

Kabak's Connections with America

On the Twenty-Fifth Yearzeit of the Hebrew Novelist

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Aaron Abraham Kabak (1880-1944) was the leading Hebrew novelist of his time. Influenced by Tolstoi and Dostoevski as well as by Flaubert and Zola, he introduced into Hebrew Literature the "wide canvas" approach, the Zionist novel and the modern historical novel — modern as opposed to historical romances in Abraham Mapu's style.

Kabak's novels comprise *By Herself* (1904), the story of a young girl who, in the midst of socialist friends and foes, carries on the struggle for Zionism all by herself; *Daniel Shafranov* (1912), whose title hero continues this struggle against the background of the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the Black Hundred pogroms; *Love* (1914), depicting the life of the emigrant Russian intelligentsia in Switzerland; *Victory* (1923), an account of Berlin Jewry up to World War I; *Solomon Molkho* (1928), a trilogy about the sixteenth-century visionary, set in Portugal, Palestine, and Germany; *Between Sea and Desert* (1933), describing the successes and failures of the pioneers in Palestine up to the Balfour Declaration; and *In the Narrow Path* (1937), a Jesus novel. His last work, *The History of a Family*, was planned as a monumental series of novels depicting the decline of the Haskalah and the rise of the National Renaissance and of political Zionism. He was still able to finish three books of the series: *In the Empty Space* (1943), set in Minsk and Kovno ca. 1850; *In the Shadow of the Gallows* (1944), recalling the Polish insurrection of 1863; and *Story without Heroes* (posthumously pub-

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lished, 1945), set in Odessa that same year of 1863. In addition to his novels, Kabak wrote plays, stories, essays and articles. He translated into Hebrew books by Pierre Loti, Stendhal, Jakob Wassermann, and Dmitri Mereshkowski.

Born in Smargon, Lithuania, Kabak went through the customary cheder, yeshivah, and "extern" education. In Odessa he lived among writers, teachers, scholars, and Zionists. He spent a few years in Turkey and some time in Palestine as a writer and teacher. Back in Russia, he married Sarah Feige Tchernowitz, the sister of Chaim Tchernowitz (Rav Tsa'ir) who was then rabbi in Odessa and head of a progressive yeshivah. During and for some years after World War I, Kabak lived in Switzerland. In 1921, he settled in Palestine and built a house in Bet Hakerem. He taught at the Jerusalem Gymnasium up to his retirement in 1936.

A BUSINESS FOR GROBE JUNGEN

Kabak's first contact with America occurred in connection with the Hebrew periodical *Hatoren*, which appeared at New York from 1913 to 1925 as the organ of the Achi'ever Society, founded in 1909. *Hatoren* began as a monthly, became a weekly and later a monthly again. Among its editors were Abraham Goldberg, Simon Ginzburg, Daniel Persky, Reuben Brainin, and Isaac Dob Berkowitz.

While living in Switzerland, Kabak regularly reviewed the literary scene. When he saw a copy of *Hatoren*, he wrote enthusiastically about it in the Warsaw Hebrew periodical *Hatsefirah*.¹ It seems that until then he had conceived of America as a totally materialistic society where the Jewish immigrants quickly lost their Jewish learning together with most of their Old-World ideals. But now the Hebrew language had found sanctuary there, and this, Kabak thought, was a promising beginning. Like Columbus, he felt moved to call out: Land, Land!

Three years later, Kabak himself became a contributor to this American Hebrew periodical. He began with an essay on Bialik, "The National Poet." There followed "Spain and the Spanish

¹ *Hatsefirah*, no. 45 (1914).

Jews," which dealt with the Jewish Community of Salonica and Spain's gesture¹ in inviting back the descendants of her Jewish expellees. In "Letters from Switzerland," he reported on the Serbian Jews, and more particularly, on the Jewish community of Belgrade.²

For some fifteen years thereafter, Kabak's connections with the United States were limited to correspondence with Hebrew writers who lived there, among them Yohanan Twersky, Daniel Persky, I. D. Berkowitz, Simon Halkin, *et al.*, but especially with his brother-in-law Tchernowitz. Rav Tsa'ir had left Odessa in 1912 for Germany to get his Ph.D. and then lived in Switzerland, where Kabak collaborated with him and Yehezkel Kaufmann on a dictionary from the estate of A. B. Gawronski. He arrived in the United States in 1923 and became Professor of Talmud at the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York.³

In 1933, there began a new phase in Kabak's relationship to the United States. In a letter written on Elul 22, 5693 (September 13, 1933), Kabak thanks his brother-in-law for his efforts in trying to achieve publication of an English-language edition of *Solomon Molkho*. Whatever it was Tchernowitz had undertaken with that goal in mind had not been successful. Kabak sent him Hebrew and Yiddish reviews of the book to bolster his case for the prospective publisher. In a letter dated Tevet 9, 5694 (December 27, 1933), Kabak shows himself already quite impatient; he indicates that it might be better if he turned to the publisher directly instead of depending on Tchernowitz' good services.⁴

There were a number of reasons for Kabak's sudden and urgent interest in the American publishing market. One was the great literary success *Solomon Molkho* had proven. It was the first Hebrew trilogy, the first modern Hebrew historical novel and, very possibly,

² *Hatoren*, III, nos. 26-28, 45 (1917); IV, no. 44 (1918).

³ Kabak's correspondence with American Hebrew writers is found at the Bet Hasofer. After Kabak's death, Tchernowitz published a collection of his letters in *Bitzaron*, XII (1945), 315-27. The dictionary was entitled *Otsar Leshon Hamikra Vehatalmud* (Moscow, 1924).

⁴ For both letters, see *Bitzaron*, XII, 322-23.



Courtesy, Werner Weinberg, Cincinnati

A. A. Kabak

"Too bad about the royalties"

בעזרת השם

בית המדרש לחכמת ישראל

בכח ההרשאה שניתנה לוועד הנאמנים סמכם בית המחקקים של מדינת ניו-יורק
ועל פי הצעת חבר המורים של בית-המדרש מחלקים אנו בזו
לזמנינו רב חכם הוא התחיה הלאומית בישראל הצופה מעל הסנדל בין ים ובין מדבר
את לבשי התנועה הציונית בדרכה אל הנצחון הגדול וטלל כאהבה ובראה את ספר
כסופי הגאולה וחזון המשיחיות באוטה וססלא את החלל הרק אסונה וקדושה
ר אהרן אברהם בהרב ר נתן קלונימוס קבק
את תואר הכבוד

דוקטור לספרות ישראל

והיה לו בזו אות ברכה והוקרה על תרומתו הנחרדה לספרות העברית החדשה
ולראיה באנו על החתום ואשרנוהו וקייטנוהו בנושפנקא דבית המדרש
ביום ארבעה עשר לחודש שבט שנת חמשת אלפים ושבע מאות וחמס

ס"ט ראש ועד הנאמנים
הנשיא ק
הדיין ק
א. מ. חניאל
א. מ. חניאל
א. מ. חניאל

Courtesy, Werner Weinberg, Cincinnati

Kabak's posthumous honorary doctoral degree
from the Jewish Institute of Religion

the first Hebrew novel that merited serious attention outside the circle of Hebrew readers.

The second reason was financial. Two years earlier, Kabak had suffered a heart attack. For several months he was forced to stay away from school, and even after his return it took him quite a long time to regain his health. He felt anxiety about his livelihood. It seems that Tchernowitz had warned him that — in case an English-language edition should materialize — Kabak was not to expect too much in the way of royalties. Kabak answered, “The ‘small honorarium’ which the English translation will pay me is not small for me these days.” Then he goes on daydreaming how, once the English translation has been published, a French one will not be long in following, and soon the royalties will amount to something.⁵

Thirdly, Kabak felt a strong “writers’ jealousy” toward Sholom Asch. He considered himself superior as an artist and begrudged Asch his popular successes. Together with this sentiment went the low regard in which Kabak held the American Jewish reader. Thus he writes on Adar 25, 5696 (March 19, 1936):

I do not think that my novel [*Solomon Molkho*] is too delicate for the coarse stomach of the American reader. (For that stomach is coarse.) Yet Asch prints his novels in the *Forverts*, and I do not want to say that Asch’s novels are so bad that they are just right for the American newspaper. The reason is not that my novel is too good for them; it is rather that they do not know me. Apparently your recommendation is not enough. After all, they know that you are a talmudic scholar, while writing novels is a business for “grobe jungen,” as any American editor knows. . . .⁶

Later he wrote of Asch, “I do not know whether he is the better artist (I believe that he has not written and will not write a book like *Molkho* or *In the Narrow Path*); but I do not doubt for a moment that he is the better businessman. . . .”⁷

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

⁷ Undated letter: *Bitzaron*, XII, 325. From the contents it appears that the letter was written in 1943.

MONEY ANSWERS EVERYTHING

In 1933 Kabak must have hoped that the publisher with whom Tchernowitz was negotiating would also see to the translation. However, from the letter of March 19, 1936, it appears that in the meantime Kabak's wife, Sarah Feige, Professor Tchernowitz' sister, had undertaken to translate the book. We know nothing about the fate of the English manuscript, except that "it did not find favor in the eyes of the American editor." And again the sigh: "Too bad about the royalties. . . ."

A year before, Kabak had suffered another setback to his health, a stroke that left him partially paralyzed. He took a "temporary" leave of absence from his school, but the leave turned out to be permanent. He received a lump sum from the Kupat Cholim⁸ and, from then on, had to live by his pen. In an optimistic mood he decided to skip the English edition of *Solomon Molkho* and to go directly for a movie version. He wrote to Max Reinhardt, then in Hollywood, enclosing a résumé and, apparently, some finished scenes. Reinhardt answered politely:

Everything you were kind enough to tell me about the subject has of course touched and interested me very much. I am convinced that the events of this epoch in Jewish history possess exceptional dramatic qualities which make them a natural for dramatization through the film. Unfortunately, however. . . .⁹

In 1937, *In the Narrow Path*, Kabak's Jesus novel, was published. It received excellent criticism in the Hebrew press. Two years later, Asch's *Nazarene* came out, and Kabak eagerly asked Tchernowitz' opinion of it. Tchernowitz obliged:

His Jesus has better luck than your Jesus. It seems that in his Jesus there is more "goyishness" than in your Jesus. They say, he has sold thousands of copies. . . . One of the large department stores in this country has acquired it and they give it much publicity in all the papers. . . . Naturally,

⁸ Kabak longhand letter to Tchernowitz, Tammuz 4, 5696 (June 22, 1936), in the *Bitzaron* office.

⁹ Reinhardt typewritten letter (in French) to Kabak, November 28, 1936, at the Bet Hasofer.

the missionaries and the Christians were very happy . . . however, the Jewish press fell upon him. But what does he care, money answers everything.¹⁰

It touches one as almost tragic to find among Tchernowitz' papers a rejection slip from the Alfred Knopf Publishing House written at about this time, thanking Tchernowitz for letting them see *In the Narrow Path* and telling him that the manuscript "is being held subject to your instructions." It is not known to this writer whether Tchernowitz had perhaps submitted it without Kabak's knowledge, who had made the English translation, or what has since become of it. At any rate, this novel, too, was rejected by the "American editor."¹¹

At that time Tchernowitz went to great lengths to secure Kabak's cooperation for his new Hebrew monthly, *Bitzaron*. He was probably motivated both by the wish to alleviate his brother-in-law's financial plight and to profit from his established reputation in Hebrew literature. Possibly in connection with the outbreak of World War II, Tchernowitz telegraphed Kabak on October 11, 1939, asking him to serve as a news correspondent for *Bitzaron*. In a follow-up letter two days later, he added instructions concerning length and division of the articles, specified deadlines and payment (two to three dollars per page), and hinted at precautions to be taken on account of the British censorship. Only a week later, on October 20, Tchernowitz sent off a reminder. He told Kabak that he was keeping a space open for the news report, but he could not wait indefinitely. Again a month later, on November 23, he inquired after the whereabouts of the articles which, so it seems, Kabak had promised to write. Tchernowitz may have sensed that Kabak was not overly flattered by being commissioned to contribute news stories only, for now he wrote: ". . . I would like you to be the regular *belles lettres* writer . . .

¹⁰ Tchernowitz to Kabak, November 23, 1939: typewritten letter, carbon copy in the *Bitzaron* office.

¹¹ Rejection slip, July 17, 1940, in the *Bitzaron* office. We are, however, happy to note that at the time of this writing — and thirty years after "Asch's Jesus" — "Kabak's Jesus" has appeared in an English translation: *The Narrow Path; the Man of Nazareth*, trans. by J. L. Meltzer (Tel Aviv: Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature, 1968).

or perhaps you prefer writing literary criticism? . . . Send all you can; your words will be very valuable even if they are late in arriving." He appealed to Kabak's sense of duty: "By right and by common sense you ought to take over this column. . . . Now God has been good to me and I have a Kabak of my own — he does not want to write stories!"¹²

Kabak did not comply. He lined up a whole array of excuses: As far as reporting the news was concerned, the censor rendered this impossible. Even if he got his reports past the censor, they would not arrive early enough to be still called news. He did not have any short stories right now. He had prepared some excerpts from the novel on which he was working, but he had already promised them to *Davar*. He might be interested in writing literary reviews, but he could not afford to buy new books. He had asked the Devir Publishing House to let him have the review copies for *Bitzaron*, only to find out that they would send them directly to New York. . . . One main reason for Kabak's failure to oblige Rav Tsa'ir was certainly the new novel *In the Empty Space*, the first of the projected series, *The History of a Family*. Also the two to three dollar honorarium per page might not have been very much of an inducement. At any rate, Kabak's connection with America via *Bitzaron* did not bear any literary fruit.¹³

IN BOTH WORLDS

There is still one last connection of Kabak with the United States. In 1944, the Jewish Institute of Religion decided to bestow an honorary degree upon him. By coincidence, this decision was taken one day before Kabak's death, which occurred suddenly and unexpectedly on November 18, 1944. When, at the ceremony, Tchernowitz accepted the diploma for Kabak's family, he said: "It is almost miraculous that our School should decide to honor the

¹² Tchernowitz to Kabak, October 13, October 20, and November 23, 1939: carbon copies of three typewritten letters in the *Bitzaron* office.

¹³ See undated letter: *Bitzaron*, XII, 326-27.

deceased with the title of Doctor of Hebrew Letters at a moment when he was hovering between life and death . . . as though one had wanted to indicate that Kabak lived in both worlds. . . ." The posthumous presentation was made by Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, who praised Kabak as "an immortal writer of the immortal language," one who depicted "the beauty of life, and especially the majesty and the glory of life in the Land of Israel."¹⁴

The text of the diploma itself is cleverly interwoven with some of Kabak's novel and story titles (here in capital letters). It reads in part:

. . . To the able novelist who beheld the national renaissance of Israel, who witnessed FROM THE HEIGHT OF THE TOWER, BETWEEN SEA AND DESERT the trials of the Zionist movement on its way to the great VICTORY, who unfolded with LOVE and with awe the scroll of the longing for redemption, the messianic vision of the nation, and who filled THE EMPTY SPACE with FAITH and with holiness. . . .

¹⁴ See Tchernowitz' introduction to the published Kabak letters: *Bitzarom*, XII, 319-20.

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