

# The Presence of Eastern and Central Europe in The Culture and Politics of Contemporary Israel

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Israel is a Middle Eastern country, and the history of the Jewish people in the region began many millenia ago and is deeply rooted in the Judaic religious tradition. The future and security of the country depends on the way it will be able to work out its relations with its regional neighbors, and with the Palestinians in particular. But the history of Jewish people as it developed in the last 500 years and the Zionist movement as an intellectual and political force that gave birth to the modern State of Israel, are deeply interwoven with the histories and cultures of Eastern and Central Europe. Anyone who fails to understand this will be unable to grasp much of the structure and nature of Israeli society, its politics and culture, both on the practical and symbolic level.

It is today largely overlooked (except by a few historians) that prior to 1882, when the great mass of Jewish immigration from the Russian Empire started, more than 80 percent of the world's Jews lived in the Czarist Russian Empire and the Hapsburg Austro-Hungarian Empire. These two empires inherited, with the partition of Poland, the vast majority of the large Jewish population of the historical Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: to those areas, which included not only the historical Polish Crown Lands and Lithuania in its present contours, but also Belorussia and Ukraine, one should add the Jewish communities of Bohemia and Moravia as well as Hungary (mainly Upper Hungary, that is, the present Slovakia and Transylvania), which were also under Hapsburg rule. The difference in the status of the Jews in these two empires—essentially oppressed in Russia, in Austria-Hungary basically tolerated—could not of course have been greater: but that need not detain us here.

In these two vast areas most of Jewish history has taken place since the close of the Middle Ages; it was there that most of the Jewish people entered the modern age and reckoned with its achievements and ex-



perienced its travails. One of these encounters between Judaism and modernity brought forth the Jewish *Haskala* (Enlightenment), which, under the twin impacts of the ideas of European Enlightenment and the emergence of modern nationalism, brought about the revival of the Hebrew language as a vehicle of secular prose, poetry, and *Publizistik*. In Eastern Europe Judaism first confronted modernity; one consequence was that during the latter part of the nineteenth century the capital cities of Hebrew letters, where journals and book printing flourished, and a new Jewish intellectual elite tried to define Jewish identity and culture in modern terms, were cities like Wilno, Warsaw, and Odessa.

Because this large Jewish population was also living on the fault lines of the great divides of Eastern and Central Europe (Polish/German, Polish/Russian, Polish/Lithuanian, Czech/German, Hungarian/German, Hungarian/Slovak, Hungarian/Romanian, and so forth), it is no wonder that one finds reflections of the general debates about identity, culture, history, and language in the Jewish internal discourse. Thus, the revival of the Hebrew language as a literary medium, no longer restricted to sacred use, owes much to the centrality of language in the preservation and construction of identity in Polish, German, Czech, and Hungarian nationalism: the debate about the role of Hebrew in the Jewish press clearly indicates this. No longer totally enclosed in a physical and spiritual ghetto but now buffeted by a multiplicity of nations and national cultures, each striving to define and delineate its identity in terms of modernity, Jewish communities were moved and influenced by this secular discourse. When the non-Jewish majority societies shifted from mainly religious identities within the *gens Christiana*, which also defined Jews in religious terms, the shift of identity from the religious to the national had to have its impact on the Jewish population as well.

The first modern Hebrew novel, a romantic bucolic idyll, *Ahavat Zion* [The Love of Zion], was published in 1853 by Avraham Mapu (born in 1808 in Slobodka, near Kovno); surrounded by Russian, Polish, German (and even the nascent Lithuanian) literatures influenced by Herderian ideas, people like Mapu taught “Herder to speak Hebrew.” Equally, a philosopher like Nachman Krochmal (born in 1785 in Brody, Galicia) in his *magnum opus Moreh Nevuchei Ha-zman* [Guide to the Perplexed of Our Times], published posthumously in 1851, tried to adapt Hegel’s philosophy of history to the Jewish

context—an attempt reminiscent of August von Cieszkowski's *Prolegomena*. In the ethnic borderlands of Lithuania, Galicia, Posen, Southern Ukraine (and especially in Odessa with its mixed, cosmopolitan, and modern population) and Bessarabia, this flowering of Hebrew letters took place.<sup>1</sup>

This Eastern and Central European background largely determined the nature of modern Hebrew literature. The modern Hebrew classics, taught in contemporary Israeli schools, include the poetry and fiction of such writers as Chaim Nachman Bialik (born 1873 in Rady, Ukraine), Shaul Tschernichowsky (born 1875 in Mikhailovka, Ukraine), Micha Yosef Berdyczewsky (born 1865 in Miedzybórz and known in Hebrew as Mezhibush), Shmuel Yosef Agnon (born 1887 in Buczacz), and others. Some lived all their lives in Eastern Europe; even those who eventually immigrated to Palestine achieved their fame prior to immigration. Their literary genres have to be understood in the context of the Polish and Russian literary traditions; Tschernichowsky's deep feeling for the Ukrainian landscape and its people, especially the Crimea, appears as a major motif in his poetry, which it is possible to describe as Ukrainian poetry written in Hebrew.

Thus, a combination of Polish romanticism and the Russian literary tradition, sometimes uneasily combined, is central to modern Hebrew literature. Even contemporary Israeli-born authors like Amos Oz or Avraham B. Yehoshua have to be understood within the context of a literary tradition that owes its force and impact to the legacies of Chekhov and Turgenev, rather than to West European genres.

The same applies to Israeli music. Its rhythms and melodies are, on the one hand, consciously modeled on adaptations of Jewish musical traditions harking from Yemen and Morocco. But the other mainstream of Israeli folk music is typically Eastern European: what is widely considered as the Israeli "national" folk dance, the *Hora*, is a Moldavian peasant dance (as is the etymology of its name). Many recent Russian immigrants to Israel are sometimes perplexed to find that so

1. In this context it should be remarked that there are specific Hebrew versions of the names of some of the major cities and towns in these areas, and they should be added to the kaleidoscope of linguistic variations of place names prevalent in these multiethnic regions: thus, we find the Hebrew versions of Kovna, Wilna, Warsha, Kraka, Wina. This applies also to smaller towns like Rzeszow (Reysha in Hebrew). Even Adam Mickiewicz's birth place, Nowogródek (Naugardukas in contemporary Lithuanian) has, as Irena Grudzińska-Gross has recently reminded us, a Hebrew-Yiddish version—Navaredok.

many Israeli patriotic songs are sung to melodies that they recognize as Russian and may even identify with communist popular propaganda. Many are the ironies of history.

Another example is the Israeli national anthem, *Hatikva* [Hope], which served before the establishment of Israel as the anthem of the Zionist movement. Its lyrics were written by Naftali Herz Imber (born 1856 in Złoczów) in 1878 when he was living in Iasi, and its main stirring line is *Od lo avda tikvatenu* (Our hope is not yet lost). This was consciously modeled on the opening line of the Polish anthem, *Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła* (Poland is not yet lost): few Israelis know this, surely fewer Poles do. The melody to which it is sung sounds like a not very good variation of Smetana's *Vltava*.

On another cultural level, more directly connected with politics, is the complex and sometimes infuriating blend of ethnicity and religion in Israel and the place religion occupies in the public sphere of what is a modern and largely secular state (only around 15 percent of the population vote for religious parties). This may be alien and incomprehensible to anyone familiar only with the American model, and it owes many of its perplexities to the idiosyncracies of Jewish history, both biblical and exilic. But similar symbiotic links between nation and religion can be found in practically all Eastern and Central European national movements, from Poland, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Russia itself—to the current murderous identification of ethnicity and religion in the post-Yugoslav wars. Even such a secular national movement as the Czech views itself as having been founded by the religious reformer Jan Hus and the Czech national struggle has been consistently constructed as a struggle as well against the Hapsburg-inspired Counter-Reformation. Surely German nationalism has links with Lutheranism, and Greek nationalism is inseparable from its self-understanding in Orthodox terms. The rise of Romanian, Serbian, and Bulgarian nationalism has been heralded by the emergence of autocephalous churches, independent of the Greek Orthodox patriarchate. The Israeli case may be at a rather extreme end of the spectrum, but it is not unique if one views it in its concrete historical, that is, Eastern and Central European, context.

Moving now to politics proper, the multiparty structure of Israeli politics, as well as the ideological cleavages in the country, can equally be understood only if the historical growth of political parties in the Jewish community in pre-1948 Palestine is borne in mind. Most of

the Zionist pioneering immigrants before the Second World War came from Eastern and Central Europe, and the political discourse of the early twentieth century of these regions deeply engraved itself on Israeli political culture: it was not created *ex nihilo*.

One cannot understand the debates of the Israeli left, its perennial splits, long-winded ideological discussions, hairsplitting discourse about socialist dogma or the centralized structure of most Israeli social-democratic and socialist parties, without realizing that the Israeli left developed in the crucible of the East European revolutionary atmosphere. Israeli Labor leaders like David Ben Gurion (born 1886 in Płock) and his generation of the 1905–14 wave of immigration (The Second Aliyah) were all immersed in the debates between Social Democrats and *Narodniks* and, later, in those between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks: this world formed their political vocabulary. The various splits in the Jewish Labor Movement in Palestine and later in Israel, up to the bitter enmity between the social-democratic Mapai and the left-socialist Mapam in the 1950s, have to be understood in the context of this debate among Russian, and later Polish, socialists.

Similarly, the debates about the relation between socialism and Zionism have been conducted since the early years of the century within the context of the East and Central European socialist polemic around the question of nationalism—between Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin, between Polish socialist parties SDKPiL and PPS—and greatly enriched by the contributions to the “national question” of Austro-Marxists like Otto Bauer and Karl Renner.<sup>2</sup> The classical Zionist-socialist synthesis was developed in the writings of Dov Ber Borochof (born in 1881 in Poltava), who wrote his *Class Warfare and the National Question* while in exile in Vienna just before the First World War. He died in 1917 in Kiev after returning to Russia in the wake of the February Revolution to participate in the Minorities Congress convened by the Kerensky government. Though he never immigrated to Palestine, his writings, deeply couched in the vocabulary of the pre-1914 Russian, Polish, and Austro-Marxist debate about nationalism and socialism, can be seen until this very day, though in a much adulterated form, as the subtext of much of the politics of the Israel Labor Party.


2. In the specific Jewish context, the debate was further complicated by the existence of a strong Jewish socialist, but anti-Zionist, party in Eastern Europe—the *Bund*.




Nor can one understand the Israeli right without its specific East European context—this time mainly that of Poland of the 1920s and 1930s. People like Menachem Begin (born in 1913 in Brest-Litovsk) and Yitzhak Shamir (born in 1915 in Rozinói, near Białystok) grew up in interwar Poland, with its parliamentary crises, deep ethnic divisions, constant sense of a hostile environment—all accompanied by the background of the poetry of Polish romanticism and political messianism. In Israeli right-wing parties, just as in the pre-1948 underground right-wing organizations, one clearly hears the echoes of Piłsudski and sees mirror-images of the National-Democratic party (*Endecja*), and even *ONR-Falange* (radical nationalist organization). Begin's underground organization was called *Irgun Zvai Leumi* (National Military Organization—a Polish translation would make it immediately familiar to most Poles), and his rhetoric if translated (back) into Polish would make any student of Polish politics of the 1930s feel at home.

Many more examples could be given to suggest how the ideological debates in Israel have been framed by the East and Central European background of the country's Founding Fathers (and Mothers: Golda Meir, born in 1898 in Kiev, though raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, at that time a very "Central European" U.S. town with a socialist city government). Even the central role of women in the socialist Zionist movement is linked with the role of women in the Russian revolutionary movement. This also had structural consequences: strong sectarian infighting within the parties, combining fierce personal loyalties with lofty ideological sloganeering—also an East European characteristic. Similarly, the kibbutz movement shows an equal blend of Russian Narodnik ideas and Tolstoyan notions (to which later some romantic ideas of the German *Jugendbewegung* were added)—best exemplified in the thoughts of Aharon David Gordon (born in 1856 in Trojanów, Podolia) whose Religion of Labour became one of the main intellectual foundations of the kibbutz movement. Gordon was aware of his physical resemblance to Tolstoy, and some of his photographs—prophetic beard, Russian shirt, working in the fields—became icons of the Israeli left.

Last and not least: the proportional system of representation. First introduced in the 1920s by the semiautonomous institutions of the Jewish community in Palestine, it was then automatically adopted, without much reflection, after 1948 by the first Provisional Govern-

ment. When first introduced in the 1920s, it was consciously modeled after the system of elections to the Polish Sejm (though with less disastrous results).


From this tradition, not the only one in Israel's kaleidoscopic culture, but certainly the dominant one, Israel has been brutally severed twice in the past half century: first by the Holocaust, then by the emergence of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, whose policies over time became more explicitly anti-Israeli, anti-Zionist, and occasionally anti-semitic. Five of the six million Jews killed in the Holocaust were from Eastern and Central Europe: this Jewish world was first destroyed and obliterated by the Germans—its memory then doomed to oblivion by the Communists. While other Israeli Jewish communities (the Yemeni, the Moroccan, the Kurdish, the Iraqi—who together make up slightly less than half of Israel's Jewish population) were able to delve into their historical memories and traditions and forge their identity as Israeli Jews in the context of their historical experiences, a physical and psychological barrier developed between many of Israel's Eastern European immigrants and their place of origin. 

Over four decades, for most Israelis, Poland, for example, became identified solely with chwitz and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. That Jews lived in Poland for almost a thousand years, survived despite many hardships and tribulations, and created a rich Jewish culture that to a large extent became the defining factor in modern Jewish identity, was mostly forgotten. That  was the capital of Hebrew letters in the nineteenth century was remembered only by archivists. That  was the largest Jewish center in Europe in the Renaissance and boasted of Jewish scholarship almost unparalleled in history was subsumed under memories of the Holocaust and the anti-Jewish Slansky trials under communism. That most of the Hebrew literature taught in Israeli schools was written in Eastern Europe and sometimes evoked its landscape was usually overlooked, and, in any case, made much of this literature unintelligible to generations of younger Israelis. This ambivalent reality of Eastern Europe in Israeli culture can be seen even in the poetry of the most radically right-wing and ethnocentric Israeli poet, Uri Zvi Grinberg, (born in 1891 in Bilkamin, Galicia), who wrote in the 1920s:

We had to hate even what we loved,  
We loved the forest, the river, the well and the mill,



We loved the foliage, the fish, the pail, the bread,  
and secretly,  
Very secretly, we loved even the sound of their bells  
And the gentile urchins with their bleached hair.

And because Israelis could not travel to Eastern Europe, this whole world became an abstraction, distant and threatening like the dark side of the moon. What was left was sometimes a kitsch commercial exploitation of this memory, as in *Fiddler on the Roof*. The reality, with its powerful ambivalence, was not there. 

A central part of Israel's complex culture is Middle Eastern. But the "European" part is, after all, not Scandinavian or Italian; it is Eastern European. And it is this real Europe, with its mixed heritage of Polish romanticism, Russian positivism, social visions, and national cultures (and hatreds), that Israel is now exploring. This shows itself in the dozens of East European cultural exchanges with Israel. Polish, Russian, and Hungarian writers are coming to Israel, as Israelis are going to Eastern Europe, finding, sometimes to their surprise, that even if they do not speak the language, they understand the music. Orchestras, ballets, and theaters from Eastern Europe come for performances in Israel. When the Red Army Choir visited Israel in 1995, they sang some songs twice—first in Russian and then in Hebrew, as the Hebrew version has been for decades considered part of Israeli folk-culture.

Younger Israelis are traveling to Eastern Europe to find the villages and *shtetls* of their parents or grandparents—not out of nostalgia, but out of keen interest to understand better their own origins, their own family history, their own identity. The more than 600,000 new immigrants who have arrived in the past six years from the countries of the former Soviet Union, and who continue to arrive at a rate of 6,000 to 7,000 a month, add a further dimension to this link between Israel and Eastern Europe.

A flowering of journalistic and intellectual activity in the Russian language is now evident in Israel; shops and banks have begun to sport signs in Russian—next to Hebrew and English—and, in general, the presence of Eastern Europe is becoming much more pronounced in many spheres of Israeli life. The fact that the preponderant majority of Soviet immigrants to Israel are secular and highly urbanized also diminishes the political clout of nationalist and religious groups in Israel,



which have historically gained much—though not all—of their popular support from the more traditionally observant and ethnocentric immigrants from Middle Eastern countries.

While the rediscovery of Israel's East European past may not have immediate political consequences, the impact nevertheless transcends culture. Israelis are beginning to understand that conversations about Europe are not necessarily about Brussels, that European literary traditions and vogues do not come only from Paris and London. Students of Jewish history can now consult archives and collections in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev, and Warsaw, rather than having to rely on snippets found at Oxford or the Sorbonne. Israeli exporters equally find it easier to export to postcommunist societies than to Western Europe and North America.

Israel is, in a profound way, becoming more in touch with its own history, less alienated and estranged from some of the formative elements of its own identity. The result is a more solid feeling of self-assurance. And if it is true that the end of the cold war, by removing the Soviet threat hovering on the horizon, has greatly reassured Israelis politically and strategically, the new Israeli "Return to (Eastern) Europe" will equally reassure other layers of their consciousness. Therein lies a great contribution to peace and stability in the area.

## **POSTSCRIPTUM**

The assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a nationalist Jewish extremist in November 1995 occurred in the context of the soul-searching internal Israeli debate about the nature of the relations of the Jewish state with its Arab, and particularly Palestinian, neighbors. But some of the discourse preceding the assassination had uncanny resemblance to at least one Eastern European episode of the 1920s.

The Oslo II agreement between Israel and the PLO passed the Knesset with the slimmest majority imaginable (61:59). Some members of parliament who voted for the government were Israeli Arab Members of the Knesset who belong to the almost defunct Israeli Communist party and a number of Arab nationalist groups. The opponents of the Oslo II agreement pointed out that the pro-government majority in parliament was achieved with the help of Arab votes and claimed that the agreement lacked legitimacy, since the parliamentary

majority was not “a Jewish” or “a Zionist” majority because it included Arab members of parliament. The leader of the right-wing Likud Party, Benjamin Netanyahu, himself made this claim several times, thus trying to delegitimize the agreements as well as the Oslo process as such.

This reminded some Israeli observers of the circumstances leading to the assassination of the first elected Polish president after Poland gained its independence after the First World War.

Gabriel Narutowicz was the liberal candidate in the Polish presidential elections in 1922, when he ran against the right-wing candidate supported by the nationalist and anti-semitic National Democratic Party of Roman Dmowski. Narutowicz won election by the Sejm by a miniscule majority, which included the Jewish members of the Sejm (at that time the Jews made up around 10 percent of the population of Poland). A few days after his inauguration, Narutowicz was assassinated on 15 December 1922 at the opening of an art exhibition in Warsaw by a painter, a member of the National Democratic Party, who claimed that a Polish president should not be elected by “a Jewish majority” and that only “true” Poles should participate in the election.

When the Israeli right-wing started using the argument about the need for “a Jewish majority” to ratify the Oslo II agreement, in an article in the Tel Aviv *Ha'aretz* newspaper, I pointed to the similarities with the racist language used by Polish anti-semites in the Narutowicz affair and to the cruel irony that the Israeli debate appeared to be a perfect mirror image of the Polish discourse. My article was published on 15 September 1995. Less than two months later, Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish extremist who claimed that the Knesset lacked “a Jewish majority” and hence its decisions were not legitimate.