longings. His wife, Shulamith, became involved in Hadassah.<sup>33</sup> Acting on sentiments expressed in his diary, Shpall helped raise money for Keren Kayemet (Jewish National Fund). Frustrated at the inertia of his brethren in the year after the 1929 Arab riots in Palestine, he explained: “Every one of our people in America must now get organized for holy work, to collect money for Keren Kayemet. The redemption of the land must now stand before the eyes of every Jew, every day, at every time and in every hour! Will the people fulfill the sacred obligation that is thrust upon them in this emergency?”<sup>34</sup>

Shpall also kept up with the political climate in the British Mandate in Palestine. For example, in the aftermath of the Arab riots, he worried about the waning British support for a Jewish state and expressed continuing support for Chaim Weizmann:<sup>35</sup>

Right now, there is no calm for Zionism. MacDonald<sup>36</sup> betrayed us and Weizmann is our leader. And he not only betrayed us, rather he slapped our cheeks in disgrace. In Parliament, it was openly declared that the Balfour Declaration remains valid, and that the government of England will do all that is in her power to make it a reality. This is the interpretation. But the actions are the complete opposite of the interpretation.<sup>37</sup> He took back 3,300 licenses that the government gave in Israel for the immigration of 3,300 pioneers. His actions angered the entire Jewish world. In all of the communities of our brethren, the Jewish people, they are organizing protest meetings against the betraying, cunning English Government. In the land of Israel on Thursday, a general strike of workers was organized as a protest against the villainy that England committed. Polish Zionists are demanding the dismissal of Weizmann. This knowledge made a great impression on me. The riots that were organized in the land of Israel last August [1929] did not disturb our calm as much as this abomination of MacDonald now.... But even so, there is no reason to lose hope. Whether the English do or don't want it, Eretz Yisrael is ours. “Because to you and your seed, I will give this land.”<sup>38</sup> That is God's promise to Abraham, and God will fulfill His promise.<sup>39</sup>

Agitated that the British were making it harder for Jews to realize their nationalist dreams, Shpall found comfort by recalling God's biblical promise. Perhaps he identified with the patriarch Abraham—a pioneer in a new land sent by God to win over others to the nationalist cause.

Shpall and his friends continually dreamt about Palestine, discussing the



times a week in Hebrew and at other times in Yiddish,<sup>46</sup> and he encouraged them to write to him in Hebrew as well.

Shpall tried to ensure that Edith and Jacob would further nationalist ideals in their home not only by speaking Hebrew but also by participating in the activities of the New York Hebraist circle. Shpall and other Hebraists around the country maintained their connections to each other primarily by devouring the weekly editions of the Hebrew newspaper *Hadoar*,<sup>47</sup> which brought news about American Jewish life in general and the activities of the Histadrut Ivrit in specific. It also published poetry, stories, and literary criticism, while including event and life cycle notices of interest to its readers. Shpall knew that by living in New York, Edith and Jacob would be able to socialize in person with other Hebraists, and he was determined to make that happen. First and foremost, he urged them to call upon Menachem Ribalow<sup>48</sup> and his family. Ribalow was a leader of Histadrut Ivrit of America and editor of *Hadoar*. As Shpall recounted:

We were so happy to hear that you spent a full hour in the company of Mr. Ribalow, who welcomed you warmly. This is a good beginning for your future life. Alas, this is my hope and desire, that you will befriend the writers and learned ones of New York, and so that the home that you build, God willing soon, will be a gathering place for intellectuals. People like this, people of high spirit, dear values; and you must get to know their friends. Therefore take advantage of their invitation and visit their home on the intermediate days of Passover. According to the words of Lisitzky, Mr. Ribalow's wife is herself an intellectual, good hearted and comfortable with people. And my strong desire is that you will get to know women like this and join their group.<sup>49</sup> And when the time comes and you move to your own home, invite them to you.... Mr. Lisitzky, his joy upon hearing that you visited Mr. Ribalow and spent an hour in conversation with him in Hebrew—surpassed all measure. “We have nothing to be ashamed of with our students”—he called out with enthusiasm. “Look New York at the fruits of our labors.” And when I told him that you too, Jacob, my dear one, were also there and participated in the conversation, his eyes lit up with joy. What a wonderful couple! He cried out in merriment. They will build a national Hebrew home.<sup>50</sup>

Because of Shpall's broad interests and contacts, he also encouraged his children to connect to Yiddish writers as well as Hebrew ones.

Go to a social gathering with Peretz Wiernik.<sup>51</sup> And even though I don't yet have details about this gathering, I am certain that you won't be lacking spiritual nourishment there either; rather you will meet respected people of a different kind. I gather that in this gathering, only writers in Yiddish newspapers participate. These writers, even though they write in Yiddish, are all learned, and know Hebrew well; they write in these newspapers only because that is how they make their living. The Hebrew language, to our

regret, cannot feed a hungry belly. As of now, she is a sacred tongue that is used only for the sake of spiritual enjoyments, a bit of Sabbath pleasure like in Tel Aviv. And for the sake of making a living, a lot of our more outstanding writers... must use the weekday language. Hebrew is the language of the soul; Yiddish is the language of the body. In my opinion, the former provides food for the soul, the latter, for the body. But when Yiddish writers get together, they too occupy themselves with spiritual matters... From the evaluation that you send me on this gathering, we'll argue about whether I am right... I am certain that at the meeting of the Histadrut that you were invited to, even though the participants will be Hebrew writers, that is, masters of the spiritual language, despite this, they will speak there about practical matters, day-to-day matters. Because the situation of the "Hebraists" is very bad, and when they get together, they will talk about money. And that's how the positions become reversed.<sup>52</sup>

Conceding that Yiddishists could be intellectuals, and cognizant of how hard it was to make a living as a Hebrew writer, Shpall nevertheless made his preference for Hebrew apparent at every turn:

The Hebrew language is different from all other languages; what is especially different is our relationship to it. In every other language that we write in, we aren't so careful about the beauty of the language; and if, on occasion, we will commit an error in grammar or style, it's of no matter. This is not the case with our language. It is called the sacred language. And our ties to it are like they are to everything sacred. Everything that we write or that we prepare to write, is with reverent awe. Even I, for whom the language flows freely from my mouth, and especially from my pen, even so, I use the language only in serious times, and even the secular subjects that I write about in this language are pulled by a thread of holiness. And if I want to recount "What's new?" matters or things that don't require close attention, I use Yiddish. In this language, I'm not careful; sooner or later, I rely on my pen. In the hours that are in Hebrew, I watch my pen, so that nothing goes out that is not corrected.<sup>53</sup>

Shpall relentlessly encouraged his children to improve their Hebrew, sometimes playing the role of cruel taskmaster and, at other times, overflowing with compliments about how amazing their achievements were. Since letters from the children to Shpall were not preserved, one can glean the impact he had on them only from his letters to them. Anecdotal evidence abounds about what his children actually did in their homes or how much they cared about Jewish learning and Hebrew culture in their own right. From Shpall's letters, one sees primarily the effort they expended trying to please him.<sup>54</sup> They made sure to tell about actions they took to advance their Jewish knowledge and facility with Hebrew. For example, he writes to them: "Good for you for reviewing the Scroll of Esther together on Purim eve. This is a good start. My advice is that you

review the weekly Torah portion each and every week, not with cantillation but with some commentary.... Review Torah together. Also learn the rest of the Bible and read Hebrew books.”<sup>55</sup> Shpall would offer hearty praise and fierce advice in the same breath: “You have done well, reading the newspaper that you got, ‘Hadoar,’ together. Take it upon yourself as an obligation to do this every week.”<sup>56</sup> And, “When will you start writing letters in Hebrew?... Yehudit’s<sup>57</sup> spelling is a little defective, but she excels in knowledge of the language; her language is rich and vivid. Help each other, and what one lacks, the other will supply.”<sup>58</sup> Again, it is not clear to what extent they succeeded, but Edith and Jacob reported to Shpall that they had begun reading Abraham Mapu’s “Ahavat Zion” together.<sup>59</sup> They surely knew how happy he would be to learn this, and, in fact, he was overjoyed: “I am happy to hear that you are busy with Torah, that is in reading Hebrew books; from reading you will move on to writing, and you will occasionally write Hebrew letters, and in this way you will inherit broad knowledge of the Hebrew language.”<sup>60</sup> Though Shpall encouraged his children to further their Jewish learning on all levels, his devotion to Hebrew culture, his “Torah,” rose above all other interests.

Shpall was unrelenting in his insistence that his daughter and son-in-law strive to respond to his letters in Hebrew. The stubbornness and iron will that he believed necessary to revive the Hebrew language and the urgency and importance of the task comes through loudly in his exhortations:

Concerning Jacob’s asking my advice on how you can overcome the slovenliness that has clung to you with regard to writing letters in Hebrew, I can answer with only one word: will. Where there’s a will, there’s a way. You just have to decide, that once a week or once every other week, you must write a letter in Hebrew, to take it upon yourselves, to extract a promise.... I write to you three times a week: On Monday, Wednesday and Friday. And there were times when welcome and unwelcome visitors showed up at our house occasionally for visits and interfered with my letter writing, or other matters came up that could not wait for me to deal with—but I live up to my rules. I am writing my letter in its time, on Friday, in Hebrew. Look at me and do the same. You both write a beautiful Hebrew. I save Jacob’s letters still, and I enjoy them. And Edith excels in the art of writing. Nothing is lacking except for will. Fortify your will, and then everything will turn out well. And the essential part is to set aside a day. On such and such a day, you must write Hebrew. And this needs to be a rule that cannot be breached.<sup>61</sup>

Edith and Jacob strove to emulate Shpall’s example, choosing to speak Hebrew to their newborn daughter, Gilla. Shpall was overjoyed, but again offered unsolicited advice:

I was so happy to hear that you have already started to speak Hebrew to her. Well done! But I want to know your method. Are you speaking to her *only* in this language, or are you mixing up the languages and sometimes using the Holy tongue and sometimes English? If so, you'll have nothing to show for your efforts. You will be confused, and the little one will be confused. You must make speaking Hebrew to her mandatory and not optional, fixed and not temporary. And then the little one will grow up and the language will be with her.<sup>62</sup>

Later, he reinforced this message: "My joy is doubled in knowing that you have gotten accustomed to turning to her only in Hebrew, and her ears absorb only the sounds of our language. Continue on this path, and you will be successful."<sup>63</sup>

Shpall's daughter Deborah married Samuel Citron in December 1934. Citron, a trained attorney, was also a Hebraist and later a Jewish educator. They too lived in New York City, and Shpall's letter-writing regimen expanded to include them. Shpall believed that the lives that his children led in New York vindicated his life's work, for they illustrated the success of both his school and his commitment to Hebrew in the home. (Eventually all four of his children would make their homes in New York.<sup>64</sup>) They were living proof to him that Hebrew could flourish in the United States, and in this way, his children fulfilled his hopes that he too would succeed as a Jewish nationalist pioneer despite having made his home in the American South and not in the Middle East.

An insatiable writer, Shpall dashed off postcards when unable to write longer letters. On his way home from his son Leo's 11 August wedding, Shpall mailed postcards from each stop. On 25 August 1935, he wrote from Baltimore that they would arrive early in Washington, DC; he joked that he felt shortchanged and ought to get a refund! On a card postmarked 10:00 AM on 26 August from Atlanta, Georgia, Shpall reported that they slept, ate, and were enjoying the trip. Later that afternoon, he sent another card from Montgomery, Alabama, noting a delay, but concluding that it was of no import.<sup>65</sup> Four days later, on 30 August, Shpall died of a heart attack at the age of sixty.<sup>66</sup>

Along with his fellow Hebraists, Shpall was buried in the *Ahiever* Society<sup>67</sup> section of Old Montefiore Cemetery in New York. Though he lived only thirteen years in the United States, spending the vast majority of that time in New Orleans, he nevertheless contributed to the flowering of the national Hebrew movement through his work in the school, his writings, and especially his own children. He lived to see his daughter build a life in New York filled with the values, friends, home life, and passions that he held dear. Though the Hebraist flowering in America never reached the heights that its leaders hoped it would, for a brief period of time, this movement enriched the lives of individuals like Aron Shimon Shpall, who, though living in remote Jewish communities in the United States, managed to build and sustain rich Jewish lives in the service of the Hebrew movement.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>It is my honor to dedicate this article to Naomi W. Cohen, who inspired me to work in the field of American Jewish history in the very first course that I took with her when I was a sophomore in college. Her lifelong devotion to the field, rigorous standards of research, probing questions, and insightful answers taught me much over the years. Cohen's gentle prodding led me to my dissertation topic on the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, and her continuing support and encouragement have pushed me to explore new topics and perspectives in the field.

It seemed fitting that I write about my great-grandfather's Hebraist interests and his life in New Orleans for this article in Cohen's honor. The first paper I wrote in the field of American Jewish history fulfilled Cohen's assignment to examine an American Jewish newspaper as a window into Jewish life. I undertook a study of the New Orleans *Jewish Ledger*. Returning now, after many decades, to look at Jewish life in that city, I also touch on larger Hebraist circles of which Cohen and her family have been a part.

<sup>2</sup>Yehuda Slutsky and Judith R. Baskin, "Haskalah," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 9, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 434–444.

<sup>3</sup>Alan Mintz, "A Sanctuary in the Wilderness: The Beginnings of the Hebrew Movement in America in *Hatoren*," in *Hebrew in America: Perspectives and Prospects*, ed. Alan Mintz (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 30, 33; Moshe Pelli, "Ideology and Reality: The American Hebrew Movement in its Inception—In Search of Identity," *Hebrew Studies* 36 (1995): 74; idem, *Hebrew Culture in America: 80 Years of Hebrew Culture in the United States, 1916–1995* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Reshafim, 1998), v–vi; and David Mirsky and Michael Berenbaum, "Histadrut Ivrit of America," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 9, 151.

<sup>4</sup>Mintz, "Sanctuary," 63–64; Daniel Elazar, "The National-Cultural Movement in Hebrew Education in the Mississippi Valley," in *Hebrew in America*, 130–132; and Herman Rosenthal and Peter Wiernik, "Heder," <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=504&letter=H> (accessed 23 July 2009).

<sup>5</sup>Shpall was my maternal grandmother's father. I have in my possession Shpall's genealogy scroll and many of the letters he wrote to my grandparents, Edith and Jacob Pearlstein. I have also read letters written to his daughter and son-in-law, Deborah and Samuel Citron. Most are in Hebrew, though he also wrote many letters in Yiddish, which I do not discuss in this paper. All cited letters below are in Hebrew unless otherwise noted, and the translations are mine.

<sup>6</sup>Mintz, "Sanctuary," 34; Aron Shimon Shpall, "In Our World: On Hebrew Education in New Orleans" (Hebrew), *Shevilei Ha-Hinnuch* 2 (1926–1927): 64; Bertram Wallace Korn, Edward L. Greenstein, Catherine Kahn, and Irwin Lachoff, "Louisiana," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 13, 222–224.

<sup>7</sup>"The Genealogy Scroll of My Mother" (Hebrew), ed. Aron Shimon Shpall (New Orleans, n.d.), personal files of author, translation mine.

<sup>8</sup>The following appear in *Pinkas Kremenets: sefer zikaron ha-'orekh*, ed. Abraham Samuel Stein (Tel Aviv: n.p., 1954): Yitskhak Rokhel, "Before World War I," 54–60; Yisrael Biberman, "Zionism, the Pioneer, and Immigration," trans. Steven Wien and Sari Havis, 107–109; and Manus Goldenberg, "Changing Eras," 51, <http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/kremenets/kre050.html> (accessed 16 July 2009).

<sup>9</sup>The Russian gymnasium with its cosmopolitan curriculum was the main conduit to higher education. Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 2002), 232.

<sup>10</sup>“Genealogy Scroll”; the following in *Pinkas Kremenets*: Rokhel, “Before World War I,” 54–60; Yehuda Kenif, “‘Tarbut’ School,” (Hebrew)137. According to Jill Aizenstein, Jews were a multilingual nation, and during this period, Hebrew co-existed with Yiddish and with the local language. Jill Havi Aizenstein, “Engaging America: Immigrant Jews in American Hebrew Literature,” doctoral dissertation (New York University, 2008), 4–7.

<sup>11</sup>The following in *Pinkas Kremenets*: Biberman, “Zionism,” 107–109; Rokhel, “Before World War I,” 108–109; Yisrael Otiker, “The Pioneer (‘haKhaluts’) Movement,” 115; and Toviya Trushinski, “Dr. Binyamin Landsberg (1890–1942),” (trans. David Dubin), 196.

<sup>12</sup>“Genealogy Scroll.”

<sup>13</sup>“Genealogy Scroll”; and Polish passport of Aron Shimon Shpall, personal files of author.

<sup>14</sup>Shpall, “To His Excellency to the Consul of America in Warsaw,” Hebrew and English translation, n.d., personal files of author.

<sup>15</sup>“*Keyvan she-higid, shuv aino hozer u’magid.*” A quote from the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ketubot 28b.

<sup>16</sup>Shpall uses the words that God utters when commanding Abram to leave his homeland. Genesis 12:1.

<sup>17</sup>Here, too, Shpall’s Hebrew echoes the exact terminology used to describe the upheaval in Sodom and Gomorrah. Genesis 19:29.

<sup>18</sup>Shpall to Edith and Jacob Pearlstein, 30 March 1930, personal files of author.

<sup>19</sup>Shpall, “From My Day-Book,” n.d., personal files of author. This sole surviving eight-page entry from the diary describes Shpall’s state of mind from the time he left Kremenets until he arrived in Warsaw en route to the United States. The entry is written in a beautiful handwriting in English. I suspect that, like Shpall’s letter to the American Consul in Warsaw, this entry was translated by Shpall from the Hebrew.

<sup>20</sup>Shpall’s disappointment was no doubt shaped at the local Zionist gatherings in which individuals would conjure up places in Palestine in their imaginations. As one resident recalled, “[O]n Shabbat oftentimes they would have a lecture on one of the mountains. Usually it was the mountain Vidomka in a hiding place in between the rocks. The gathering, the trip, the enjoyment of nature’s surroundings, drinking fresh milk—were all integrated together. The youngsters would lie down by a spruce or a tree, and travel in their imaginations, fantasizing about village life, nature, and Eretz Yisrael.” Biberman, “Zionism,” 108.

<sup>21</sup>Shpall, “Day Book.” Shpall corrects some of his spelling and usage in this letter, and there are later edits in pencil, though it is unclear whether he made these corrections. Unless otherwise noted, I have used the clearest version.

<sup>22</sup>In 1921, the first group of twelve immigrated to Israel from Kremenets. Khanokh Rokhel and Yitskhak Biberman, “First Group of Pioneers,” 112–114.

<sup>23</sup>HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), an international immigrant and refugee service, was founded in New York City in 1881. Morris Ardoin, “Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 8, 620.

<sup>24</sup>“Genealogy Scroll”; and Shpall to N. Straus, 25 April 1928, personal files of author. The Communal Talmud Torah was first organized as the New Orleans Hebrew School in 1910. Leo Shpall, *The Jews in Louisiana* (New Orleans: Steeg Print. & Pub. Co., 1936), 24.

<sup>25</sup>Shpall, *Jews in Louisiana*, 18–29; Richard Gortheil and Peter Wiernik, “Jewish Ledger, The,” in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=281&letter=J> (accessed 6 July 2009); Catherine Kahn and Irwin Lachoff, “New Orleans,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 15, 152–153.

<sup>26</sup>Eisig Silberschlag, "Lisitzky, Ephraim E.," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 13, 81; Ephraim E. Lisitzky, *In the Grip of Cross-currents*, trans. Moshe Kohn and Jacob Sloan, revised by the author (New York: Bloch Publishing, 1959), 66–300; Mintz, "Sanctuary," 46; and Elazar, "The National-Cultural Movement," 137.

<sup>27</sup>Shpall, "In Our World," 64–67 (translations mine).

<sup>28</sup>This method was pioneered in the United States by Samson Benderly in Baltimore. He then introduced it in New York when he served as first director of the city's Bureau of Jewish Education beginning in 1910.

<sup>29</sup>Shpall is alluding to a verse from *Ethics of the Fathers* (4:7): "Rabbi Tzadok taught: Do not make Torah an ornament for self-aggrandizement nor a means for livelihood."

<sup>30</sup>Shpall, "In Our World," 64–67.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid; Aizenstein, "Engaging America," 8. According to Jane Ravid, who was a student at the school, by the 1940s the school had difficulty achieving its goals because of disinterested students who had little interest in speaking Hebrew. Phone conversation with Jane Ravid, 16 July 2009.

<sup>32</sup>Shpall to N. Straus, 25 April 1928, personal files of author; Isaac Remba, "The Hebrew Press in Poland between the World Wars," in *Di Yidishe prese vos iz geven* (Yiddish), ed. David Flinker, M. Tsanin, Shalom Rosenfeld, Moshe Ron (Tel Aviv, n.d.), 370; Shpall to Edith and Jacob Pearlstein, 22 April 1930, personal files of the author. *Ha-Zefirah* ("The Dawn") was a Hebrew paper that appeared in Warsaw intermittently between 1862 and 1931. Founded as a weekly in 1862, it was the only Hebrew paper of its kind during the 1860s and 1870s. By the 1880s under the editorship of Nahum Sokolow, the paper enjoyed a wide circulation, attracting readers both among the maskilim and the Hasidim. After the First Zionist Congress, *Ha-Zefirah* was firmly Zionist in orientation. The paper appeared intermittently in the 1920s and ceased publication in 1931. Getzel Kressel, "Ha-Zefirah," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 8, 495.

<sup>33</sup>Shpall to Edith and Jacob Pearlstein, 16 January 1931 and 8 Adar Sheni 5692 [16 March 1932], personal files of author.

<sup>34</sup>Shpall to Edith and Jacob Pearlstein, 12 December 1930, personal files of author.

<sup>35</sup>Chaim Weizmann (1874–1952) was the first president of the State of Israel, president of the (World) Zionist Organization (1920–1931 and 1935–1946), and a distinguished scientist. He played an instrumental role in persuading the British government to issue the Balfour Declaration in 1917. However, by 1930, the British abandonment of its obligations toward the Zionists led Weizmann to resign his office and caused a wave of public protest. British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald acknowledged the magnitude of this public dissent by sending a letter to Weizmann in which he renewed the main assurances that Zionists considered essential to mandatory policy. Abba Eban and Samuel Aaron Miller, "Weizmann, Chaim," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 20, 744–752. For more on the reaction of the Jewish community to the riots, see Naomi W. Cohen *The Year After the Riots: American Responses to the Palestine Crisis of 1929–30* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988).

<sup>36</sup>Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald was the first Labour Party prime minister of Great Britain. He served in the Labour governments of 1924 and 1929–1931 and in the national coalition government of 1931–1935. "Ramsay MacDonald," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/354108/Ramsay-MacDonald> (accessed 31 July 2009).

<sup>37</sup>Shpall is turning the idiom from *Ethics of the Fathers* (1: 17)—"Not study but doing mitzvot is the essence of virtue"—on its head.

<sup>38</sup>Paraphrase of Genesis 26:3.

<sup>39</sup>Shpall to Edith and Jacob Pearlstein, 23 May 1930, personal files of author.

<sup>40</sup>Family friends.

<sup>41</sup>Shpall vocalizes this word, perhaps suspecting that his children might not yet be familiar with it. The town was founded in 1929.

<sup>42</sup>Nathan Straus (1848–1931) was a merchant and philanthropist who was deeply devoted to Palestine and gave a great deal of his fortune to support various projects there. Naomi W. Cohen, Hanns G. Reissner, and Ruth Beloff, “Straus,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 19, 248–250.

<sup>43</sup>Shpall to Edith and Jacob Pearlstein, 22 April 1930, personal files of author.

<sup>44</sup>Jacob Pearlstein learned Hebrew at The Jewish Theological Seminary’s Teachers Institute. He graduated in 1920, subsequently attending medical school in New Orleans at Tulane University. He met Edith during his years as a medical student, no doubt being drawn to the Shpall family because of their mutual interests in Hebrew culture. He graduated Tulane in 1927; Jacob and Edith married on 2 March 1930.

<sup>45</sup>Shpall had already begun writing Hebrew letters to Samuel during the engagement period.

<sup>46</sup>I examined only the Hebrew letters for this article. A comparison of the two would no doubt yield proof of Shpall’s philosophy that the two languages served different functions.

<sup>47</sup>*Hadoar*, a Hebrew weekly newspaper, was published by the Histadrut Ivrit from 1923 until 2005. It was the only Hebrew weekly in the Diaspora to be published regularly without interruption. Mirsky and Berenbaum, “Histadrut Ivrit of America,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 9, 151.

<sup>48</sup>Menachem Ribalow (1895–1953) was a Hebrew editor and essayist. Born in Chudnov, Volhynia, Ribalow immigrated to the United States in 1921. Two years later he was appointed editor of the Hebrew weekly *Hadoar*. Eisig Silberschlag, “Ribalow, Menachem” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 17, 279–280.

<sup>49</sup>Shpall consistently demonstrated how much he recognized the important role women played in furthering Hebraism.

<sup>50</sup>Shpall to Edith and Jacob Pearlstein, 2 April 1930, personal files of author.

<sup>51</sup>Peter Wiernik was editor of *Der Morgen Zhurnal*, New York City’s only morning Yiddish newspaper.

<sup>52</sup>Shpall to Edith and Jacob Pearlstein, 28 April 1930, personal files of author.

<sup>53</sup>Shpall to Edith and Jacob Pearlstein, 9 July 1930, personal files of author.

<sup>54</sup>One measure of the children’s reverence for Aron Shimon can be seen in the fact that each of the four children named one of their sons “Aron Shimon” to honor his memory.

<sup>55</sup>Shpall to Edith and Jacob Pearlstein, 19 March 1930, personal files of author.

<sup>56</sup>Shpall to Edith and Jacob Pearlstein, 23 March 1930, personal files of author.

<sup>57</sup>“Yehudit” was Edith’s Hebrew name.

<sup>58</sup>Shpall to Edith and Jacob Pearlstein, 19 March 1930, personal files of author.

<sup>59</sup>Shpall to Edith and Jacob Pearlstein, 2 January 1931, personal files of author. Abraham Mapu (1808–1867) was a Lithuanian novelist who wrote in Hebrew. For many years an impoverished, itinerant schoolmaster, Mapu was a gained financial security when he was appointed teacher in a government school for Jewish children. Mapu is considered the creator of the Hebrew novel. Influenced by French romantic literature, he wrote heavily plotted novels about life in ancient Palestine, which he contrasted favorably with nineteenth-century Jewish life. His style is fresh and poetic, almost biblical in its simple grandeur. The novel appeared in 1853. “Abraham Mapu,” in *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1E1-Mapu-Abr.html> (accessed 2 July 2009).

<sup>60</sup>Shpall to Edith and Jacob Pearlstein, 9 January 1931, personal files of author.

<sup>61</sup>Shpall to Edith and Jacob Pearlstein, 2 January 1931, personal files of author.

<sup>62</sup>Shpall to Edith and Jacob Pearlstein, Erev Rosh Hodesh Adar Sheni 5692 [7 March 1932], and Shpall to Edith and Jacob Pearlstein, 9 Nissan 1932 [15 April 1932], personal files of author.

<sup>63</sup>Shpall to Edith and Jacob Pearlstein, 9 Nissan 1932 [15 April 1932], personal files of author.

<sup>64</sup>Leo Shpall was an educator and American Jewish historian who published many articles in the field. He and his wife Jean moved to New York after Aron Shimon's death. Gila, only sixteen when her father died, eventually married Leon Lantz. A dentist by profession, he was a Hebrew poet by avocation. Both Gila and Deborah taught in afternoon Hebrew schools in the New York area for many decades. They and their husbands also spoke Hebrew to their children.

<sup>65</sup>Shpall to Jacob Pearlstein, 25 August 1935; Shpall to Samuel Citron, 26 August 1935 (9:00 AM); and Shpall to Samuel Citron, 26 August 1935 (3:00 PM), personal files of Sharon Citron Urbas.

<sup>66</sup>*Jewish Ledger* (6 September 1935): 8. This article states that Shpall was fifty-five at the age of his death; however, born in 1875, Shpall was sixty when he died.

<sup>67</sup>This society was founded in 1905 in New York and dedicated to the dissemination of the new Hebrew literature in America. A note to Menachem Ribalow implored him to "make every effort to get burial on Achiever cemetery." Undated, personal files of Sharon Citron Urbas. Mintz, "Sanctuary," 33; Ezra Spicehandler, "Ameriqa'iyut in American Hebrew Literature," in *Hebrew in America*, 73; *Hadoar* (6 September 1935): 685; and *Der Morgen Zhurnal* (3 September 1935): 3.