

Magdalena Sitarz

# Literature as a Medium for Memory

The Universe of Sholem Asch's Novels

## Polish Studies - Transdisciplinary Perspectives

Edited by Krzysztof Zajas / Jarosław Fazan



PETER LANG  
EDITION

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Volume 5

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# Contents

Acknowledgements .....	9
1. “From the world which is already gone” .....	11
2. Literature as a reflection and co-creator of common memory .....	19
3. “What I Believe” .....	31
4. Memory in Sholem Asch’s novels .....	65
4.1 The world of Asch’s novels and their reception .....	68
4.2 Asch’s novels and the problems of the form .....	103
4.3 Memory’s formation and transmission in Asch’s novels .....	114
4.3.1 Landscape and nature .....	114
4.3.2 Town and city .....	123
4.3.3 Home and family .....	134
4.3.4 Religion, denomination, beliefs .....	146
4.3.5 Characters .....	182
4.3.6 Feasts, celebrations and everyday life .....	201
4.3.7 The world of culture and ideas .....	221
4.3.8 The biblical world and historical events .....	242
4.4 Sholem Asch’s novels as a medium for memory: a conclusion .....	253
5. A Polish author? .....	259
5.1 Asch, Poland, and Poles .....	263
5.2 Asch and the Polish Jewry .....	276
5.3 Facets of the reception of Asch’s works in Poland .....	297
6. Sholem Asch as a chronicler of memory .....	315
Appendix: First editions of Asch’s works in Yiddish and their translations in English, French, German, and Polish .....	319
1. Asch’s works and their translations .....	319
2. Collections of selected short stories in translation .....	329
2.1 English-language editions .....	329
2.2 German-language editions .....	329
2.3 Polish-language editions .....	330
Bibliography .....	331
1. Primary sources .....	331

2. Other texts by Sholem Asch .....	333
2.1 In Yiddish .....	333
2.2 In other languages .....	334
3. Secondary sources .....	337
3.1.1 In Yiddish .....	337
3.1.2 In other languages .....	343
3.2.1 In Yiddish .....	360
3.2.2 In other languages .....	362
Index .....	375



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# 1. “From the world which is already gone”<sup>1</sup>

The future historian of Jewish life in the first half of the 20th century will fail to grasp many of its aspects without a close study of the Jewish literature of the period.

For, like the treasures of any nation’s literature, Jewish writings reflect the problems, struggles, and achievements of our times, perhaps more than most others.<sup>2</sup>

This is how Eliahu Elath, an Israeli politician and ambassador to the US and Great Britain of a long standing, begins his article on Sholem Asch. It seems he managed to capture in a few lines the essence of what should be important while reading Asch today.

Sholem Asch, a Polish-born Jewish writer<sup>3</sup> (Kutno 1880–London 1957) is known mostly thanks to a few translations of his novels, originally written in Yiddish. However, because he wrote in Yiddish only, not many readers realize how vast his literary output was and what universal acclaim he enjoyed as the first Yiddish author. Although he was a controversial writer, criticized for many of his works, no one ever denied his literary talent. Apart from being a Jewish writer, he was a humanist, striving to find ways of mutual understanding and co-existence between nations and religions. To this end, in his novels he tried to bring Jewish life closer home to non-Jewish readers and to show to Jewish readers many positive aspects of a Christian<sup>4</sup> way of life.

The main objective of the present book is to examine the figures of memory present in all twenty-six novels he wrote, as they play an important role in shaping and transmitting common memory by literature. A theoretical framework of such an approach to literary works is provided in a separate chapter. At the same time the book is meant to elucidate, at least superficially, all of Asch’s literary

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1 It seems it was ישראל יהושע זינגער, ישראל Joshua Singer (1893–1944), an older brother of Isaac Bashevis Singer (1902–1991), a Nobel Prize laureate in literature of 1978, who used this expression in the title of his childhood memories first printed in installments in פֿאָרוערטס (*Forverts*, a Yiddish daily published in New York since 1879, which now is a weekly, see <http://yiddish.forward.com>, 7 February 2012), and then published as a book after the writer’s death, see Yisroel Yoshua Zinger, *Fun a velt vos iz nishto mer*, Nyu York: Matones 1946.

ישראל יהושע זינגער, פֿון אַ וועלט וואָס איז נישטאָ מער, ניו-יאָרק: מתנות 1946.

2 Eliahu Elath, *Sholem Asch, The Man*, in: *Canadian Jewish Review*, 9 January 1959, p. 10.

3 Depending on the language used and the pronunciation, the writer’s first and second name, which in Yiddish are written as אַש וואָס, are transcribed in many different ways.

4 The designation “Christian” is used throughout the book as a reference to all those who were brought up in the tradition of Christian culture, broadly understood, no matter whether they were baptized, whether they are believers and whether they practice their belief.

output and his life. Thus it contains a survey of his life and works as well as a comprehensive bibliography. A chapter on the writer's relations with his home country, its culture and literature, makes his works more vivid and substantial, as they are closely related to his life, experiences and ideals.

The inclusion of comprehensive biographical information and the bibliography was necessitated by the nature of research on Yiddish literature which often lacks even the most basic studies in biographies and general literary output of Yiddish authors. Hence it was first necessary to collect and verify the most important facts from Asch's life and to prepare an exhaustive list of his works.

The present book is also meant as a small effort to save the world which for a long time was part of Polish culture and now, at least in the case of society at large, is more than half-forgotten. Due to the Shoah, it was destroyed beyond repair in most European countries, and at the other side of the Atlantic it has gone through the process of assimilation. Apart from my natural conviction of a philologist that literature should be read in the original, this is another reason why I decided to base my analysis on Asch's works originally written in Yiddish and to quote from his works using the Hebrew alphabet whenever I cite a given book for the first time or refer to it in the bibliography. Apart from quoting from the original editions of the primary sources whenever it is possible, I quote from the original editions of the secondary sources (including non-Yiddish ones) and refer to them in the footnotes. To make the book easier to read I always include English translations of the original quotations, whereas the original Yiddish texts and their transcript in the Latin alphabet<sup>5</sup> can be found in the footnotes. The inclusion of the original Hebrew transcript, now possible thanks to a rapid development and universal availability of advanced word processing programs, should be seen not only as a sign of general research validity but also as a moral

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5 I consistently employ the international YIVO transcription based on Weinreich's dictionary, see Uriel Weinreich, *Modern English–Yiddish Yiddish–English Dictionary*, New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research 1968. The transcription of Yiddish words of Hebrew origin, including first names, is based on the pronunciation proposed in Yitskhok Niborski's dictionary, see Yitskhok Niborski, *Verterbukh fun loshn-koydesh-shtamike verter in yidish*, Pariz: Medem-biblyotek 1999

יצחק ניבאָרסקי, ווערטערבוך פֿון לשון־קדוש־שטאַמיקע ווערטער אין ייִדיש, פֿאַרײַן: מעדעם־ביבליאָטעק 1999

The only exception is the transcription of English, German, French, Italian and Polish first, second and geographical names, which is identical with the original version in these languages. Furthermore, as far as the writers' first and second names are concerned which appear in the body of the text, I quote them in their accepted English form, whereas in the footnotes and in the bibliography I provide the transcription invariably based on the YIVO principles (when the text is in the Hebrew alphabet) and on the version quoted on the frontispiece.

obligation of a serious student of literature which has been increasingly seen as written “in no one’s language.”<sup>6</sup> After all, language is not just a series of sounds but also a visual sign, the fact which has always prompted the Jews to put down their languages in the Hebrew alphabet, as to them the Latin one has had manifest Christian connotations.<sup>7</sup>

During his lifetime Sholem Asch was an immensely popular writer—especially between the two world wars his novels and plays enjoyed universal acclaim among Jews and non-Jews alike, both in Europe and in the United States. In spite of this, research studies on his life and work are few and far between. What is more, they fall into three categories, characteristic of all Yiddish-related research, which are often cryptic, self-referential and self-contained. The first category includes studies and analyses written in Hebrew, which are given only a cursory treatment in the present work.

The next category are books and articles published in Yiddish, which have a limited readership, are mostly descriptive and often blur the border between the world constructed by a writer and the world he lives in. Typically their authors provide summaries, biographical details, personal memories or stories which are very loosely related to the real life of a writer.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes such books and articles are quite valuable as they supply biographical data, facts on the literary reception of a given work or on the history of literary criticism in Yiddish. As an example we should mention the recollections of the 1930s written by Shloyme Rozenberg,<sup>9</sup> Asch’s secretary, who strives to show Asch in the best possible light though he writes more about himself than about his employer. An exception among literary scholars writing in Yiddish is definitely Shmuel Niger,

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6 *Dans la langue de personne*—this symbolic title was given to the anthology of Yiddish poetry published by Rachel Ertel, a French translator and student of Yiddish literature, who in her own turn was inspired by the title of Paul Celan’s *Die Niemandsrose*, see Rachel Ertel (ed.), *Dans la langue de personne*, Paris: Seuil 1993, p. 209; Martine Broda, *Dans la main de personne. Essai sur Paul Celan*, Paris: Le Cerf 1986.

7 For this reason the Latin alphabet was called גלחוס (*galkhes*) in Yiddish, which can be fully appreciated when we consider the etymology of the word: גלח (*galekh*) stands for a priest, especially a Catholic one, and the prefix ית- (-es) serves to produce new nouns (which have more or less plural meanings—in Hebrew this prefix is used in plural feminine nouns), so *galkhes* may be literally translated as “this which pertains to a priest.”

8 For instance, in his book on Jewish writers, Efroim Kaganovski admits disarmingly that the stories presented in his book are either true or only very likely, considering the writers’ characters, see Efroim Kaganovski, *Yidishe shrayber in der heyem*, Pariz: Afsnay 1956, p. 6

אפרים קאגאנווסקי, “ידישע שרייבער אין דער היים, פארוי: אויפסניי 1956, ז. 6.

9 Shloyme Rozenberg (1896–1975) was a writer and translator from Polish into Yiddish, Asch’s secretary in the years 1932–1938.

whose works are on a par with world critical literature. At the same time we should treat some critical works with a high dose of caution as their authors were often partial, moved by rancor or bigotry.<sup>10</sup>

The third category encompasses publications in other languages, mostly in English. They are relatively fewer than those in Yiddish. The only monograph ever written on Asch in English is that by Ben Siegel,<sup>11</sup> an American scholar, who presents Asch's detailed biography and brief accounts, predominantly summaries, of the writer's most important works and their critical reception. Separate chapters of various length have been published on Asch's life and work in a few histories of Yiddish literature and in lexicons. Also, an unpublished doctoral thesis has been written on Asch's works.<sup>12</sup> Finally, a collection of conference articles collected and edited by Nanette Stahl was published in 2004.<sup>13</sup>

So far no serious research work on Sholem Asch has been conducted in Poland. There were a few translations of his novels published in the interwar period, at least one of which was based on a German translation of the Yiddish original, as has been recently proved by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska. Just like in other countries, the recent upsurge of interest in Yiddish culture has produced a number of secondary translations of Asch's works from translations into other languages, predominantly into English. They are often accompanied by excellent forewords or afterwords, for instance, to *Mąz z Nazaretu* (The Man of Nazareth) written by Salomon Belis-Legis, to *Czarodziejka z Kastylii* (The Sorceress of Castile) by Eugenia Prokop-Janiec, to *Miasteczko* (A Townlet) by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska or Michał Friedman's foreword to *Kidusz haszem* (The Sanctification of the Name of God).<sup>14</sup> Occasionally, one can come

- 10 See Av[rom] Kahan, *Sholem Ash's nayer veg*, Nyu-York: 1941; Khaim Liberman, *Sholem Ash un kristntum*, Nyu-York: Om Publishing Ko. 1950.  
אב. קאהאן, שלום אש'ס נייער וועג, ניו-יאָרק: 1941; חיים ליבערמאַן, שלום אש און קריסטנטום, ניו-יאָרק: אום פּאַבלישינג קאָמפּאַני.
- 11 See Ben Siegel, *The Controversial Sholem Asch. An Introduction to His Fiction*, Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press 1976.
- 12 See Cheryl Amy Alexander, *Major Themes in Selected American Novels by Sholem Asch*, East Texas State University: Dissertation 1984.
- 13 See Nanette Stahl (ed.), *Sholem Asch Reconsidered*, New Haven: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University 2004.
- 14 See Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Kazimierz czy Kutno? Zagadki powieści i przekładu*, in: Szalom Asz, *Miasteczko*, 2003, edited by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, Janowiec nad Wisłą: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Janowca nad Wisłą 2003, pp. 217–233, here pp. 227–231; Salomon Belis-Legis, *Wstęp*, in: Szalom Asz, *Mąz z Nazaretu*, translated by Michał Friedman, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie 1990, pp. 7–23; Eugenia Prokop-Janiec, *Wstęp*, in: Szalom Asz, *Czarodziejka z Kastylii i inne opowiadania*, translated by Michał Friedman, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie 1993, pp. 7–16;

across stand-alone articles published in newspapers, journals, encyclopedias and books.<sup>15</sup>

For a Polish scholar, Sholem Asch’s works have a double significance. On the one hand they are written in Yiddish, that is in the language which for centuries coexisted with the Polish language in the same land and as such had a decisive impact on the Polish culture, language and literature. On the other hand they contain “the world which is no more,” awaiting rediscovery and examination. At the same time we should emphasize that Asch’s works are especially well suited to the examination of, among other things, the image of Jewish and Christian culture and their common features. This is due to the fact that in Yiddish literature Asch was undeniably a pioneer of Jewish–Christian dialogue and most of his works were not overshadowed by the Shoah, as they were written prior to the tragedy. What is more, even the novels written during and after the war continue the prewar threads.

Moreover, Asch’s works exemplify parallel trends to those discussed by Eugenia Prokop-Janiec in her book on interwar Polish-Jewish literature.<sup>16</sup> Among other things she writes about voices urging Jewish authors writing in Polish to bring Jewish life home to the Polish reader as they claimed it was the only way to make the two nations understand and accept each other.<sup>17</sup> Asch seemed to share the same hope though he wrote in Yiddish, after a short bout of using Polish.<sup>18</sup> By using Yiddish he was able to address directly the Yiddish-speaking Jews and he relied on translations to reach a wider audience, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Probably because of this he supported a publishing initiative launched by the Safrus publishing house: a series of translations from Yiddish titled *Biblioteka Pisarzy Żydowskich* (Library of Yiddish Writers).<sup>19</sup>

Asch was well known as an astute observer of people and nature—in 1933 he received the Order of Polonia Restituta, one of the highest Polish orders, for an excellent depiction of Polish landscapes in his novels. Thus it would be interesting to study the literary means he used to render more complex aspects of human existence, including intercultural problems. Besides, for a non-Jewish

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Michał Friedman, [Introduction], in: Szalom Asz, *Kidusz ha-szem*, translated by Michał Friedman, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie 2003, pp. 7–9.

- 15 Sholem Asch’s presence in Polish-language press, journals and books is presented and discussed in the chapter on the writer’s links with Poland.
- 16 See Eugenia Prokop-Janiec, *Międzywojenna literatura polsko-żydowska*, Kraków: Universitas 1992.
- 17 See *ibid.*, pp. 78–91.
- 18 See Edmund Jankowski, *O polskim epizodzie Szolema Asza*, in: *Przegląd Humanistyczny*, 3, 1959, pp. 165–170.
- 19 See Eugenia Prokop-Janiec, *Międzywojenna literatura polsko-żydowska*, op. cit., p. 86.

reader an important feature of his works is a recurrent didactic impulse which makes it exceptionally easy to translate them into other languages as they do not require additional explanations of obscure notions or cultural references—as a rule everything is made explicit in the Yiddish original.

Asch was a prolific writer throughout his entire life. He wrote poems, plays and short stories, but predominantly novels, which were most often translated into foreign languages and which gained a widespread fame thanks to reviews and literary critiques. In the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's thesis that novel is the only literary genre which is still developing,<sup>20</sup> it seems that the analysis of Asch's novels may yield many interesting details related to their historical message and to the author's narrative techniques, the more so as it is novels that are sometimes compared to historiographical writings in respect of the abundance and variety of historical material they weave into their narrative fabric.<sup>21</sup>

In the present book I discuss all the novels published by Asch, including twenty novels published before World War II and six novels published during the war and afterwards.<sup>22</sup> What I consider most important in the analysis of the novels or parts of them is the author's rendition of reality he knew first-hand and which revolved around Central and Eastern Europe. Many of his novels take place there and many of his characters are emigrants from Central and Eastern Europe—either those looking for a better future in America or those hoping to rebuild a Jewish world in the land of Palestine. It is also well-nigh impossible to present and understand many protagonists of his novels who live in Western Europe without any references to their East European roots.

Understandably, the events of World War II and the geographical and cultural background of Asch's readers and critics made an impact on the reception of Asch's works, including those published after 1939 as well as the older ones, which were published or translated again. I examine the reception of his works

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20 See Michail Bachtin, *Problemy literatury i estetyki* (or: Mihail Mihajlovič Bahtin, *Voprosy literatury i estetiki*, Moskva: Hudožestvennaâ lit. 1975), translated by Wincenty Grajewski, Warszawa: Czytelnik 1982, p. 538.

21 See Michael Holquist, *Introduction*, in: Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (selection from: Mihail Mihajlovič Bahtin, *Voprosy literatury i estetiki*, op. cit.), translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press 1981, pp. XV–XXXIV, here p. XXVIII.

22 As a matter of fact, some of these novels are rather “long short stories” (e.g. *Di kishf-makherin fun Kastilyen*), but I follow Asch's own classification contained in the introduction to the third Warsaw edition of his collected works, see Sholem Ash, *A por venter fun Sholem Ash*, in: Sholem Ash, *Gezamlte shriftn*, Varshe: Kultur-lige 1925, Vol. I, pp. I–IV, here p. IV.

שׁוֹלֵם אַשׁ, אַ פּאָר ווערטער פֿון שׁוֹלֵם אַשׁ, אײַן: שׁוֹלֵם אַשׁ, געזאַמלטע שרײַפטן, וואַרשע: קולטור־ליגע, 1925, ב.ד. I, I–IV, א. ד. אַ, IV.



using available responses to his novels published in newspapers, journals and literary studies in English, German, Polish, and Yiddish.

No matter what the idiosyncrasies of an author’s writings are, while studying literature in Yiddish one should never forget the tragic legacy of the Shoah. In the interwar period, Yiddish literature shared many features with European literatures of that time, whereas after World War II it acquired the role of a repository of national memory and its major objective was to preserve what remained of the destroyed world of the European Jewry. This is most evident in autobiographical works and in a large number of remembrance publications, most notably in *yizkor* (memorial) books.<sup>23</sup>

Surprisingly enough, this legacy is not evident in Asch’s purely literary works, possibly because by the time of the Shoah he was a seasoned writer who long before chose a path which he always believed was a right one. Besides, from the very beginning he infused his novels with memories of the world inhabited by the Jews, which made his writings almost naturally reflect the post-war trends in Yiddish literature.

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23 See Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, Adam Kopciowski, Andrzej Trzciński (selection, edition and introduction), *Tam był kiedyś mój dom ... Księgi pamięci gmin żydowskich*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS 2009. 650 memorial books are available online in their entirety at the New York Public Library website, <http://yizkor.nysl.org/> (28 January 2012).



## 2. Literature as a reflection and co-creator of common memory

The intricate relationships between history, historiography, memory, society and, more recently, their implications for literary studies have always been the hotly debated subject in the humanities. One of the consequences of the debate is a possibility of seeing literature as a complementary historical source, a peculiar witness to the times, but also as a medium of common memory which, on the one hand, is the product of the latter and, on the other hand, has a significant role in shaping it. It was noticed by, among other historians and students of memory, a well-known British scholar Frances Yates, who claimed that the art of memory had produced a universe of images which found their expression in literature and art.<sup>24</sup>

As there is no direct access to history, which is transmitted either as oral testimony (in the case of recent or current events) or written one (historiography, various historical sources), history becomes a narrative creative process,<sup>25</sup> whose aim is to understand the course of events. From this point of view literature itself may be regarded not only as an insight into the minds and everyday lives of people, but also as a means of a better understanding of historical events, seen and responded to by those touched by them. Let us quote Jerzy Topolski, who sees two ways of using literary texts by historians:

Thus the fictional world presented in a literary text may be a source for a historian, as it can inform about significant structures of the real world in the context of the essential truth. It is an exceptionally valuable source (though considerably underused) reflecting the power of the writer's imagination. [...] The suggestion that literature may be seen as a reflection of certain historical processes (what is natural, mostly those of a conscious nature) places us in the most current trend in the field of history and in the theory of a historical source. [...] The second way is to gain historical knowledge independent of sources but nevertheless related to the epoch and its patterns, to types of people and situations, mentality and common psyche.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, literature seems to play an important role in the relationship between social memory and history. In the context of the modern world, the way

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24 See Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*, Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press / Routledge 1966, pp. 80–81.

25 See Hayden White, *The Content of the Form*, Baltimore / London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1987, p. IX.

26 Jerzy Topolski, *Problemy metodologiczne korzystania ze źródeł literackich w badaniu historycznym*, in: Zofia Stefanowska, Janusz Sławiński (eds.), *Dzieło literackie jako źródło historyczne*, Warszawa: Czytelnik 1978, pp. 7–30, here pp. 17, 19, and 28.

reality is seen depends to a large degree on its relationship with history, which, in turn, plays the role of a filter which helps understand the meaning of modern times.<sup>27</sup>

The fascinating relationship between literature and memory was paid attention to by Theo D'haen, who in his introduction to conference articles entitled *Literature as Cultural Memory* writes as follows:

Both: literature and memory have a complicated relationship to the past, both select and edit what they register; both change and distort, in ways that are comparable as well as totally different, what they report on. If literature and memory, each in its own way, act like this, then what kind of "truth" is being preserved by their combination, by a memory that is also literature? Moreover, literature not only preserves culture, it also is itself part of culture, and even creates culture.<sup>28</sup>

In Poland the relationship between memory and literature has been studied by, among other literary critics, Marek Zaleski, who in the introduction to his book *Formy pamięci* (Forms of Memory) claims that:

We are the product of our memories and our consciousness is a function of our memory. Our past demands commemoration and a need to commemorate the past is always present in our undertakings, such as, for instance, literature.<sup>29</sup>

Modern interdisciplinary research into reciprocal relationships between literature and memory goes back to pioneering works of many different researchers. Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), a sociologist, is regarded as the first of them. His main thesis was a social conditioning of memory. Contrary to general assumptions formulated in the first decades of the 20th century, when his groundbreaking work *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925) was published, instead of studying biological foundations of memory he focused on interactions between an individual and society and concluded that individual memory was conditioned by social, collective memory and that it was very difficult to draw a line between these two types of memory. From the point of view of a community

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27 See Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989, pp. 2–3.

28 Theo D'haen, *General Preface*, in: Raymond Vervliet, Annemarie Estor (eds.), *Methods for the Study of Literature as Cultural Memory*, Amsterdam: Rodopi 2000, pp. 1–2, here p. 1.

29 Marek Zaleski, *Formy pamięci*, Warszawa: IBL 1996, p. 5. In this context Zygmunt Łempicki's thoughts are also of interest, see Zygmunt Łempicki, *Literatura, poezja, życie*, in: Henryk Markiewicz (ed.), *Problemy teorii literatury w Polsce międzywojennej*, Wrocław / Warszawa / Kraków / Gdańsk / Łódź: Ossolineum 1982, pp. 249–281. His thoughts demonstrate that the problem of analyzing the correlation between the world of the author, the author himself, his work, his readers and their world is not new and was studied by, among others, Polish literary critics in the years 1920–1939.

one can talk about interactivity—on the one hand individual memory is shaped by collective memory and on the other hand collective memory is produced by individuals. A social framework of memory not only allows an individual to contextualize past events but also to use certain thought patterns which guide perception and recollections.

In *La mémoire collective*, his other work on memory, Halbwachs sees relations between social memory and history as opposites: social memory seeks similarities and continuation, whereas what matters for history is differences and groundbreaking events.<sup>30</sup> According to Birgit Neumann, Halbwachs's theories lend themselves to studying modern cultures, which may be seen as specific memory communities, where further stratification into smaller groups is contrasted with collective memory, which includes all members of a nation. However, in modern multicultural societies collective memory has been steadily disappearing.<sup>31</sup> Further, Neumann argues that Halbwachs, who understands the rise of collective memory as a result of communication among living individuals, assigns merely a marginal role to literary texts.<sup>32</sup>

Another significant idea of collective memory can be found in the works of Aby Warburg (1866–1929), a historian of art and culture, who is regarded as a pioneer of modern cultural studies.<sup>33</sup> Warburg interprets recurrent forms and motifs in art, “Vorprägungen,”<sup>34</sup> not in terms of the impact exerted by preceding artists but as the result of the influence of cultural symbols. Symbols become the media of culture and culture depends on the memory of symbols, the fact that Warburg uses to develop his theory of collective pictorial memory, “kollektives

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30 See Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France 1950, pp. 45–48. An interesting contribution to the research on Halbwachs's theory and its possible implications on the modern world is Gérard Namer's work, see Gérard Namer, *Mémoire et société*, Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck 1987.

31 See Birgit Neumann, *Literatur als Medium kollektiver Erinnerungen und Identitäten*, in: Astrid Erll, Marion Gymnich, Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Literatur—Erinnerung—Identität: Theoriekonzeptionen und Fallstudien*, Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag 2003, pp. 49–77, here p. 53.

32 See *ibid.*, pp. 53–54.

33 See Astrid Erll, *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen*, Stuttgart: Metzler 2005, p. 19; Astrid Erll, *Gedächtnisromane. Literatur über den Ersten Weltkrieg als Medium englischer und deutscher Erinnerungskulturen in den 1920er Jahren*, Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag 2003, p. 23.

34 See Aby Warburg, *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag 2000, p. 4.

Bildgedächtnis,”<sup>35</sup> which he sometimes calls social memory, “soziales Gedächtnis” or collective memory “kollektives Gedächtnis.”<sup>36</sup>

An important contribution to the discussion about the relation between collective memory and history is the research carried out by the historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1932–2009), and especially *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, in which the author also examines the idea of Jewish identity. He pays much attention to the problems of modern historiography, one of which is its gradual divorce from literature. He believes this divorce has become fatal for historiography because it not only widened the gap between a historian and a layman, but, more importantly, it distorted the image of presented history. The author claims that those who are not concerned with history are not able to understand it just on the basis of a description—it should be also evoked, just like in literary texts.<sup>37</sup> Another interesting thing Yerushalmi notices is in a way a different mode of memory existence for the Jews: in a nation whose culture is based on the written word, cultural memory also tends to rely on the written tradition.<sup>38</sup>

Halbwachs’s theory gave rise to a monumental work edited by the historian Pierre Nora<sup>39</sup> (b. 1931) and published in France in 1984–1992, which was meant to present French focal points of memory as anchors of national collective mem-

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35 The phrase is used in, among other sources, a summary of the work on predictions, see Aby Warburg, *Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten*, in: Dieter Wuttke (ed.), *Aby Warburg. Ausgewählte Schriften und Würdigungen*, Baden-Baden: Valentin Koerner 1980, pp. 199–304, here p. 267.

36 Warburg’s theory and its significance in literary studies are discussed by Astrid Erll, see Astrid Erll, *Gedächtnisromane. Literatur über den Ersten Weltkrieg als Medium englischer und deutscher Erinnerungskulturen in den 1920er Jahren*, op. cit., pp. 23–26; Astrid Erll, *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen*, op. cit., pp. 19–22. Undoubtedly a very important work on Warburg is that of Ernst Hans Gombrich, a long-time employee of the Warburg Institute in London, see Ernst Hans Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography*, Oxford: Phaidon 1986. We should note here that as a pragmatist Warburg focuses on facts in many of his articles, sometimes published many years after his death, thus letting other researchers and readers draw their own conclusions on possible theoretical implications of his ideas.

37 See Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, op. cit., p. 100.

38 See *ibid.*, p. XV.

39 Warburg, Halbwachs and Nora came from assimilated Jewish families. Nonetheless, one should remember their roots, as at different times and in different ways they influenced their lives, their theories and ideas about the history of the Jews as well as the social reception of their works. At the last moment Warburg’s library was moved from Hamburg to Great Britain in 1933, at the age of twelve Nora had to escape the Gestapo and Halbwachs was murdered in Buchenwald.

ory, be they national colors, libraries, dictionaries and museums, as well as national holidays and feasts, buildings, statues and encyclopedic works.<sup>40</sup> Nora claims that the very existence of such symbols of memory is characteristic of modern atomized societies, in which they replaced traditional collective memory. As they are not common to all members of a society, the collective memory they stand for is not a homogeneous entity common to all, but it becomes an open construct.<sup>41</sup> Nora's theory is exceptionally important for literary studies because, just as historical works, literary works may be treated as focal points of memory shaping collective memory of a given society.<sup>42</sup> What is also interesting is Nora's treatment of Jewish focal points of memory—in the introduction to *Les lieux de mémoire* he writes that he found it difficult to choose Jewish focal points of memory because for the Jews the true focal point of memory is memory itself.<sup>43</sup>

Towards the end of the 1980s, Aleida and Jan Assmann developed a concept of cultural memory. Using Halbwachs's theory of collective memory as a starting point, they noticed that collective memory makes itself manifest through different cultural memory media. That is why Jan Assmann distinguished two types of memory: communicative one, "kommunikatives Gedächtnis," which corresponds to Halbwachs's collective memory and is based on oral communication and cultural memory, "kulturelles Gedächtnis," which is based on different cultural works and artifacts: statues, pictures and texts. According to Jan Assmann, cultural memory has a few characteristic features: it depends on a specific medium and it is reconstructible, as it is possible only in reference to the present, which it uses to reconstruct the past. It has a different form than communicative memory because it can be transmitted only when its content is embedded in a concrete medium. It is structured, it has an institutional character and it is reflexive in three different ways: it explains everyday practices, such as rituals, proverbs, etc., it explains away its own image of a given cultural group by, among other means, criticism, and it reflects upon itself.<sup>44</sup>

40 See Pierre Nora, *Entre Mémoire et Histoire*, in: Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire*, Paris: Gallimard 1984–1992, Vol. I, pp. XV–XLII, here p. XXIII.

41 See *ibid.*, pp. XVII and XXX.

42 See *ibid.*, pp. XXXVI–XXXVII and XLII; Birgit Neumann, *Literatur als Medium kollektiver Erinnerungen und Identitäten*, op. cit., pp. 56–57; Astrid Erll, *Gedächtnisromane. Literatur über den Ersten Weltkrieg als Medium englischer und deutscher Erinnerungskulturen in den 1920er Jahren*, op. cit., pp. 27–30.

43 See Pierre Nora, *Présentation*, in: Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire*, op. cit., Vol. I, pp. VII–XIII, here p. XI.

44 See Jan Assmann, *Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität*, in: Jan Assmann, Tonio Hölscher (eds.), *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1988, pp. 9–19, here pp. 13–15.

Aleida Assmann reiterates Pierre Nora's thesis and adds that today one can talk about a unique parallelism between communicative and cultural memory, because they both have been steadily disappearing.<sup>45</sup> The Assmanns do not devote much space to the analysis of literary texts as memory media. As Neumann rightly notices, they are treated globally and examined along with other types of texts, such as religious or philosophical ones.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, Aleida Assmann admits that memory issues demand an interdisciplinary treatment, which, among other disciplines, makes use of literary studies.<sup>47</sup>

A specific starting point for the analysis of the relations between collective memory and literature was formulated independently by Paul Ricoeur and Mikhail Bakhtin, who drew attention to the interdependency between human reality and reality in a literary text. Ricoeur suggests that as a special version of a non-literary reality, reality presented in a literary text, is the result of a three-stage process: first the text is related to human reality, then it is transformed into a work of fiction and finally it is readjusted by the reader. Thanks to this dynamic process of their creation, when referring to non-literary reality, literary works present and fictionalize it by their own means and ultimately make the readers form their own individual visions of reality. According to Ricoeur, this is all possible because every text, no matter how fictionalized, is in one way or another rooted in a non-literary reality. On the other hand, intentionally or unintentionally, literary texts always make selective use of cultural memory, and what matters is both the form and content of its expression. In the process of fictionalization the elements of the content and of the form are transformed into an imaginative whole. That is why the make-up of a literary text does not reflect mimetically a non-textual reality but it is a dynamic creation of the textual reality. However, a text achieves its full meaning and impact in the process of reception, in which the reader alters his individual perception of human reality, having learned about alternative realities.<sup>48</sup>

It is along the same lines that Mikhail Bakhtin understands interdependency between human and textual reality. He believes that although they should not be mistaken one for another, they are closely interrelated and keep interacting with

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45 See Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, München: Beck 1999, p. 13.

46 See Birgit Neumann, *Literatur als Medium kollektiver Erinnerungen und Identitäten*, op. cit., p. 59.

47 See Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, op. cit., pp. 16 and 27–32; Aleida Assmann, Jan Assmann, *Ohne Gedächtnis gibt es keine Kultur*, in: *Der Blaue Reiter. Journal für Philosophie* 18, 2/03, 2003, pp. 70–78.

48 See Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, Paris: Seuil 1983, Vol. 1, pp. 105–162.



each other. A literary text relates to human reality and makes it richer, whereas human reality impacts fictional reality in the process of creation and in the process of reception.<sup>49</sup>

According to Birgit Neumann, there are two fundamental implications of Ricoeur's theory for literary studies of a cultural bent. Firstly, a formal analysis of literary texts should be accompanied by an analysis of non-literary circumstances underlying their origins as this alone warrants an examination of a semantic value of narrative techniques employed. Besides, it is also necessary to analyze the reception and meaning of literary texts in the context of images of reality and value systems characteristic of a given epoch.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, Neumann notes that besides human actions, rituals, material evidence and monuments, written forms of a literary, religious or philosophical character are major factors responsible for the creation of cultural memory and awareness.<sup>51</sup>

When examining what memory and literary studies may have in common one should consider concepts of memory in literary studies. This has been done by, among other authors, Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, who defined five basic subject areas. They are: (i) literary memory as literary texts make references to earlier texts; (ii) genres as sites of memory as conventionalized genre patterns are the subjects of collective memory; (iii) the canon and history of literature as institutionalized memory of literary studies and society because literary studies create and transmit cultural memory by producing works of criticism and forming the literary canon; (iv) mimesis of memory, which is an umbrella term encompassing all individual and collective forms of memory in literary works, as literature uncovers processes and problems of memory and of remembering by a set of aesthetic means; (v) literature as a medium of collective memory since literary texts are media which create and transmit collective memory.<sup>52</sup>

For culture-biased literary studies, a significant challenge has been the last, least examined area, that is the study of various relations and interdependencies between literary texts, memory and identity in their cultural aspects. It should be noted here that literature has in a way a double role of a memory and identity medium. As the authors of *Literatur—Erinnerung—Identität: Theoriekonzeptionen und Fallstudien* write in the introduction, one should focus on literature-specific artistic devices by means of which literature expresses, thematizes

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49 See Michail Bachtin, *Problemy literatury i estetyki*, op. cit., pp. 481–483.

50 See Birgit Neumann, *Literatur als Medium kollektiver Erinnerungen und Identitäten*, op. cit., pp. 72–73.

51 See *ibid.*, p. 50.

52 See Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, *Gedächtniskonzepte der Literaturwissenschaft: Ein Überblick*, in: Astrid Erll, Marion Gymnich, Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Literatur—Erinnerung—Identität: Theoriekonzeptionen und Fallstudien*, op. cit., pp. 3–27, here p. 4.

and problematizes images and versions of the past and the present, but one should not neglect an immensely important role of literature as an active co-author of modern and future memory and identity patterns.<sup>53</sup> Of additional significance are the literary devices common for literature and other media of collective memory: construction of memorable, clear-cut figures and memory spots as well as sense creation by means of narration.<sup>54</sup>

Apart from Astrid Erll, Marion Gymnich and Ansgar Nünning, the implications of the above mentioned issues for literary studies have been examined by, among other scholars, Donald E. Polkinghorne, who aptly singled out characteristic features of narrative history. According to him, they are the reconstruction, thanks to which the plot, produced in the course of narration, becomes responsible for cohesion, and the simplification, because real life is more complicated than the stories which tell it. For these reasons certain details are either disregarded or compressed in the course of narration, or are highlighted and elaborated upon. At the same time narration is rationalized to facilitate understanding and available cultural threads are used to interpret and provide meaning.<sup>55</sup>

In the introduction to the conference proceedings *Literature as Cultural Memory*, John Milton and Lieven D’Hulst pay attention to a complex issue of relations and interdependencies between literature and cultural memory and, among other things, ask a question what kind of “truth” is expressed by literature and cultural memory when they overlap, as they both are selective about the past and they distort it. What kind of truth can be conveyed by literature, which is remembering? By asking such questions the authors stress the fact that although today the function of literature as a medium of culture and memory seems obvious, it is far from clear how to study it.<sup>56</sup>

Marion Gymnich notes that both individual and collective memory and identity are the basis for self-identification of an individual and of a nation and as such they help answer the question: “What am I?” as well as “What do I want to be?” That is why our memory of past events has an immense influence on our

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53 See Astrid Erll, Marion Gymnich, Ansgar Nünning, *Einleitung: Literatur als Medium der Repräsentation und Konstruktion von Erinnerung und Identität*, in: Astrid Erll, Marion Gymnich, Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Literatur—Erinnerung—Identität: Theoriekonzeptionen und Fallstudien*, op. cit., pp. III–IX.

54 See Astrid Erll, *Gedächtnisromane. Literatur über den Ersten Weltkrieg als Medium englischer und deutscher Erinnerungskulturen in den 1920er Jahren*, op. cit., p. 5.

55 See Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Psychologie und Geschichtsbewußtsein: Beziehungen und Perspektiven*, in: Jürgen Straub (ed.), *Erzählung, Identität und historisches Bewußtsein: Die psychologische Konstruktion von Zeit und Geschichte. Erinnerung, Geschichte, Identität*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1988, pp. 12–45, here pp. 24–28.

56 See Lieven D’Hulst, John Milton (eds.), *Reconstructing Cultural Memory: Translation, Scripts, Literacy*, Amsterdam: Rodopi 2000, p. 1.

identity. On the one hand, our current personality is the product of the past. On the other hand, thanks to, among other things, planning or setting goals, we project it onto the future. So for instance people suffering from amnesia are incapable of identifying their own personality or to dream and plan ahead—they live in the present only.<sup>57</sup>

In the majority of literary texts produced after World War II one can observe a simple identification of the author and his characters. Their belonging to a given nation identifies them as living in a specific country, in a specific culture, using a specific language and, more often than not, having one, specific religion. It is only now, in increasingly multicultural societies, that this identification has been changing—it is more and more difficult to find homogeneous societies and, consequently, homogeneous literatures.

However, in the case of Jewish literature, including literature in Yiddish, from the very beginning the interrelationship between the nation, language, culture and religion has been very complicated. The only unchangeable element is the authors and their characters belong to the Jewish nation. Their other relations and identities, those based on the country, language, culture and even religion, tend to vary. Also, we should not forget about the tragic and exceptional status of Yiddish literature in comparison with other literatures. As it was already mentioned, after the Shoah the role of literary texts written in Yiddish was dramatically reevaluated by writers and readers alike, so since then they have expressed different meanings by means of different literary devices.

Just like World War I, World War II meant a shock and a breakdown for memory. For the Jews, the breakdown was even more severe than for other nations. As a result of genocide, the thread of communicative memory was cruelly broken and cultural memory, though irreversibly damaged itself, gained more significance as it had to fill in the gap.

Today it seems obvious that literature cannot be discussed outside of its social and historical context with which it interacts. Eugeniusz Czuplejewicz notes that historically different ways of understanding, analyzing and criticizing literature resulted from the clash between ancient views expressed by Aristotle and Plato. The latter's ideas were introduced to literary studies by Mikhail Bakhtin and Plato's poetics is also the basis for Stefania Skwarczyńska's research. Czuplejewicz isolates three threads in the Platonic understanding of literature, which are particularly relevant nowadays. He believes literature is an action, a

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57 See Marion Gymnich, *Individuelle Identität und Erinnerung aus Sicht von Identitätstheorie und Gedächtnisforschung sowie als Gegenstand literarischer Inszenierung*, in: Astrid Erll, Marion Gymnich, Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Literatur—Erinnerung—Identität: Theoriekonzeptionen und Fallstudien*, op. cit., pp. 29–48, here pp. 34–35.

dialogue and an ideology.<sup>58</sup> His thesis fits very well a theory of understanding literature as a medium both preserving and co-creating history.

As Gotthart Wunberg rightly observes, it is possible to identify three factors which have fundamentally changed the problems of memory, “Gedächtnis,” and its recollection, “Erinnern.” The first two, that is the development of fast transport and information exchange, have led to an avalanche of data which cannot be absorbed, processed and remembered by an average person. The third factor, which emerged in a way as a response to the first two, is the new methods of collecting, saving and storing images, sounds and other data.<sup>59</sup>

Implications for art and literature are well-known. On the one hand, some artists have completely abandoned mimesis and representative art, and have embraced “art for art’s sake” instead; on the other hand, others have been forced to make choices, to ignore certain details and to highlight others. At the same time all writers as if acquired a moral right to be subjective, because it is historiography which replaced literature as a medium for an objective transfer of memory.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, what is interesting about a given author’s works is not just what he chooses to write about but also how. So for instance Marion Gymnich suggests that space in a literary text may serve the purpose not only of a reference point for individual memory, but also it may remind the reader about historical events embedded in collective memory.<sup>61</sup> Another aspect of her analysis is the way characters remember and transmit their memories, for instance, through images, stories, memoirs and the selection of works, including borrowings and calques. Here we should stress the selectiveness of memory once again. To a large degree, remembering and transmitting memories involve forgetting as well.<sup>62</sup>

In one of her many works on the subject, Astrid Erll points out fundamental similarities and differences between collective memory and literature. Accord-

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58 See Eugeniusz Czapplewicz, *Pragmatyka, dialog, historia*, Warszawa: PWN 1990, p. 26. In the first chapter the author compares Aristotle’s and Plato’s poetics, reviews Bakhtin’s and Skwarczyńska’s research and its implications for modern literary studies, see *ibid.*, pp. 5–46.

59 See Gotthart Wunberg, *Mnemosyne. Literatur unter den Bedingungen der Moderne: ihre technik- und sozialgeschichtliche Begründung*, in: Aleida Assmann, Dietrich Harth (eds.), *Mnemosyne. Formen und Funktionen der kulturellen Erinnerung*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 1991, pp. 83–100, here pp. 83–84.

60 See *ibid.*, pp. 92–94.

61 See Marion Gymnich, *Individuelle Identität und Erinnerung aus Sicht von Identitätstheorie und Gedächtnisforschung sowie als Gegenstand literarischer Inszenierung*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

62 See Renate Lachmann, *Kultursemiotischer Prospekt*, in: Anselm Haverkamp, Renate Lachmann (eds.), *Memoria. Vergessen und Erinnern*, München: Wilhelm Fink 1993, pp. XVII–XXVII, here pp. XVIII–XX and XXVII.

ing to her, what they have in common is compacting meanings, “Verdichtung,” that is containing various semantic fields in the smallest space possible; narration, “Narration,” that is using narrative techniques as a basis for collective memory and literature; and using genre patterns, “Gattungsmuster.” The differences identified by Erll are first of all the fictional character of literature, “fiktionaler Status literarischer Werke,” as well as its interdiscursive and polyvalent features, “Interdiskursivität” and “Polyvalenz,” which make it possible to present the past in a varied and highly complex manner. In this way literature may contribute new meanings to the civilization of memory.<sup>63</sup>

While examining the rhetoric of literary texts and the modes by which they specifically contribute to shaping cultural memory, Erll enumerates five such modes: experiential (“erfahrungshaftiger Modus”), monumental (“monumentaler Modus”), historicizing (“historisierender Modus”), antagonistic (“antagonistischer Modus”) and reflexive (“reflexiver Modus”). Thanks to the experiential mode, fictitious events acquire an aura of authenticity and appear as real experiences; the second mode makes a literary text seem as grounded in tradition and having a comprehensive view of culture; the third one comes to the fore mainly in historical novels; the fourth one actively contributes to producing collective memory, mostly by speaking up for those marginalized by society; and the fifth one enables the reader to observe the society presented from a distance. Every mode is related to particular narrative strategies and techniques and to a specific structure of a literary text, which combines different modes mentioned above.<sup>64</sup>

Marek Zaleski characterizes the memory-transfer function of literature in the following way: “Images captured in language revive memory and imagination; their allegorical dimension means that they reaffirm the order hidden beyond language, the continuity of life, the whole which they were wrenched from.”<sup>65</sup>

It is worth quoting Jan Assmann here, who believes that in the context of cultural memory the very fact of recalling is meaning-producing and the question about the historical truth becomes irrelevant: “What counts for cultural memory is not the real past but the past which is recalled. One could also say

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63 See Astrid Erll, *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen*, op. cit., pp. 143–149.

64 See *ibid.*, pp. 167–193. Narrative strategies are discussed by Michael Riffaterre in his work *Fictional Truth*, Baltimore / London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1990. He pays attention to an apparent paradox: on the one hand, the text contains clear signs proving it is pure literary fiction, but on the other hand, it pretends to be a genuine description of reality, which after all makes it interesting to the reader.

65 Marek Zaleski, *Formy pamięci*, op. cit., p. 68.

that in cultural memory the real past undergoes a transformation into the past which is recalled and thus it turns into a myth."<sup>66</sup>

In the context of the above, an analysis of the role of Asch's novels as media for collective memory seems to be promising. The major part of the present book discusses subjective choices and strategies adopted by Asch to transfer memory about the Jewish nation and its relations with the outside world, and it also tries to evaluate to what degree the meanings he contains in his novels are intentional.<sup>67</sup>

At the same time, in the light of Jan Assmann's view quoted above it seems that the search for relations between the fictitious world and the real world does not always have to be the major goal of literary analysis. What matters most for cultural memory is the recalled past which creates it, whereas the historical truth is of a lesser significance.

Hence the main goal of the present book is the analysis of Asch's novels as regards the figures of memory they contain and an attempt to reconstruct the reality which thanks to the medium of literature the author keeps creating in the individual memory of his readers and, through them, in the collective memory of societies.

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66 Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, München: Beck 1999, p. 52.

67 See Michał Głowiński, *Lektura dzieła a wiedza historyczna*, in: Zofia Stefanowska, Janusz Sławiński (eds.), *Dzieło literackie jako źródło historyczne*, op. cit., pp. 94–113, here pp. 97–99.

### 3. “What I Believe”<sup>68</sup>

Believing man, whether Jew or Christian, who has been brought up in one of the prophetic faiths, accepts every punishment which is visited upon him, no matter how hard it bears upon his destiny, not as a sign of rejection or indifference on the part of divinity, as does fatalistic man, but as a sign of his portion in the divinity. [...] Thus believing man transforms every punishment from a curse into a blessing of God, every degradation from a defeat into a victory. [...] And this truth, which holds for individuals, holds equally for peoples and religions.

In these days, when punishment of God has come not only upon individuals, but upon entire peoples, [...] has not the time come for such a reckoning and review, not only for the individual, but for all of us? [...]

The will to see the world emerge strengthened and purified from the calamity under which it lies prostrate, the longing to help transform the punishment of God into his blessing, constitute my right and supply me with the courage to set down in writing my innermost convictions and to offer them to the public in this book.<sup>69</sup>

This is what Sholem Asch says in an introduction to a book published in 1941, which was meant as a rebuttal to accusations made against him for his apparent betrayal of the Jewish faith after the publication of *Der man fun Natseres* in 1939.<sup>70</sup> Asch’s search for understanding at all costs reveals his unspeakable tragedy and at the same time shows his involvement in a theological discussion about the events the explanation of which has been often regarded as a profanation of the memory of the Shoah victims.<sup>71</sup>

Asch’s whole life seems to have been such a search. On the one hand, he made unceasing attempts to find meaning in reality he inhabited and on the other hand, he made it a point to share his reflections and beliefs with his readers and thus to make an impact on his contemporary reality and the one to come.

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68 This is the title of Asch’s autobiography, from which comes the quotation opening this chapter. Asch’s purpose was possibly to emphasize that his life and work were influenced by his ethical and religious strivings.

69 Sholem Asch, *My Personal Faith*, translated by Maurice Samuel, London: George Routledge & Sons 1942, pp. V–VI. This book has no Yiddish edition, but apart from the quoted British version there exists also an American one, see Sholem Asch, *What I Believe*, translated by Maurice Samuel, New York: Putnam’s 1941. The English text is an extended version of *Woran ich glaube*, published in 1932 in German, see Schalom Asch, *Woran ich glaube. Von der Gattung zur Persönlichkeit*, translated by Siegfried Schmitz, Berlin / Wien / Leipzig: Zsolnay 1932.

70 See Sholem Asch, *The Nazarene*, translated by Maurice Samuel, New York: Putnam’s 1939; Sholem Ash, *Der man fun Natseres*, Nyu-York: Kultur farlag 1943.

שלום אש, דער מאן פון נצרת, ניו־יאָרק: קולטור פֿאַרלאַג 1943.

71 See Rachel Ertel, *Dans la langue de personne*, op. cit., p. 209.

As the most prolific of all Yiddish writers, at the peak of his fame he was sometimes compared with such widely acclaimed figures as Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein or Henri Bergson. For instance, in 1936 Ludwig Lewinson included Asch on the list of the most outstanding Jews in his time,<sup>72</sup> whereas non-Jewish critics saw him as one of the most important originators of literature in Yiddish and a classic of world literature.<sup>73</sup> Asch himself cultivated friendships with well-known figures who remained his friends and acquaintances. For instance, David Mazower, Asch's great-grandson, mentions postcards from Marc Chagall, and letters from Chaim Weizmann, Israel's first president, or from Albert Einstein which belong to the family archives.<sup>74</sup>

Asch wrote short stories, novels and plays, many of which have been translated not only into English but also into Polish, German and other languages. He was equally skillful depicting human characters and nature, which he introduced into Yiddish literature. His depictions are so plastic that the reader may easily imagine the look of a character or the scenery. Thanks to this gift, his style was often compared to that of Polish painters, such as Maurycy Gottlieb (1856–1879), whose portraits are rich in details, very expressive and full of romantic atmosphere,<sup>75</sup> Jan Stanisławski (1860–1907), well-known for his poetic landscapes,<sup>76</sup> or Abraham Neuman (1873–1942), an outstanding landscape painter, killed by the Germans in the Cracow ghetto.<sup>77</sup> As a writer, Asch combined romantic idealism with realism and is one of those who placed Yiddish literature in the context of universal, mainstream culture. At the same time he was deeply attached to Jewish history and tradition, which he included in many short stories,

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72 See Maria B. Dinnen, *Asch Sholem*, in: John A. Garraty, Mark C. Carnes (eds.), *American National Biography*, New York / Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999, Vol. 1, p. 664.

73 See Peter Bien, *Can Minor Discourses Produce a Classic?*, in: *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 8:1, May 1990, pp. 65–79, here p. 71.

74 See David Mazower, *Sholem Asch: Images of a Life*, in: Nanette Stahl (ed.), *Sholem Asch Reconsidered*, op. cit., pp. 2–31, here p. 4.

75 See M.S., *Tsum ondenk fun Sholem Ash*, in: *Folks-shtime*, 115, 27 July 1957, pp. 4 and 7, here p. 7.

מ. ס., צום אָנדענק פֿון שלום אַש, אײַן: פֿאָלקס־שטימע, נר. 27.07.1957, 4 און 7, דאָ 7. *Folks-shtime*, Yiddish newspaper published irregularly in Poland between 1946–1991, bilingual in its final years.

76 See Salomon Belis-Legis, *Wstęp* in: Szalom Asz, *Mąz z Nazaretu*, op. cit., p. 10.

77 See M[ożesz] Kanfer, *Szalom Asz (Z okazji 50-lecia urodzin poety)*, in: *Miesięcznik Żydowski*, 1, December 1930, pp. 45–54, here p. 46. Mojżesz Kanfer (1880–1942) was a journalist, lawyer, literary and theater critic. He translated Asch's novel *Di muter* into Polish. Kanfer was killed by the Germans in Bełżec.



novels and plays. In the latter years he became especially interested in examining the common Jewish–Christian spiritual heritage.

Sholem Asch was born in the town of Kutno. Although his birthday certificate bears the date 1 January 1880, he himself claimed he had been born on 1 November, and this is when he would always celebrate his birthday,<sup>78</sup> whereas his mother remembered that he had been born in the spring, four days after Passover. His father, Moyshe Gombiner, was a sheep merchant and an innkeeper, known for his comprehensive knowledge of the Torah and charitable work. His mother, Malke née Vidovska, died in Kutno at the age of 91.<sup>79</sup> She was Sholem’s father’s second wife coming from the family of Jewish scholars from the town of Łęczycza. Out of his father’s sixteen children, Sholem was the tenth.<sup>80</sup> Because he was an intelligent child, his parents enrolled him in the best Cheder in Kutno.<sup>81</sup> It was his father who taught him to read the Bible: “The Bible was the first book that I ever held in my hand. From it, my father taught me the alphabet. It was my textbook and my book of boyish joy, my grammar and my storybook, my geography and my history book.”<sup>82</sup>

Soon Asch began reading the Jewish Enlightenment books in Hebrew as well as German classics: Schiller, Goethe and Heine. He learned German reading Moses Mendelssohn’s translation of the Bible.<sup>83</sup> When it became clear

78 See Asch’s letter to Dovid Ben-Uri, letter No. 190, from London, of 29 October 1955 in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, Bat-Yam: Beys Sholem Ash 1980, pp. 206–207, here p. 207

מ. צאנן (רעד.), בריוו פון שלום אַש, בת״ים: בית שלום אַש 1980, ז. 206–207, דאָ ז. 207.

79 See I.Sh. Goldshtayn, *Af der levaye fun Sholem Ashs muter*, in: Dovid Shtokfish (ed.), *Sefer Kutne vahasvive*, Tel-Aviv: Urli 1968, pp. 255–257, here p. 255

י. ש. גאַלדשטיין, אויף דער לוייה פון שלום אַש׳ס מוטער, אין: דוד שטוקפיש (רעד.), ספר קוטנה והסביבה, תל־אביב: אורלי 1968, ז. 255–257, דאָ ז. 255.

80 Moyshe Ash, the writer’s father (b. 1 May 1825 in Gąbin, d. 1/25 August 1905 in Kutno) had six children with his first wife, Ruda Shmit (b. 5 December 1820 in Gąbin, d. 30 May 1873 in Kutno), and as many as ten children with his second wife, Malke Freyde Vidovska (b. 1 October 1850 in Łęczycza /the date does not correspond with the date of her death at the age of 91, quoted in some other sources/, d. 1938 in Kutno).

81 See Ben Siegel, *The Controversial Sholem Asch. An Introduction to His Fiction*, op. cit., p. 10.

82 Sholem Asch, *A Word About My Collection of Jewish Books*, in: Leon Nemoy, *Catalogue of Hebrew and Yiddish Manuscripts and Books from the Library of Sholem Asch*, New Haven: Yale University Library 1945, pp. VII–XVIII, here p. VII.

83 See Yitskhok Kharlash, *Ash Sholem*, in: Shmuel Niger, Yankev Shatski (eds.), *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, Nyu York: Alvetlekker yidisher kultur-kongres 1956–1981, Vol. 1, cols. 183–192, here col. 183

יצחק כאַרלאַש, אַש שלום, אין: שמואל ניגער, יעקב שאַצקי (רעד.), לעקסיקאָן פֿון דער נײַער ייִדישער ליטעראַטור, ניו יאָרק: אַלטוועלטלעכער ייִדישער קולטור־קאָנגרעס 1956–1981, באַנד 1, שפ.

that the young Sholem was too much absorbed in lay knowledge and would not become a rabbi, he was sent to a nearby town to become a teacher of Hebrew. Next he spent two years in the town of Włocławek, taking up a variety of jobs, including letter writing. The latter allowed him to incorporate many problems he had learned about into his own writings.<sup>84</sup>

In 1900 Asch traveled to Warsaw to show his juvenilia in Hebrew to Yitskhok Leyb Perets,<sup>85</sup> one of the three classics of Yiddish literature and a patron of most young artists. Later he recalled that nobody would publish anything without first submitting it to Perets for his evaluation.<sup>86</sup> Under Perets' influence, Asch began writing short stories in Yiddish about the Eastern European shtetl. In the same year, on 29 November, he published his first short story *משדלע* (*Moyshele*) in the 48 issue of the weekly *דער יוד* (*Der yud*).<sup>87</sup> In 1901 Perets presented the young Asch with an edition of *Der yud* bearing the author's inscription which later would be often quoted:

A bird is hatching,  
hatching with a lot of might  
who knows what it will be—  
a crow or an eagle?—<sup>88</sup>

.183–182, דאָ שפּ. 183.

Moses Mendelssohn (1728–1789) translated the Bible into German setting it in the Hebrew alphabet. It was published in 1780–1783 and became one of the most important landmarks in the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, in Germany. The translation was meant to facilitate the assimilation of the German Jews by providing them with a model of the correct German language, which, it was hoped, would replace Western Yiddish, still relatively widely used.

84 See Maria B. Dinnen, *Asch Sholem*, op. cit., p. 663.

85 יצחק לייבוש פרץ Yitskhok Leyb Perets (1852–1915).

86 See Nakhman Mayzil, *Yitskhok Leybush Perets un zayn dor shrayber*, Nyu-York: Ikuf 1951, p. 100; Zusman Segalovitsh, *Tlomatske 13*, Buenos Ayres: Tsentral farband fun poylishe yidn in Argentine 1946, p. 126

נחמן מייזיל, יצחק לייבוש פרץ און זיין דור שרייבער, ניו־יאָרק: איקוף 1951, ז. 100; זוסמאַן סעגאַלאָוויטש, טלאָמאַצקע 13, בוענאָס איירעס: צענטראַל־פאַרבאַנד פֿון פּוילישע יידן אין אַרגענטינע 1946, ז. 126.

87 *Der yud* (1899–1904) was a Zionist weekly edited by Yosef Luria (1871–1937). It was published in Cracow due to the tsarist ban on publishing newspapers and periodicals in Yiddish.

88 Nakhman Mayzil, *Yitskhok Leybush Perets un zayn dor shrayber*, op. cit., p. 103; *Es pikt zikh an ey / es pikt gor shtark / ver veyst— / a kro tsi an odler?—*

עס פיקט זיך אן איי,

עס פיקט גאָר שטאַרק.

ווער ווייס—

אַ קראָצִי אָן אַדלער?—

In the same year Sholem Asch married Menachem Mendel Szpiro's daughter Matylda, four years his junior. Later Asch's father-in-law became one of his translators.<sup>89</sup> It is universally acknowledged that thanks to the marriage his career gained momentum. By marrying into a Warsaw intelligentsia family he learned a great deal and his wife would offer him much support throughout his life.<sup>90</sup> She was admired by all Asch's friends. Melekh Ravitsh recalls a beautiful woman who spoke Polish as if she had been born in Galicia, with whom it was possible to discuss any literature of the world and who, according to Ravitsh, was full of poetry and herself “was a song.” At the same time he claims she was able to rein her husband in—usually one word would be enough to calm him down and bring a smile to his face.<sup>91</sup> After a year, their son Nathan Asch (1902–1964) was born, who later became an American writer.

Sholem Asch's first published book was a collection of sketches *אין אַ שלעכטער צייט* (*In a shlekhter tsayt*), enthusiastically received by the critics. Also *אַ שטעטל* (*A shtetl*), first published in installments in *דער פֿרײַנד* (*Der fraynd*)<sup>92</sup> in 1904 and then republished as *דאָס שטעטל* (*Dos shtetl*) in 1905, enjoyed a wide acclaim among its readers.

Among Asch's works there are other devoted to the shtetl. In the introduction to one of collective editions of his works, the author explains his fascination with the Jewish townlet:

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89 He translated into Hebrew a selection of Asch's works published in Odessa in 1913:

כתבי שלום אש, מוריסה: תרע"ג,  
as well as produced a Hebrew translation of *Reb Shloyme Noged* published in Warsaw in 1919:

רבי שלמה נגד, ורשה: שטיבל, תרע"ט,  
and a Hebrew translation of *Dos shtetl* published in Tel-Aviv in 1928:

אַ שטעטל (עברית), תל־אביב: דביר, תרפ"ח.  
In 1926 he (along, it seems, with the writer's wife Matylda) translated *Amerika* into Polish. M.M. Szpiro died in the Warsaw ghetto, see M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., p. 112 [editor's footnote].

90 See Zusman Segalovitsh, *Tlomatske 13*, op. cit., pp. 131–132.

91 See Melekh Ravitsh, *Mayn leksikon 1*, Montreal: Komitet: Roskes, Berman, Lipshits 1945, pp. 33–34; Ber I. Rozen, *Tlomatske 13*, Buenos-Ayres: Tsentral-farband fun poylishe yidn in Argentine 1950, p. 51.  
מלך ראויטש, מיינ לעקסיקאָן 1, מאָנטרעאַל: קאָמיטעט: ראָסקעס, בערמאַן, ליפשיץ 1945, ז. 33–34;  
בער י. ראָזען, טלאָמאַצקע 13, בוענאָס־אייירעס: צענטראַל־פאַראַבאַנד פֿון פּוילישע יידן אין אַרגענטינע 1950, ז. 51.

92 *Der fraynd*, the first daily in Yiddish founded by Shaul Ginsburg (1866–1940) and Shapse Rapoport (1862?–1928) in Saint Petersburg in 1930, later published in Warsaw by Shmuel Rozenfeld (1869–1943) until 1913.

I left the Jewish town and in all my works I have been coming back to it. [...] My paths might have been worldly ones but wherever I would go and come, to large towns and cities of the old or of the modern world, I would be met by flickering, enchanted lights, like visions, of shtetl crooked houses with low roofs, inhabited by poverty, virtue and Jewish piety.<sup>93</sup>

Also in his other works Asch is full of sympathy for simple, religious Jews.

In 1902 Bal Makhshoves,<sup>94</sup> a literary critic, published an article *A nayer talant*, in which he praised the young writer's works published so far and although he also pointed out some shortcomings, he predicted he would have the pleasure to read and to review many new works of the talented author.<sup>95</sup>

In 1904 Asch published his first theater play. All in all in the next fifteen years he would publish fifteen plays. The first one was *צוריקגעקומען* (*Tsurikgekumen*, 1904, later published under the title *מיטן שטרומ*, *Mitn shtrom*, 1909). Its major character, Dovid, leaves his family and heads for a big city. He explains to his wife that people in their town are born in winter and live in winter, generation after generation. He, however, feels the budding spring forces him to forsake his native town and explore the world. Years pass by and he comes back, disillusioned, as he has not found anything that could replace the faith he lost on the way.

Asch's next longer play was *משיח'ס צייטן* (*Meshiyekhs tsaytn*), published in 1906. In this drama the grandfather-patriarch summons his children for the last meeting before setting off to Palestine. Three generations are shown: religious grandparents, assimilated, middle-class parents, and idealistic children. One of the female characters, Justyna, bears close resemblance to the legendary Esterka.<sup>96</sup> Translations of the play into Russian, Polish and German were published

93 Sholem Ash, *A por verter fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., p. III; *Fun yidishn shtetl bin ikh aroysgekumen, un af dem veg tsu dem yidishn shtetl bin ich gegangen durkh der gantser tsayt fun mayn shafn. [...] Hobn mayne trakt gekont zayn trakt fun der velt, nor vu ikh bin gegangen un gekumen, in di groyse shtet fun der alter tsi in di groyse shtet fun der nayer velt, umetum hobn far mir gefinkelt vi kishef-fayern, vi vizyonen, di niderike dekker fun di krumme heyzlekh fun shtetl, vu di orimkeyt, di tsnives un di yidische frumkeyt voynt.*

פון יידישן שטעטל בין איך ארויסגעקומען, און אויף דעם וועג צו דעם יידישן שטעטל בין איך געגאנגען דורך דער גאנצער צייט פון טיין שאפן. [...] האבן מייע טראקטן געקאנט זיין טראקטן פון דער וועלט, נאך ווי איך בין געגאנגען און געקומען, אין די גרויסע שטעט פון דער אלטער צי אין די גרויסע שטעט פון דער נייער וועלט, אומעטום האבן פאר מיר געפֿינקעלט ווי כישוף־פֿייערן, ווי וויזיאָנען, די נידעריקע דעכער פֿון די קרומע היילעך פֿון שטעטל, ווי די אַרימקייט, די צניעות און די ייִדישע פֿרומקייט ווינט.

94 Bal Makhshoves, real name: Isidor Eliashev (1873–1924). איזידאר עליאַשעוו

95 See Bal-Makhshoves, *Geklibene shriften*, Vilne: Kletskin 1910, Vol. 1, pp. 133–137

בעל־מחשבות, געקליבענע שריפטען, ווילנא: קלעצקין 1910, ערשטער באַנד ז. 133–137.

96 See Chone Shmeruk, *Legenda o Esterce w literaturze jidysz i polskiej*, translated by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa 2000, p. 66. More infor-

almost simultaneously and the play itself was staged in Saint Petersburg and Warsaw in the same year.

Also in 1906 Asch wrote a few short stories and a volume of recollections of the 1905 Revolution in Warsaw *מאָמענטן* (*Momentn*, 1908), in which he expresses sympathy with Socialist activists and workers. Jewish town residents is another recurrent theme in Asch’s works; in many of them he depicts the life of the ghetto and of the thieves’ underworld. Chronologically, the first play on the theme is *דער גאָט פֿון נקמה* (*Der Got fun nekome*, 1907), written in Switzerland in the summer of 1906.<sup>97</sup>

The play made Asch famous and popular. Translated into English, Danish, French, German, Polish, Russian and Italian, it soon found its way to major world stages. Although Perets advised Asch to burn the play because of its controversial content,<sup>98</sup> the latter never obeyed his mentor. Instead he managed to enlist Max Reinhardt (born Maximilian Goldmann, 1873–1943), a well-known director, and Rudolf Schildkraut (1862–1930), a world-famous actor, to bring the play to Western theaters. The play was first shown in the Deutsches Theater in Berlin on 19 March 1907<sup>99</sup> and in the same year it was staged in Saint Petersburg in a Russian translation. Asch saw it only when prince Constantine Alexandrovich Romanov, the czar’s relative and the president of the Dramatists’ Club, had intervened on his behalf. Without the intervention, the writer would not be able to stay in Saint Petersburg, because just like any other Jew living in the Russian Empire he was prohibited from staying overnight in the capital.<sup>100</sup>

In 1916 the play crossed the Atlantic and reached the United States in the original version in Yiddish. However, when in 1923 Rudolf Schildkraut appeared in the English language version of the play in New York, the police banned it because they found it immoral. What is more, based on the first-hand account provided by two detectives, judge McIntyre found the director and eleven actors, including Schildkraut himself, who played the leading character, guilty and sentenced them to pay a fine of \$200 each.<sup>101</sup> Although now the whole issue looks ridiculous, one can understand the judge as the American society

mation on Esterka is included in the chapter on memory figures in Asch’s novels.

97 See David Mazower, *Sholem Asch: Images of a Life*, op. cit., p. 14.

98 See Sholem Ash, *Y.L. Perets*, in: *Di goldene keyt*, issue 10 (dedicated to Perets), 1951, pp. 48–54, here p. 50

שלום אַשׁ, י. ל. פּרעץ, אין: די גאָלדענע קייט, פּרעץ נומער 10, 1951, ז. 48–54, דאָ ז. 50.

99 See David Mazower, *Sholem Asch: Images of a Life*, op. cit., p. 14.

100 See Shloyme Rozenberg, *Sholem Ash fun der noent*, Myami: Shoelzon [1958], pp. 30–32; Ben Siegel, *The Controversial Sholem Asch. An Introduction to His Fiction*, op. cit., p. 39. The so-called Pale of Settlement was instituted under Catherine the Great (1729–1796) in the 18th century. Russian authorities prohibited the Jews from settling in the countryside and in larger towns. They could live only in Western *guberniyas*.

was not ready to receive the play. This was noted by Mary Carolyn Davies, who wrote that the characters and the venue were too appalling to make the play welcome anywhere in the United States at the time.<sup>102</sup> Apart from the fact that the play takes place in a brothel, what was especially shocking to Americans was the depiction of lesbians, the first ever in an English-language play.<sup>103</sup>

Nevertheless *Der Got fun nekome* made Asch even more popular internationally and it was his first major work which was heavily criticized by the Jews. For instance, a reader from Berlin, using the initials K.B., wrote that he would have never voiced his opinion on Asch's play had the author not been a Jew. K.B. believed the author could not be called a Jew because by writing the play he turned against his own nation. According to him, Asch violated the rule prohibiting the depiction of disgrace and the title he provided the play with contradicted the principles of Jewish faith as it is only a pagan God who could be revengeful, never a Jewish one.<sup>104</sup>

However, the main accusation advanced by K.B. and shared by many other readers was that in the play Asch defiled the sacred Torah. The play's leading character is Yankiel Shapshovitsh, who runs a brothel. To protect his daughter Rivkele from the evils of the house she lives in, he obtains a copy of the Torah, which he places in her bedroom. As the safeguard is of no help, Shapshovitsh accuses God of revengefulness, sends his daughter away to the brothel, and removes the Torah from his house. Both works, *Meshiyekhs tsaytn* and *Der Got fun nekome*, contain isolated passages of Asch's earlier short stories, which are not fully integrated into the plays. According to Ben Siegel, in spite of this they confirm his talent as a dramatist and storyteller.<sup>105</sup>

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101 See Charles A. Madison, *Yiddish Literature. Its Scope and Major Writers*, New York: Frederick Unger 1968, p. 225; Unknown author, *Drama and Detectives*, in: *The Nation*, 6 June 1923, p. 646; Ellen Schiff, *Sinners, Scandals, Scoundrels, and Scamps on the American Jewish Stage*, in: *American Jewish History*, Vol. 91, 1, March 2003, pp. 83–96, here pp. 85–86; Harley Erdman, *Jewish Anxiety in "Days of Judgement,"* in: *Theatre Survey*, 40:1, May 1999, pp. 51–74; Unknown author, *Ash Sholem*, in: Zalmen Zilbertsvayg (ed.), *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, Nyu-york: Alishbe 1931, Vol. 1, cols. 105-111, here col. 106;

אויטאָר גיט באַקאַנט, אַש שלום, אין: זלמן זילבערצווייג (רעד.), לעקסיקאָן פֿון ייִדישן טעאַטער, ניו־יאָרק: אלישבע 1931, ב.ד. 1, שפ. 105–111, דאָ שפ. 106.

102 See Mary Carolyn Davies, *Yiddish Plays*, in: *The Nation*, 24 September 1918, p. 210.

103 See Kaier Curtin, "We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians." *The Emergence of Lesbians and Gay Men on the American Stage*, Boston: Alyson 1987, pp. 25–42.

104 See K.B., [reader's letter], in: *Im deutschen Reich*, 5, 1907, pp. 317–318, here p. 317.

105 See Ben Siegel, *The Controversial Sholem Asch. An Introduction to His Fiction*, op. cit., p. 32.

One could say that Asch's marriage to Matylda, the publication of *Dos shtetl*, and the production of *Der Got fun nekome* mark the birth of the mature Asch, apparently full of contradictions both as a man and as a writer, so well described by David Mazower, his grandson:

A youth who had turned his back on a rabbinical career but never stopped searching for faith; a passionate Jew who harbored a deep mistrust of organized religion; a bon vivant who prided himself of being a man of the people; an activist deeply involved in politics but impatient of political parties; and a writer adored by the Jewish masses and later virtually excommunicated. [...] Some found him aloof, selfish, moody, and quick to anger; to others he was kind, generous, convivial, and quick to forgive.<sup>106</sup>

In 1907 Asch traveled to Palestine for the first time. Enthralled by the biblical scenery and the recollections of the Holy Land, he wrote a series of sketches *ארץ-ישראל* (*Erets-Yisroel*, 1911). In 1907–1908, on the way to Italy, the writer visited Maxim Gorky (1868–1936) in his villa on the island of Capri. Gorky, the great Russian realist, became interested in the Jews and the Jewish literature as early as the beginning of the 20th century. He planned to publish a selection of short stories written by Jewish authors and hoped to write a play whose protagonist would be a Jew. He knew and valued Asch's works and believed that, unlike some other Jewish writers, Asch did not just focus on martyrs only but made his characters love life and fight for it. He thought the most characteristic feature of Asch as a writer was longing, which let him discuss universal problems. It was already then that Asch mentioned it to Gorky he was going to write a novel about Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>107</sup> This clearly shows that he was preoccupied with the idea of writing a book on the subject for many years, and is significant in the context of criticism he came under later, which among other things focused on the fact that Asch published his book on Jesus on the eve of World War II. In 1907 Asch wrote *יִקְחֶס* (*Yikhes*, 1907), a play about an old family house which comes into the possession of the nouveau riche.

Another play Asch wrote was *שְׁבִתֵי צַיִ* (*Shapse Tsvi*, 1908, published in Vilnius in 1910). It was an attempt to show the perennial struggle between sainthood and carnal desires in reference to the 17th-century Messianic movement started by Sabbatai Zevi (1626–1676), a Jewish mystic and pseudo-Messiah. Sabbatai, a Turkish Jew, feels he has a Messianic calling. At the same time Sore, a Polish Jewess, is convinced her destiny is to become Sabbatai's wife. She vis-

106 David Mazower, *Sholem Asch: Images of a Life*, op. cit., p. 3.

107 See Berl Royzn, *Maksim Gorki un der yunger Sholem Ash*, in: *Folks-shtime*, 19, 28 June 1991, pp. 6 and 8, here p. 6.

בערל רייזן, מאַקסימ גאָרקי און דער יונגער שלום אַש, אין: פֿאָלקס־שטימע, גר. 19, 28.06.1991, ז. 6 און 8, דאָ ז. 6.

its him in Cairo with a group of the faithful as numerous as Sabbatai's followers. He agrees to marry her and thus loses God's favor. *Shapse Tsvi* was Asch's first important work in which he refers to the history of his nation, a rich source of inspiration in his later plays and novels.

In 1908 he also published *יונגט* (*Yugnt*, 1908), a collection of short stories written in 1902–1907. Once again, in many of them Asch creates a romantic image of the shtetl, though based on more realistic ground. For instance, *דער יונג מיטן קינד* (*Der yung mitn kind*) tells a sad story of a Jew forsaken by his wife and taking care of their baby. Despite the dire straits he is in, somehow he copes with the situation and, to a litany of his usual beggarly supplications, he adds the one about a drop of milk for his baby.

Having returned from Palestine, Asch took part in the famous conference on the Yiddish language held in Czernowitz in Bukovina in 1908. The conference, proposed by Nathan Birnbaum (1864–1937), a journalist and philosopher, was aimed at setting standards for Yiddish orthography, grammar and vocabulary as well as at discussing some other grave issues, such as whether Yiddish should be proclaimed the national language of the Jews. The conference's impact on the further development of Yiddish and its literature was immense, as besides Hebrew it was proclaimed a national language. Asch's contribution to the conference was a paper on the necessity to translate the treasures of Hebrew literature into Yiddish (he himself translated the biblical Book of Ruth). Also Perets believed that the Jewish literary heritage, including the Bible, should be translated into Yiddish. As far as the Bible is concerned, this was done about twenty years later by Yehoyesh, a Yiddish poet.<sup>108</sup> After the conference, Perets, Asch and his friends, writers Avrom Reyzen<sup>109</sup> and Hersh-Dovid Nomberg,<sup>110</sup> set out to visit Jewish towns to enlist allies who would help develop Yiddish and elevate it to the status of the Jewish national language of literature and science.

Towards the end of 1909, Asch embarked upon a longer trip to the United States and Canada. It was in America that his first comedy *דער לאַנדסמאַן* (*Der landsman*, 1911) on the Jewish life in the new country was written and published. In 1910–1914, after coming back to Poland and during his stay in France, he wrote many works of literature, including *ערד* (*Erd*, 1910), a short story on the life in the Polish countryside and the play *יפתח טאָכטער* (*Yiftahs tokhter*, 1910), which is an interpretation of a biblical story.

In 1911 Asch published a moving story about the fate of a Jewish child in America, *אַמעריקאַ* (*Amerika*, 1911, subsequently published under the title

108 יהואש Yehoyesh (1872–1927, real name: בלומגאַרטן Yehoyesh-Shloyme Blumgarten).

109 אַברעם רייזען Avrom Reyzen (1876–1953).

110 הערש-דויד נאָמבערג Hersh-Dovid Nomberg (1876–1927).



קיינ *Kin Amerike* and in 1921 published in an abridged version for children, entitled *יאָסעלע Yosele*). Also in 1911 he published the novel *רב שלמה נגיד* (*Reb Shloyme Noged*, 1911), in which he comes back to the idyllic world of the shtetl, and the play *די יורשים* (*Di yorshim*, 1911). *Di yorshim* is in a way similar to *Meshiyekhs tsaytn*, in which, however, three generations of a Jewish family are presented in a more realistic way. A religious grandfather complains that his granddaughter wants to become baptized to be able to marry a Polish count and thus is about to reject everything her forefathers paid dearly for with their blood. Her father, in turn, believes he is tolerant and lets his daughter do whatever she pleases. The daughter admits her parents gave her everything but faith.

Asch's first years of marriage were difficult. Matylda began working as a teacher, whereas Sholem was trying to make ends meet by knocking on publishers' doors and borrowing money. He was writing letters to his wife, full of love and longing. He felt responsible for his expanding family and was desperate to earn enough to ensure they would always be together. This is best reflected in the letters to his wife written at that time—Asch writes about constant financial problems and long periods of separation from his wife and children, he informs his wife that he is sending her, depending on the circumstances, 25 rubles or 100 marks and wants to know whether the money he had sent from America reached her. In a letter from Hamburg sent in 1909, he admits openly that the life they lead does not make sense and that they must become financially independent.<sup>111</sup>

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In 1912 Sholem and Matylda had already four children<sup>112</sup> and he finally came to the conclusion it would be easier to support the family if they lived abroad.<sup>113</sup> Although at one point they thought about moving to America, Sholem decided against leaving Europe. Neither did they move to Cracow, though the writer

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111 See Asch's letters to his wife, letters No. 3–14 written in 1905–1909, in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., pp. 10–18.

112 His oldest son was Nathan (נחן Nosn) Asch (1902–1964), the Jewish-American writer already mentioned above; another one was Moses / Moe (משה Moyshe) Asch (1905–1986), a folklorist and the founder of Folkways Records; the third one was Jochanan / John (יוחנן / יאָנעק Yanek / Yoykhenen) Asch (1907?–10 May 1997), a botanist who graduated from an agricultural school; and the youngest child was their daughter Ruth (רות Rus) Asch / Schaffer (1910–?), the grandmother of David Mazower. I provide the English spelling of their names, whereas the spelling of the names in parentheses comes from Asch's letters to his wife. Melekh Ravitsh mentions also their fourth son, who died prematurely and was buried in a Warsaw cemetery, see Melekh Ravitsh, *Mayn leksikon I*, op. cit., p. 30.

113 See David Mazower, *Sholem Asch: Images of a Life*, op. cit., p. 16.

considered the idea for some time,<sup>114</sup> nor to Berlin, which also appeared on their shortlist,<sup>115</sup> but to France. The move, however, did not improve the family's financial situation. Matylda lived alone in Paris with the younger children, their oldest son lived in Łódź, where he attended school and was taken care of by his grandfather, Matylda's father, whereas Sholem himself would crisscross Europe, mostly Russia, earning money and sending it to Matylda. There are many letters that have survived which, just like the earlier ones, document those difficult times: family separation, financial problems, racing thoughts on how to earn more or where to move. Apart from going to Berlin, the writer was thinking about moving to Vilnius or to a Polish provincial town, such as Skierniewice.

At the same time Asch published *דער בונד פֿון די שוואַכע* (*Der bund fun di shvakhe*, 1912), a play on artistic life in Poland. The drama was staged in German at the Kammerspiel Theater in Berlin. In the next year he published *מעשהדלעך פֿון חומש* (*Maysলেখ fun Khumesh*, 1913), the biblical stories for children, and the novel *מֵעֵרִי* (*Meri*, 1913). In the latter, Asch focuses on Jewish life during the 1905 Revolution and the Jewish youth who identify with the movement to overthrow the czarist government and who were naïve enough to believe that the collapse of czarism would automatically bring about freedom and equal rights for the Jews. Similar views can be found in *Farn mabl*, a trilogy written in 1929–1931. In 1914 Asch published *דער וועג צו זיך* (*Der veg tsu zikh*, 1914, book edition 1917), the continuation of *Meri*. They all prove Asch hoped to write a novel on the Jewish Diaspora in Central and Eastern Europe.

Already in the early years of his literary career, Asch enjoyed immense popularity among those readers who chose him over any other writer. The popularity is mentioned in A.H. Bialin's book where, among other things, the author recalls a reading in Warsaw which Asch was invited to. When he failed to come, however, those present demanded his appearance and some of them began leaving the room despite the fact that the reading was attended by such famous writers as Perets.<sup>116</sup>

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At the beginning of World War I, Asch moved again, this time from Paris to New York, where many of his brothers and sisters had been already living. As early as during his first trip to the United States in 1909–1910, he considered it

114 See Asch's letters to his wife, letter No. 30 from New York written in 1910, in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., p. 35.

115 See Asch's letters to his wife, letter No. 38 from Vilnius written in 1911, in: *ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

116 See A.H. Bialin, *Sholem Ash*, Meksike: Meksikaner lebn 1959, pp. 13–14.

א. ה. ביאלין, שלום אש, מעקסיקע: מעקסיקאנער לעבן 1959, ת. 13–14.

the only country his children would have any future in, as he makes clear in his letters to his wife.<sup>117</sup> In New York Asch wrote the play *אונדזער גלויבן* (*Undzer gloybn*, 1914) and shortly afterwards he set off on his second journey to Palestine.

In 1916 Asch published *מאָטקע גנב* (*Motke Ganev*, 1916), a novel of manners, whose first and second parts describing, respectively, Motke’s childhood and youth, are excellently crafted, whereas the third part resembles a detective story of a type that was popular at the time.<sup>118</sup>

In the same year he published the drama *דאָס הייליקע מיידל אָדער אַ שנירל פּער* (*Dos heylike meydln oder a shnirl perl*, 1916). The plot takes place in Russia during the war. Russian soldiers capture a Polish village and demand that the Jews leave it within the next twelve hours. Furthermore, the commanding officer orders Reb Melekh, the community leader, to give up his beautiful daughter. Reb Melekh makes his daughter wear an old dress of her grandmother to put the Russian off and gives her a pearl necklace with a hidden dagger. When the soldier comes to take the girl, a miracle happens: instead of a young beauty, he finds a senile woman.

During World War I, many European refugees found a safe haven in the United States. Asch befriended many of them. One was Leon Trotsky (1879–1940), for whom he vouched financially in a furniture store. When Trotsky returned to Russia after the outbreak of the February Revolution of 1917, Asch had to repay Trotsky’s outstanding debt of \$200 in the store.<sup>119</sup>

In 1918 Asch published *אָנקעל מאָזעס* (*Onkel Mozes*, 1918), a novel on the Jewish life in the United States, a collection of short stories, containing, among other stories, *דער ייִדישער סאַלדאַט* (*Der yidisher soldat*, 1918), *חורבן פּוילן* (*Khurbn Poyln*, 1918) and *אַמעריקאַנער דערצײלונגען* (*Amerikaner dertseylungen*, 1918), as well as the play *ווער איז דער פֿאָטער?* (*Ver iz der foter?*, 1918).

The year 1919 brought the publication of the historical novel *קדוש השם* (*Kidush hashem*, 1919),<sup>120</sup> which Asch wrote as a response to pogroms in the Ukraine under the rule of Symon Petliura (1879–1926) in the years 1919–1920.

117 See Asch’s letters to his wife, letters No. 18–23 written in the years 1909–1910, in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., pp. 21–29.

118 See Yitskhok Kharlash, *Ash Sholem*, op. cit., col. 187.

119 See Frederick C. Giffin, *Leon Trotsky in New York City*, in: *New York History*, 49:4, October 1968, pp. 391–403, here p. 400.

120 *Kidush hashem*, the sanctification of the Name of God, is, to simplify a little, the way every pious Jew should behave in his daily life. As the highest form of *Kidush hashem* is the offering of one’s life for faith, the expression became synonymous with Jewish martyrdom.

In the same year he published *חיים לעדערערס צוריקקומען* (*Khaim Lederers tsurikkumen*, 1919), a novel of manners about the lives of Jews in the United States.

In the spring of 1919, Asch came to Europe as an envoy of the American Jewish Relief Committee and brought relief funds, which he himself had helped collect, for the Jewish victims of the war. In 1920 he published the play *דער טייטער מענטש* (*Der toyter mentsh*, 1920) and in the same year he became an American citizen. To celebrate the writer's fortieth birthday a committee was set up in New York under the leadership of Judah Leon Magnes (1877–1948), a subsequent founder and the first president of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In 1921 the committee published Asch's collected works in twelve volumes with an introduction written by Shmuel Niger.<sup>121</sup> In the same year the writer visited Poland, where he was warmly welcomed by his Jewish readers.

The year 1921 saw the publication of *די כישעף-מאכערין פון קאסטיליען* (*Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen*, 1921), a historical novel continuing the motif of the death of a beautiful girl for faith, which Asch employed earlier in *Kidush hashem*. In 1922 he wrote *מאראנען* (*Maranen*,<sup>122</sup> 1922), a new play.

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In the years 1923–1924 Asch lived in Warsaw for some time and, among other things, he published *די מוטער* (*Di muter*, 1924), another novel of manners, whose first part tells the story of a Jewish family leaving a Polish shtetl, and other parts narrate the family's fate in the United States. In 1924 Asch published the play *יוסף* (*Yoysef*, 1924) and in 1925 he moved with his family to France, where he settled in Bellevue near Paris. Just like his house in Châtillon, the one in Bellevue soon became a magnet, not only for Jewish artists living in Paris. For instance, among his friends Asch counted Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961).<sup>123</sup>

Asch's next novel *טויט-אורטייל* (*Toyt urteyl*, 1926), which tells a story of a Jewish banker who accidentally kills another man, was brought out in 1926. Driven by remorse, the banker resigns himself to death by electrocution. The same year saw the publication of *מיינ רייזע איבער שפאניען* (*Mayn rayze iber Shpanyen*, 1926), a literary travelogue in which he mentions, among other things, a bullfight he saw. What is interesting, Asch is mentioned in a passage of *Death in the Afternoon* (1931) by Ernest Hemingway, who describes the impression the

121 שמואל ניגער Shmuel Niger, real name: Shmuel Tsharni (1883–1955), was a well-known critic of Yiddish literature.

122 Marranos were the Jews living in Spain and Portugal who decided to become baptized to avoid persecutions and expulsion. Most of them would continue practicing Judaism in secret though. The Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492 and from Portugal in 1497.

123 See David Mazower, *Sholem Asch: Images of a Life*, op. cit., pp. 20–23; Josef Herman, *Sholem Asch on Art and Artists*, in: *Jewish Quarterly*, 21 January 1977, pp. 25–26.

fight had on different members of his family and friends. In the novel Asch appears as S.A.<sup>124</sup>

In 1927 Asch published a play about a Jewish-American preacher, entitled *רעווערענד דאָקטאָר סילווער* (*Reverend doktor Silver*, 1927), whereas in 1928 he published a dramatic piece *קוילן* (*Koilyn*, 1927), and his literary account of travels in Palestine *דער מזבך* (*Der mizbeyekh*, 1928). When three years later *Reverend doktor Silver* was published in Poland, Mojżesz Kanfer reviewed the play and put it among other plays by Asch which lacked literary merit. According to Kanfer, Asch was excessively preoccupied with sympathy for human misery, which made him pity his characters too much and had a negative impact on the play’s structure.<sup>125</sup>

In 1929, at the congress of PEN Clubs in Vienna, the Jewish delegation led by Sholem Asch demanded equal status for languages and cultures of minorities. On the occasion, Asch said, among other things, that any attack on a national culture is tantamount to ransacking universal human treasures.<sup>126</sup> In the same year Asch used the daily *Haynt*<sup>127</sup> to publish a proclamation to the Jews and to everyone else, having been moved by the riots in Palestine. The Polish translation appeared in *Nowy Dziennik*. Asch urges the Jews to maintain order and discipline and to follow the orders given by their leaders. He also emphasizes the fact that it was the Arabs who were planning to make pogroms in Palestine and the Jews were forced to defend themselves. Finally he warns that due to the Palestinian lesson anyone thinking about organizing anti-Jewish pogroms would now face armed resistance.<sup>128</sup>

Another story that takes place in a number of large cities is the trilogy *פֿאַרן מבול* (*Farn mabl*, 1929–1931). Besides the Christian trilogy *Der man fun Natseres* (1939), *The Apostle* (1943), and *Mary* (1949), it is arguably the best known literary work by Asch.

124 See Miriam B. Mandel, *Hemingway Confirms the Importance of the Taurine Baptism*, in: *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 23, 1, Fall 1999, pp. 145–157, here pp. 155–156.

125 See M[ojżesz] Kanfer, *Nowe dramaty Asza*, in: *Nasz Przegląd*, 302, 2 November 1930, p. 7.

126 See Nachman Majzel, *11 Międzynarodowy kongres P.E.N. klubów a obecny P.E.N. klub niemiecki*, in: *Nasz Przegląd*, 141, 21 May 1933, p. 12.

127 *היינט* *Haynt*, a Yiddish daily founded in Warsaw in 1908. It reflected the views of the left wing of the Zionist movement and was published until the Shoah, with a brief break during World War I, see Khaim Finkelshtayn, *Haynt. A tsaytung ba yidn 1908–1939*, Tel-Aviv: Y.L. Perets 1978

היים פינקעלשטיין, *היינט*. א צייטונג ביי יידן תרס"ח–תרצ"ט 1908–1939, תל-אביב: י. ל. פרץ 1978.

128 See Szalom Asz, *Szalom Asz o wypadkach palestyńskich*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 248, 14 September 1929, p. 4.

In 1930 Sholem and his wife moved to Nice, where later he bought a house situated outside the city on a hill. Upon renovation the house became the Shalom villa. The year 1930 also marked the writer's fiftieth birthday and the thirtieth anniversary of his literary career. This double jubilee was joyously and publicly celebrated in Paris, Warsaw and Vienna thanks to, among other people, Asch's friends: the German-language writers Franz Werfel (1890–1945) and Stefan Zweig (1881–1942, he committed suicide in exile in Brazil).<sup>129</sup> In Vienna the local PEN Club held a formal banquet for Asch at which the welcome speech, much applauded, was given by Franz Werfel. He made it a point that the writer's job was to see the world and make it available to his readers. The writer should see the world as it is, which apparently is a skill beyond the capabilities of rulers and politicians. On the other hand, many artists are capable of understanding and describing the world and according to Werfel the most prominent among them was Sholem Asch, who in those bleak times appeared as a true *advocatus Dei*. At the same time the writer's job is to see the future and to be a prophet, which again Asch exemplified thanks to pathos and empathy in his works.<sup>130</sup>

Asch's jubilee was also celebrated in the United States. At this time, Shmuel Niger published an article in which he stressed that Asch elevated Yiddish literature to the world status. He claimed that of all Yiddish writers it was the author of *Dos shtetl* who was able to transcend the shtetl. It was Asch who at the turn of the 20th century put Yiddish literature on a new track and made it express faith rather than doubts, as well as affirmation and a positive image of Jewish life rather than negation and satire. According to Niger, Asch also succeeded in making the Jewish nation a collective character. This is especially true of *Dos shtetl*, but can also be seen in his later works. Moreover, he enriched Yiddish literature with the novel of manners, which deals not only with perennial Jewish issues but also with universal ones. Another novelty which, according to Niger, Asch introduced into Yiddish literature was discreet humor. Niger also claims that Asch developed a special kind of poetic, lyrical prose, which existed in Yiddish literature before but did not have the charm Asch infused it with.<sup>131</sup>

At the beginning of 1931 the French PEN Club and the Association of French Writers organized a gala evening to celebrate Asch's fiftieth birthday.

129 See David Mazower, *Sholem Asch: Images of a Life*, op. cit., p. 24; Evelyn Adunka, *Schalom Asch und Wien*, in: *Zwischenwelt*, 8, 2003, pp. 185–198, here p. 187.

130 See Franz Werfel, *In Praise of Schalom Asch*, in: *Living Age*, 339, February 1931, pp. 596–599.

131 See Shmuel Niger, *Sholem Ash un zayn ort in der yidisher literatur*, in: *Tsukunft*, December 1930, pp. 814–820

שמואל ניגער, שלום אש און זיין אָרט אין דער אידישער ליטעראַטור, אין: צוקונפט, דעצעמבער 1930, ז. 814–820

The meeting was attended by writers from all over the world. Representatives of the Polish Embassy in Paris were assigned seats of honor and one of the presidium seats was reserved for Jan Lechoń (1899–1956), a Polish poet and literary critic.<sup>132</sup> Probably on the request of Paul Zsolnay, Asch’s Viennese publisher, Asch wrote a short autobiography on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday, which was published in the yearbook of Zsolnay’s publishing house in 1931.<sup>133</sup> The text contains many recollections of Asch’s childhood and youth and at the same time it is the author’s summary of his works and beliefs.

On the occasion of Asch visiting London in 1932, the painter Leopold Pili-chowski (1869–1933) organized a celebration at which the writer gave a long speech, mostly on anti-Semitism. He expressed a belief that two contemporary responses to anti-Semitism, that is Zionism and Bolshevism, were wrong. He thought that Zionism should be positive and uplifting and it should be a free choice rather than an escape motivated by a belief that there was no place for Jews in the Diaspora. Bolshevism, which assumed that the roots of anti-Semitism lay in material conditions and because of that the only solution was a Socialist state, was also wrong, as could be demonstrated by the fate of the Jews in Soviet Russia. Asch was convinced that the major reason for anti-Semitism were instances of individual behavior of the Jews and the inability of the Christians to differentiate between a Jewish individual and the Jewish nation. That is why the Jews should introduce order in their own ranks and univocally condemn any mistakes made by individuals.<sup>134</sup>

In 1933 Asch published another novel: *ענגאנעסע טשנג* (*Gots gefangene*, 1933), a sad story about a woman’s love for a man ten years her junior. At the beginning of 1933 the German PEN Club sent a statement to other PEN Clubs, with the exception of the Hebrew and Yiddish ones, which explained that the excesses against the Jews that apparently had taken place in Germany were all made up. In response Sholem Asch, acting on behalf of the Yiddish PEN Club, sent a letter of protest to the PEN International headquarters in London and to local PEN Clubs, in which he asked for moral support for Jewish writers.<sup>135</sup> Ac-

132 See X., *Imponująca uroczystość ku czci Szaloma Asza w Paryżu*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 30, 30 January 1931, p. 3.

133 See Schalom Asch, *Rückblick*, in: *Jahrbuch Paul Zsolnay Verlag 1931*, Berlin / Wien / Leipzig: Paul Zsolnay 1931, pp. 35–77. *Menorah*, a Viennese monthly, reprinted the same text with the date 1930, see Schalom Asch, *Schalom Asch erzählt sein Leben*, in: *Menorah*, 11/12, November/December 1930, pp. 511–538.

134 See unknown author, *Szalom Asz o antysemityzmie*, in: *Nasz Przegląd*, 66, 6 March 1932, p. 5.

135 See unknown author, *Pen-klub wobec zbrodni hitlerowskich*, in: *Nasz Przegląd*, 99, 9 April 1933, p. 7; Nachman Majzel, *11 Międzynarodowy kongres P.E.N. klubów a obecny P.E.N. klub niemiecki*, op. cit., p. 12.

ording to Ben Siegel,<sup>136</sup> in 1933 Asch was first nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. As an honorary president of the Yiddish PEN Club he took part in the congress of the PEN International in Dubrovnik and in his speech he mounted a bitter attack on the Nazis. This, on top of even more bitter accusations formulated by Ernst Toller,<sup>137</sup> made the German delegation leave the room.<sup>138</sup>

The events at the Dubrovnik congress reverberated throughout the world—in Poland they were quoted in, among other magazines, *Literarische bleter*,<sup>139</sup> which included an interview with Sholem Asch and his Dubrovnik speech on the front pages. In his speech Asch addressed mostly the German delegation and, by proxy, the German nation. He reminded that Germany was the country that had gained respect and admiration in the world thanks to its exquisite culture and that the German Jews had been living in their German fatherland for centuries, sharing its fate, bringing it glory in peacetime thanks to their achievements, sac-

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136 See Ben Siegel, *The Controversial Sholem Asch. An Introduction to His Fiction*, op. cit., p. 302. Elsewhere in the book, Siegel mentions a failed nomination of 1944, see *ibid.*, p. 303. Siegel could not have possibly learned the details because all materials related to a nomination remain secret for 50 years. In 2001 Bo Svensén edited a two-volume book which clearly suggests that in 1901–1950 Asch was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature twice (at any rate only these two nominations were formally admissible): in 1946 and 1947 (Siegel does not mention these nominations); on both occasions he was nominated by Walter Arthur Berendsohn (1884–1984), a retired professor of Scandinavian and German literature, see Bo Svensén (ed.), *Nobelpriset i litteratur. Nomineringar och utlåtanden 1901–1950*, Stockholm: Svenska Akademien 2001, pp. 359 and 371. Berendsohn was a monist and because he was a Jew, first he lost his professorship in Hamburg and then in 1936 his German citizenship was revoked. He emigrated via Denmark to Sweden, where in 1943 he became a visiting professor at the University of Stockholm. Back in 1933 Asch really hoped he would receive a Nobel Prize—along with his wife they were debating how to find the best support for his nomination, see Matylda Asch’s letter to her husband No. 228 from Nice of 12 November 1933, in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., pp. 245–247, here pp. 245–246.

137 Ernst Toller (1893–1939) was a German writer of Jewish origin; he committed suicide in exile in New York.

138 See Ben Siegel, *The Controversial Sholem Asch. An Introduction to His Fiction*, op. cit., p. 103.

139 ליטערארישע בלעטער *Literarische bleter* was a Yiddish weekly published in Warsaw in 1924–1939, devoted to literature, theater, and arts. The main editors were Israel Joshua Singer, פרץ מארקיש Perets Markish (1895–1952), נחמן מייזיל Nakhman Mayzil (1887–1966), and מלך ראויטש Melekh Ravitsh (1893–1976), see Aleksandra Geller, *The twin weeklies—“Wiadomości Literackie” and “Literarische Bleter,”* [icj.huji.ac.il/conference/papers/Aleksandra%20Geller.pdf](http://icj.huji.ac.il/conference/papers/Aleksandra%20Geller.pdf) (7 February 2012).



rificing their lives for it during World War I, and teaching their children to love and honor it.

Asch wrote that the excesses against the Jews opened everyone’s eyes to the unprecedented drama developing in the country which so far had been exceptionally civilized. Jewish citizens were losing their equal rights in Germany: persecutions were especially harsh in the case of the educated Jews, many of whom became jobless, committed suicide, starved or were forced to leave their fatherland. Being a Jew in Germany became a crime. Asch did not want to discuss atrocities, among which the most severe ones were, as he believed, the new laws which humiliated all his compatriots. By advancing theories of racial purity, which made it possible to call Germans a chosen nation, unscrupulous scientists laid foundations for these laws. Books by Jewish authors were burnt in the streets. Asch rightly observed that the racial theory could be turned against everyone—today it is one specific race, tomorrow one specific set of beliefs, and finally one specific social class would fight another one. Summing up, Asch addressed all Germans and said that in the history of humankind no one ever succeeded in defeating the Jews and that the Jews had never been so much united against any regime. At the same time he expressed his gratitude to all Christians for signs of brotherhood, and his hope that the Germans would come to their right senses and revert to their high moral values.<sup>140</sup>

A few days later *Literarische bleter* published an interview with Asch conducted in Paris, in which the writer discussed behind-the-scenes details of the congress. The interviewer emphasized that the French press considered Asch’s speech the most important event at the congress and that among all the delegates Asch was the most eminent one. Later, in a Montparnasse café, it was difficult to carry conversation with Asch when those present realized it was the famous writer who was sitting at one of the tables. Asch admitted that the congress had taken a heavy toll on him and that he would never again represent Yiddish writers, because not all of them trusted him. He said that in the context of these family feuds among writers no one should envy him because he earned less and less due to the fact that his books could not be sold in Germany any longer. On the way to the congress, on board of a ship, Asch met the British delegation headed by Herbert George Wells. The British believed the most important thing was to preclude any further conflicts that might result in a dissolution of the PEN Club.

140 See unknown author, *Niemcy opuścili kongres PEN-klubu. Przemówienie Szaloma Asza o stosunkach w Niemczech*, in: *Nasz Przegląd*, 148, 28 May 1933, p. 6; Sholem Ash, *Di rede fun Sholem Ash afn Pen-kongres*, in: *Literarische bleter*, 23, 9 June 1933, pp. 473–474

שלום אש, די רעדע פון שלום אש אויפן פענקאנגרעס, אין: ליטערארישע בלעטער, גר. 23, 9 יוני 1933, ז. 473–474

Privately Asch sympathized with their view and thought that neither the French, the Poles nor the Jews should make any statements because they were the nations which historically had had an ax to grind with the Germans. Thus it would be better if someone else attacked the Germans. He asked the British whether they would accomplish the task but did not receive a clear answer.

Considering all this, he decided to make a speech himself—he spent the whole night, writing it in his imperfect German. In the interview Asch also praised the speech given by the Dutch delegation and above all by the Italian Futurist, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who stressed the fact that there was no anti-Semitism in Italy. To Asch, such an admission by a representative of a German ally was a slap in the face for Nazi Germany. He also praised the PEN Club for its support and thought it was a political success that the German delegation left the room.<sup>141</sup> The congress events and Asch's unprecedented address sank deep in the minds of all those fighting for freedom of speech and were recalled many years later when other writers were persecuted.<sup>142</sup>

In 1934 Asch published *דער תהילים ייד* (*Der tilim yid*, 1934), a novel that combines many elements of his earlier works and presents the Jewish life in 19th-century Poland, including Hasidic life. In 1935 Asch lectured in the United States, having been invited by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and also took part in the 19th Zionist Congress in Lucerne. A year later he visited Palestine once again and published *בנימ אפגרונט* (*Bam opgrunt*, 1936), a novel about the years preceding the rise of Nazism in Germany. In 1937 he returned to the United States to collect financial support for the Jews in Europe and received an honorary doctorate conferred by the Jewish Theological Seminar.

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The year 1938 saw the publication of the novel *דאָס געזאַנג פֿון טאַל* (*Dos gezang fun tol*, 1938), a poetic image of the lives of young East European Jews in Palestine, who were trying to make the marsh outside Nazareth a habitable place. In the same year the writer and his wife left Europe for the United States. It was supposed to be a short stay which in reality expanded over many years. In February 1939, Asch was asked by Chaim Weizmann to take part in St James Con-

141 See Sh[muel]-L[eyb] Shnayderman, *A shmues mit Sholem Ash*, in: *Literarische bleter*, 24, 16 June 1933, pp. 381–382

ש. ל. שניידערמאַן, אַ שמועס מיט שלום אַש, אין: ליטעראַרישע בלעטער, גר. 24, 16 יוני 1933, ז. 381–382

142 See Robie Macauley, *PEN and the Sword*, in: *New York Times Book Review*, 15 August 1965, pp. 26–27.

ference<sup>143</sup> in London, at which he gave his support to Zionists. In 1940 the writer bought a house in Stamford, Connecticut, close to New York.

Another set of Asch's novels are those of a Christological character. They deal with the roots of Christianity and try to demonstrate what the two great religions have in common. The famous trilogy: *דער מאַן פֿון נצרת* (*Der man fun Natseres*, translated by Maurice Samuel<sup>144</sup> and published in English under the title *The Nazarene* in 1939, in Yiddish in 1943), *The Apostle* (translated into English by Maurice Samuel, 1943, never published in Yiddish), and *Mary* (translated into English by Leo Steinberg, 1949, likewise never published in Yiddish), enhanced Asch's international fame, but at the same time it alienated many Jewish critics and readers and exposed him to harsh criticism.

Not many Asch's detractors were willing to understand at the time of the Shoah that to him seeking an understanding with Christianity was the only path he could choose on the strength of his lifelong beliefs. Most of his critics expected that a world-famous Jewish writer would show the magnitude of the suffering of his nation and condemn the oppressors.<sup>145</sup> *Forverts*, which would usually serialize Asch's novels, this time refused to publish *Der man fun Natseres* and openly criticized the writer, accusing him of heresy and apostasy as, apparently, he popularized Christianity. Many publishers followed suit, notably Abraham Cahan, the editor-in-chief of *Forverts*, who had supported him for many years.<sup>146</sup> At the same time gossip spread around that Asch was to become baptized. Critical articles that would objectively evaluate the trilogy's literary worth were scarce; most, following *Forverts*, would chastize the author.<sup>147</sup> Asch

143 The conference was organized by the British, who invited the Jewish and Arab delegations. Although it did not produce any consensus it was an important element in the chain of events and political decisions which, beginning with the Balfour Declaration of 1917, ultimately led to the establishment of the state of Israel.

144 Maurice Samuel (1895–1972) translated into English also some other Asch's works, as well as books by contemporary Yiddish writers. He was also known for his own literary and journalistic work, e.g. for an outstanding book *In Praise of Yiddish*, New York: Cowles 1971.

145 See Ben Siegel, *Why Not a Holocaust Novel, Sholem Asch?*, in: Douglas F. Tobler (ed.), *Remembrance, Repentance, Reconciliation*, Lanham / New York / London: University Press of America 1998, pp. 177–186.

146 אַבְרָהָם קאַהאַן Avrom Kahan (Abraham Cahan, 1860–1951) came to the United States from Lithuania in 1882. In 1897 he set up *Forverts* and remained its editor-in-chief for more than forty years. He was also known as a writer and Socialist activist.

147 See Ben Siegel, *The Controversial Sholem Asch. An Introduction to His Fiction*, op. cit., pp. 141–142; Hannah Berliner Fischthal, *Abraham Cahan and Sholem Asch*, in: *Yiddish*, 11, 1–2, 1998, pp. 1–17; Francis Cosgrove, *Lieberman, H.*, “*Sholem Asch un Kristintum*” (*Book Review*), in: *Theological Studies*, 12, 1951, pp. 598–300; Avrom Kahan, *Sholem Ash's nayer veg*, op. cit.; Khaim Liberman, *Sholem Ash un kristintum*, op. cit.;

decided to answer his critics by publishing articles and essays, among them the already mentioned *What I Believe*, which met with many positive responses.<sup>148</sup> With the exception of the introduction, already quoted here, the opening chapters of Asch's literary autobiography copy word by word the German-language version, shorter by half and published ten years earlier. At the beginning of *What I Believe* the writer tries to provide his own view on human history and contextualize it in a broader concept of creation. The text, which in the 1930s was seen as an interesting continuation of his autobiography,<sup>149</sup> had already changed its character, just like *One Destiny: An Epistle to the Christians*<sup>150</sup> some time later, and became the author's message to his contemporaries, especially to Americans:

It is America which has been saved from the worst terrors of the night, [...] it is America, young and powerful, blossoming in the virginity of Faith, which must become the leading spirit among the nations [...], which I would like to see [...] leading the world back out of the night into the authority of the one and only God.<sup>151</sup>

It seems worthwhile to compare these closing sentences from *What I Believe* with a fundamentally different ending of the already mentioned German-language *Woran ich glaube*: "We all have been weaving one robe—our world. We are all a unity, attached with our bodies to the creation and with our spirit to the Creator."<sup>152</sup>

In the older text, one sees Asch's abiding, calm and unshakable faith in the unity of all people, whereas during the wartime his faith becomes shaken and consequently he tries to find a way to overcome the tragedy at all costs, a way that would be viable for his readers and for himself. It seems this is the proper context in which his novels, written at that time and going back far into the past, should be understood and appreciated. Also it should be remembered that the writer was deeply concerned with whatever was happening to his people in Europe. After World War I, he became actively involved in the American humani-

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A.N. Ostrovski (Rutman), *Kritischer analiz af "Man fun Natseres" fun Sholem Ash*, Tel Aviv: Arzi 1968

א. נ. אסטרווסקי (רוטמאן), קריטישער אנאליז אויף „מאן פון נצרת" פון שלום אש, תל-אביב: ארזי 1968

148 See Charles A. Madison, *Sholem Asch*, "What I Believe," in: *Books Abroad*, 15:4, Fall 1941, p. 476; Leonora Eyles, *Faith of a Jew*, in: *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 August 1942, p. 376.

149 See unknown author, *Schalom Asch: Woran ich glaube*, in: *Menorah*, 7, 1932, p. 360.

150 See Sholem Asch, *One Destiny: An Epistle to the Christians*, translated by Milton Hindus, New York: Putnam 1945.

151 Sholem Asch, *My Personal Faith*, op. cit., p. 201.

152 Schalom Asch, *Woran ich glaube*, op. cit., p. 78.



Perets, and that his birthday should not only be a feast of literature, which was so much indebted to his writings, but a feast of all his contemporary writers. However, Mayzil realized that the reality was very much different and asked the question who should be blamed for this: Asch himself, his literary milieu or his readers. He argued that readers expected literature which dealt with problems close at home, whereas Asch's recent works fell short of such expectations. He appreciated Asch's exceptional talent and this is precisely why he demanded more from the writer than from others. At the same time he was convinced that Asch the man and Asch the writer were one and the same, because his works owed their momentum and richness to his personality. However, it was also his personality that made him write too fast and lose control over his language and style, which carried him away. This, however, did not change the fact that Asch's works permanently enriched Yiddish literature. His readers should ask themselves whether they were happy because of Asch's presence among them. Mayzil concluded by urging critics to pay more attention to Asch's works and first of all to examine them objectively.<sup>157</sup>

Nakhman Mayzil does not give a straightforward answer to the questions raised, though it seems he hopes that his brief analysis of Asch's main works may produce some answers. On the other hand he does not tackle the touchy problem of *Der man fun Natseres* and does not pay attention to the fact that thanks to Asch's courage to go beyond purely Jewish issues, Yiddish literature found a strong footing in world literature. On the whole it is not clear which side Mayzil is on. Mayzil clarifies his standpoint in an article which he wrote four years later and which has a promising title *Virkungen un aynflusn af Sholem Ash*. Yet, contrary to what the title may suggest, there is very little about literary influences; instead, Mayzil deplors the fact that Asch let his non-Jewish milieu influence his work and that he tried to please non-Jewish readers.<sup>158</sup>

During World War II, Asch kept writing but also continued his involvement in current politics. For instance, he tried to convince American Jews that in difficult times they should unite for the sake of a common cause and should stop factional fights between rightists and leftists.<sup>159</sup>

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157 See Nakhman Mayzil, *Forgeyer un mittsaytler*, Nyu-York: Ikuf 1946, pp. 227–231 and 237

בחמן מייזיל, פאָרגייער און מיטצייטלער, ניו-יאָרק: איקוף 1946, ז. 227–231 און 237.

158 See *ibid.*, pp. 237–253.

159 See Khaim Zhitlovski, *An entfer Sholem Ashn un H. Leyvikn*, Nyu-York: Kooperativer folks-farlag fun der yidisher sektsye internatsyonaler arbeter ordn 1943, pp. 3–5

חיים זשיטלאָווסקי, אַן ענטפער שלום אשן און ה. לייַוויקן, ניו-יאָרק: קאָאָפּעראַטיווער פֿאָלקס-פאַרלאַג פֿון דער ייִדישער סעקציע אינטערנאַציאָנאַלער אַרבעטער אָרדן 1943, ז. 3–5.

At the turn of 1943 and 1944, Yitskhok Katsenelson<sup>160</sup> wrote his famous poem *דאָס ליד פֿונעם אויסגעהרגעטן ייִדישן פֿאָלק* (*Dos lid funem oysgehargetn yidishn folk*). At the end of the last song the poet mourned the nation which had perished and enumerated as *pars pro toto* characters from novels in Yiddish, including Shloyme the Rich Man and Motke the Thief. He added that just like the prophets from the Torah, the symbols of European Jewish life from the works of Khaim Nakhman Bialik,<sup>161</sup> Sholem Aleykhem and Sholem Asch would appeal to the next generations.<sup>162</sup> It seems such opinions are more precious than various antagonisms, which were especially strong at the time of the publication of Asch’s “Christian novels,” the more so as one can notice a certain pattern: those who witnessed the Shoah first-hand did not reproach him, whereas those who were lucky enough to survive the war outside Europe were his staunchest critics. The times were tragic for both sides, the survivors often felt helpless and guilty because they lived on, so their campaign against Asch, reprehensible in its own right, can be at least understood.

In 1945 in an English-language work *One Destiny: An Epistle to the Christians*, Asch again emphasized his belief that both faiths were closely interlinked and he defended his right to write about Jesus, who, even if He had never resurrected in reality, resurrects every day, every hour and every minute in the hearts of those who believe in Him.<sup>163</sup> For Asch, Judaism and Christianity were one, they were interdependent and thanks to the Messianic idea the Christians also believed in the God of Israel. Therefore he was convinced that as a Jew he had a full right to address his Christian brothers in faith in his novel.<sup>164</sup>

In the chapter *In the Shadow of Death*, Asch described the extermination of the European Jews, including the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto and the ghetto’s destruction. He also mentioned particular Christians, e.g. nuns and priests who saved Jewish children, and he praised the Soviet Union, where many of his compatriots found a safe haven and which “behaved in a truly Christian way.” He

160 יצחק קאצענעלסאָן Yitskhok Katsenelson (1886–1944) was a poet and playwright, born in Łódź. During World War II, he was in the Warsaw ghetto, his wife and two younger sons were murdered in Treblinka. With his oldest son, he took part in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising; thanks to counterfeit Honduran passports they were sent to a detention camp in France but ultimately found themselves in Auschwitz, where they were gassed. Katsenelson buried his poem in the detention camp in Vittel in France.

161 Khaim Nakhman Bialik (1873–1934) was one of the most outstanding Hebrew writers of the 20th century, considered the father of modern Hebrew poetry.

162 See Yitskhok Katsenelson, *Dos lid funem oysgehargetn yidishn folk*, Nyu-York: Ikuf 1948, p. 77

יצחק קאצענעלסאָן, דאָס ליד פֿונעם אויסגעהרגעטן ייִדישן פֿאָלק, ניו־יאָרק: איקוף 1948, ז. 77.

163 See Sholem Asch, *One Destiny: An Epistle to the Christians*, op. cit., p. 6.

164 See *ibid.*, p. 9.

acknowledged the fact that there were many other nations who suffered and perished at the hands of the Nazis, but he believed the magnitude of the Jewish tragedy was incomparable to that of any other nation. Despite all this he hoped that when the war was over the Germans would soon join civilized nations and revert to the moral standards of Goethe and Schiller. However, every German man, woman and child would carry the mark of Cain till the end of time.<sup>165</sup>

In the chapter *The Poisoned Well*, however, Asch wrote that it is not just the Germans who carried all the guilt—all those who for years had incited hatred and paved the way for the events of the recent times were to be blamed. He realized how serious the accusation was and although every fiber of his being protested and his hand trembled while writing that, he would not renounce the truth. What Hitler did was the ultimate consequence of what all anti-Semites had ever done. Hitler needed a scapegoat to unite the Germans. He did not need the enemy though, because the enemy had been known for centuries. In Roman times it was enough to be Christian to be guilty, whereas in modern times it was enough to be Jewish to be considered an offender. Unfortunately Christians began treating the Jews the way they had been treated themselves. Asch addressed the readers who believed that Jesus is the Messiah to think over why God wanted His Son to be born a Jew. The author knew that the Jews suffered not only at the hands of Christians but also Muslims, but he turned to Christians because he considered them his brothers. In the chapter *Son of God and Son of Satan*, Asch described particularly dramatic pronouncements of the Catholic Church against the Jews and asked the question who from among the murderers and the victims was on the side of God and who was on the side of Satan. In conclusion he made an appeal: in the times when the angel of death casts his shadow over every household, we should cherish and safeguard the glimmer of faith in God, which is present in every heart, and we should make it purer, because it is this glimmer only which may lead us away from the darkness which reigns over the world.<sup>166</sup>

Of the same tenor is the last chapter of the book, in which Asch explains his Jewish-Christian idea and emphasizes the fact that in the face of adversity many Christians were able to understand the most important message of their faith and to risk their own lives to rescue Jewish men, women and children.<sup>167</sup>

Quite naturally, responses to Asch's ideas were diverse. In his article, Theodor Herzl Gaster tries to ridicule Asch's proposal by writing that although it was an understandable attempt to counter anti-Semitism, on the whole it was

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165 See *ibid.*, pp. 11–35.

166 See *ibid.*, pp. 36–69.

167 See *ibid.*, pp. 77–80.



“dangerous nonsense.”<sup>168</sup> As an expert in religious studies he believed that there were more differences than similarities between Judaism and Christianity and that what the world really needed was not Judeo-Christianity but both faiths, with their separate natures and different believers, who would truly abide by the principles of their religions, both of which teach the respect for the fellow human being.<sup>169</sup> Lewis Mumford had a more positive opinion of the book and reminded his readers that the Americans were the silent witnesses of the tragedy because, despite the growing terror in Europe, they did not modify their visa requirements accordingly. However, he was also skeptical about the idea of Judeo-Christian faith, not because of the respective, intrinsic natures of these religions, but because, as he claimed, such an alliance would be directed against other religions, which he found unacceptable.<sup>170</sup> Another reviewer was right to notice that after all Asch did not call for the union between the Church and the Synagogue —instead, he claimed that the same hope and the same faith filled the hearts of true Jews and true Christians and the book was “a genuine cry of anguish” caused by the tragedy of European Jews.<sup>171</sup> Also Shmuel Niger commented on Asch’s new book; although he found the middle chapters exquisite, he did not understand the writer’s attitude shown at the beginning and at the end. Further, he believed that to identify the Jewish Messiah with the Christian one was to negate thousands of years of Jewish history, tradition and culture.<sup>172</sup>

Beside these variegated opinions expressed by readers and critics, one can see *One Destiny: An Epistle to the Christians* as the fourth and the final part of Asch’s autobiographical, philosophical and religious texts. The initial part was his autobiography written in 1930, which describes the first fifty years of his life. Soon afterwards he published *Woran ich glaube*, a philosophical and religious text which focuses on the author’s personal opinions and experiences. Less than ten years later Asch published *What I Believe*, which can be seen as a very subjective quintessence of both Jewish and Christian faith. Thus, despite the title, the faith he wrote about is not just a private affair. Finally, in his *One*

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168 Theodor Herzl Gaster, *A Judeo-Christian Civilisation*, in: *Commentary*, 1, 1945/1946, pp. 90–92, here p. 91.

169 See *ibid.*, p. 92.

170 See Lewis Mumford, *Toward a Wider Union*, in: *Saturday Review of Literature*, 29 September 1945, p. 12.

171 See P.W. Wilson, *Epistle to Christians*, in: *New York Times Book Review*, 7 October 1945, p. 8.

172 See Shmuel Niger, *Sholem Ash. Zayn lebn un zayne verk*, Nyu-York: Sh. Niger bukh-komitet bam alveltlekhn yidishn kultur-kongres 1960, pp. 396–404.

ש. ניגער, שלום אש. זיין לעבן און זיינע ווערק, ניריאָרק: ש. ניגער בוך־קאָמיטעט ביים אַלטוועלטלעכן ייִדישן קולטור־קאָנגרעס ה'תש"ך 1960, 396–404.

*Destiny: An Epistle to the Christians*, Asch commemorates the life and death of the whole nation rather than of an individual.

In 1946 Asch published a collection of short stories *דער ברענענדיקער דאָרן* (1946), which glorifies the martyrdom of Jews in the ghetto and in minute detail exposes the cruelty of the Germans, as well as the novel *איסט ריווער* (*Ist river*,<sup>173</sup> 1946), which like his other novels of the same type, espouses the idea of Jewish–Christian coexistence.<sup>174</sup>

The year 1946 brought the first documented nomination of Sholem Asch for the Nobel Prize in Literature. In view of many erroneous opinions and exchanges, the best idea will be to quote here the views on Asch's works as presented at the sittings of the Nobel Committee in 1946 and 1947:

No. 6. Sholem Asch. The submission based on the two works of the Yiddish-language author devoted to Jesus and St Paul. In English they are known as *The Nazarene* and *The Apostle*, but they also circulated in other languages and were widely praised. They are both historical novels, though very much different. *The Nazarene* is a story about a Roman chiliarch of Jerusalem who reincarnates, along with his memories, as a contemporary Polish specialist in religious studies, whereas *The Apostle* is based on widely accessible sources and thus it is more reliable; generally, the latter is more expressive. However, as the present author is not competent enough to evaluate the historical reliability of the novel, he must limit himself to evaluating its aesthetic aspect, which he finds praiseworthy.

Shalom Asch very skillfully uses a whole range of resources at his disposal and provides a vivid description of various cultures in the Roman Empire; often he includes interesting episodes from the life of the masses and equally often the episodes are shrouded in a poetic aura.

What is even more important, while presenting the major character the author skillfully makes the presentation powerful, especially when the plot becomes dramatic and reveals his spiritual life with true intuition.

However, in the case of such a hefty book this is not enough to make the novel an outstanding piece of art, which it should be if it were submitted to receive the Nobel Prize.

Thus the present reviewer, who does not consider himself competent enough to make such a judgment, humbly asks the Academy to accept his resignation and, if the Academy finds it appropriate, to appoint a better qualified person to evaluate the book and its objective. Consequently, the submission will be reconsidered the following year.

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173 The East River, a river that runs through New York, is seen here also as a symbol of the city itself. The title of the novel refers to the name of the river and the consistent transcription is used throughout, one of the reasons being that it shows which language the book was written in.

174 See Yitskhok Kharlash, *Ash Sholem*, op. cit., col. 191.

The Committee’s members found the submission noteworthy but they did not find any good reason to make a recommendation for the prize.<sup>175</sup> (translated by Piotr Pieńkowski from the Polish translation by Jan Balbierz of the Swedish original)

The opinion, though relatively long in comparison with other ones, seems quite superficial. On the one hand, the reviewer is sorry he is not competent enough to appreciate the historical value of the novel, maybe because he did not want to criticize the writer openly, but on the other hand he never pays any attention to the significance of Asch’s works in his contemporary times. It is understandable then that sheer speculations on the aesthetic value of the novel were not enough to ensure its nomination. However, the Swedish Academy did not appoint another reviewer, which transpires from a brief and hardly favorable note of 1947:

No. 23 *Sholem Asch*. The members of the committee, who last year did not find it appropriate to recommend the submission, today uphold their decision and believe that so far Asch’s works have not met the requirements necessary for granting the Nobel Prize.<sup>176</sup> (translated by Piotr Pieńkowski from the Polish translation by Jan Balbierz of the Swedish original)

This is how Asch’s close encounter with the Swedish Academy came to a definite end. Today it is difficult to judge whether he deserved the Nobel Prize in Literature or not, considering formidable competition and outstanding names of other nominees: in 1946 the prize was won by Herman Hesse (1877–1962) and in 1947 by André Gide (1869–1951). Definitely, however, it is a pity the reviewers gave his works short shrift.<sup>177</sup> The problem with Asch’s nomination was not forgotten; for instance, after the death of Isaac Bashevis Singer, the only Yiddish Nobel laureate, some believed that by the same token Asch deserved the prize, but was not lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time.<sup>178</sup>

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175 Bo Svensén (ed.), *Nobelpriset i litteratur. Nomineringar och utlåtanden 1901–1950*, op. cit., pp. 362–363.

176 *Ibid.*, p. 374.

177 In the course of time many press and academic articles debating the justification of nominations for particular prizes and the objectivity of the Academy members have been published. Among them we should mention that by William Lamont, who in 1950 made an effort to poll 350 experts on world literature. In 1951 he published the results, which demonstrated that those polled unanimously believed that the laureates of the Nobel Prize in Literature had not always been the most deserving authors. It was also suggested the prize should go to three authors, just like in some other disciplines. At the time of the poll no author writing in Yiddish had been ever chosen a laureate; among the deserving ones the polled specialists mentioned Sholem Aleykhem and first of all Sholem Asch, see William F. Lamont, *The Nobel Prizes in Literature*, in: *Books Abroad*, 25:1, Winter 1951, pp. 11–14.

178 See Khave Rozenfarb, *Yitskhok Bashevis un Sholem Ash*, in: *Di goldene keyt*, 133, 1992, pp. 75–104, here pp. 75–76

At the turn of 1947 and 1948 Asch stayed in Nice, because he was trying to sell a house he had bought before the war. He also visited Paris, where he met his old friends and acquaintances and discussed publication issues related to his works with European publishers. One of the meetings he found very moving and encouraging about the future: his German publisher, a Polish Jew married to a German, who spoke Yiddish “just like everyone else,” was trying to convince Asch that his books would find many readers in Germany and that they were very important for developing an understanding with the Jews.<sup>179</sup> For Asch, who at the time was beset by a plethora of problems, such reassurance was extremely precious. In 1951 he wrote *מששה* (*Moyshe*).

In 1952 Asch wrote an introduction to a book by Aage Bertelsen on saving Danish Jews, which was published in Denmark.<sup>180</sup> Asch noted that although the book presented the most hopeless time in the history of humankind, it was a joyful book, because it provided the reader with hope and consolation. Asch believed that the blame for the tragedy of World War II should be put on his inter-war generation, which let the Shoah happen. However, everywhere in Europe, there were people of good will, Christians from all walks of life, peasants, priests and nuns, who not only risked their own lives trying to save the Jews but often lost their lives while doing this. However, a special case were the Danes, who managed to save almost all their Jews. According to Asch, Bertelsen’s book

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הוה רֶאָזענפֿאַרבר, יצחק באַשעוויס און שלום אַש, אין: די גאַלדענע קייט 1992, נר. 133, ז. 104–75, דף ז.  
75–76

On Sholem Asch and Isaac Bashevis Singer see also David G. Roskies, *Found in America: Sholem Asch and I.B. Singer*, in: Nanette Stahl (ed.), *Sholem Asch Reconsidered*, op. cit., pp. 239–248. In his article Roskies suggests that Singer’s works were a response to Asch’s works, written earlier, which Singer transposed and parodied. That is why, according to Roskies, so many works by Singer show, in a different guise, the same threads, e.g. the uprisings led by Bohdan Khmelnytsky against Poland, the Hasidic movement, pictures of the Jewish community in Warsaw, and the fate of Jewish emigrants in the United States. Although it is an interesting proposition, certain parallels in the works of both writers can be explained by the fact that they were trying to present to the reader a comprehensive panorama of Jewish life in the historical and contemporary context and, being excellent observers and analysts, they paid attention to the same events, phenomena and issues.

179 See Asch’s letters to his wife, letter No. 125 from Paris written in 1949, in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., pp. 129–131, here p. 130.

180 See Aage Bertelsen, *Oktober 43*, Aarhus: Jydsk Centraltrykkeri 1952. The effort to save Danish Jews was unprecedented in Europe under German occupation. In October 1943, under the cover of many nights, Danish fishermen whisked to Sweden more than seven thousand Jews facing deportation to concentration camps; first they were hidden mostly by Danish clergymen, doctors, teachers, civil servants and students with the assistance of Danish police, whereas the German Wehrmacht would turn a blind eye. Out of eight thousand Danish Jews only about a hundred lost their lives.

was not only a historical document but a universal one, showing hope in the most difficult moments. Hitler decided to separate Christians and Jews once for all, whereas Bertelsen, who himself helped to save the Jews, wrote the book to make two faiths one and two nations one.<sup>181</sup>

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In 1953 Asch and his wife moved to Europe, although a few years before they did not plan to move again.<sup>182</sup> It is hard to say what made them change their minds—whether it was Asch’s wish to live closer to his daughter, who he was very attached to and who could take care of the ailing Matylda; an escape from the rainy climate, which Asch called bluntly “lousy;”<sup>183</sup> or the atmosphere surrounding him in the United States, which, although markedly improved after the publication of *Moyshe*, was never as favorable as that before the publication of *Der man fun Natseres*. It is also worth pointing out that despite the writer’s liking for his adopted homeland, he never became a fully-fledged American and he was never acknowledged as an American writer, despite immense popularity of his books in English translation. Among other critics, it was Oscar Cargill who deplored the fact and believed the reason was that the Americans were not ready to fully accept immigrants, especially those writing in other languages.<sup>184</sup>

In 1954 Asch published another work, *גראַסמאַן און זון* (*Grosman un zun*), and in 1955, a novel about the prophet Deutero-Isaiah, *דער נביא* (*Der novi*, which first appeared in the English translation by Artur Saul in 1955 and then in Yiddish in 1956).

In 1955 Asch celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday. To mark the occasion, Shmuel Niger published an article in *Di goldene keyt*, in which he chastised his contemporaries for censoring the writer and his works. Although he could understand their dislike for Asch, he could not justify it. Niger also posed a question why Asch’s readers would put an equal mark between the author and his works. The writer’s works made a significant contribution to Yiddish literature and enriched his readers’ experience, which is what should be really remembered on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday. Next Niger discussed Asch’s literary works, highlighting turning points not only of his literary career, but also of Yiddish literature as such, including *Dos shtetl*, published at the beginning of

181 See Scholem Asch, *Einige einleitende Gedanken*, in: Aage Bertelsen, *Oktober 1943*, translated by Harry Maor, München: Ner-Tamid 1960, pp. 7–11.

182 See Asch’s letters to his wife, letter No. 123 from Nice written in 1948, in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., pp. 127–128, here p. 127.

183 See Asch’s letters to his wife, letter No. 164 from Miami Beach written in 1953, in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., pp. 178–179, here p. 178.

184 See Oscar Cargill, *Sholem Asch: Still Immigrant and Alien*, in: *The English Journal*, Vol. XXXIX, 9 October 1950, pp. 483–490, here pp. 483–484.

the 20th century. He also paid attention to the fact that Christian motifs appeared in Asch's works a long time before the publication of *Der man fun Natseres*, and that it was already Perets who defended Asch against those who would like to "gag the author's creative mouth with filthy rags." He stressed that thanks to Asch, Yiddish literature became universally known as it crossed external borders and as its internal borders shifted, because the author never neglected any important aspect of Jewish history and tradition, nor failed to mention any place inhabited by the Jews. Thus, according to Niger, Asch's birthday was a great feast of Yiddish literature that everyone should celebrate.<sup>185</sup>

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Having been encouraged by a warm welcome in Israel offered to him during his previous visit by, among other people, Avrom Sutskever,<sup>186</sup> a well-known Yiddish writer and a group of immigrants from Asch's native Kutno,<sup>187</sup> in 1956 he settled with his wife in Bat Yam,<sup>188</sup> where some time earlier his house had been built. The choice of Bat Yam was a coincidence, as testified to by Dovid Ben-Uri. He once met the great writer in the street and as a result of the meeting he invited Asch and his wife to Bat Yam, his home town, which the writer enjoyed very much. On the one hand it was the landscape: a young town between the desert and the sea; and on the other hand it was the inhabitants, mostly European refugees, who were trying to regain their own life there. Soon Asch decided to build a house in Bat Yam and move there with his wife. Dovid Ben-Uri was very helpful in the process and soon the whole town was happy to have such a resident. Also the writer himself was very loyal to the local people and during the Suez Canal crisis he rejected the US offer to leave Israel. Neither did he agree to move temporarily to the American Embassy—he was happy to stay with "his Jews." After the victory he was planning to write a book about the heroism of the new state, but his death thwarted the plan.<sup>189</sup>

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185 See Shmuel Niger, *Sholem Ash*, in: *Di goldene keyt*, 22, 1955, pp. 66–70

שמואל ניגער, שלום אַש, אין: די גאלדענע קייט, בר. 22, 1955, ז. 66–70.

186 Avrom Sutskever (1913–2010) is considered one of the greatest poets of the 20th century. Among his literary achievements, there are lyrics and surrealist epic works.

187 See David Mazower, *Sholem Asch: Images of a Life*, op. cit., p. 30.

188 Bat Yam is a sea resort situated on the Mediterranean, south of Tel Aviv, a partner town of Kutno, see <http://www.bat-yam.muni.il/> (30 January 2012).

189 See Dovid Ben-Uri, *Sholem Ash un Bat-Yam*, in: Yitskhok Turkov-Grudberg, *Sholem Ashs derekh in der yidisher eybikeyt*, Bat-Yam: Beys Sholem Ash 1967, pp. 5–15

דוד בן-עורי, שלום אַש און בתים, אין: יצחק טורקאָוויגרוֹדבערג, שלום אַש דרך אין דער יידישער אייביקייט, בתים: בית שלום אַש תשכ"ה 1967, ז. 5–15.

Throughout their lives the writer and his wife were dreaming about moving to Israel, but first they wanted to bring up their children, as Asch made it clear in a letter he sent to Matylda about fifty years before.<sup>190</sup> Matylda thought that Bat Yam resembled Kutno and maybe that was the real reason why the writer wished to spend his last years there.<sup>191</sup> From Israel, Asch went to visit his sons in the United States. Although he did it often, this was a special visit as he wanted to participate in Bar Mitzvah of his grandson Michael, Moyshe Asch’s son. The celebration took place in an orthodox synagogue and then Michael’s class was invited to a restaurant. In his letter to Matylda, Asch emphasized how wonderfully Jewish and Christian children played together and that, wearing a tallith, Michael danced with a Catholic girl.<sup>192</sup>

In 1957, while visiting his daughter in London, Sholem Asch had a cerebral stroke and died. Shortly before his death he worked on his new novel on contemporary Israeli youth.<sup>193</sup> On the strength of his last will, his house in Bat Yam was turned into his museum.<sup>194</sup> His rich library was incorporated into the library collection of Yale University in the United States. His death was reported in all major newspapers and the authors of obituaries wrote that he was the best-known author writing in Yiddish.<sup>195</sup>

Asch’s life, being a constant quest, may be seen as an embodiment of the fate of many Jews in the 20th century. Born in Poland, which soon became too small for him, fascinated by world culture and at the same time looking for financial stability for his young family, he set off for Western Europe, just like some other Yiddish writers. Already at the same time he became fascinated with the United States, the new homeland for so many Jewish immigrants. Looking for safety, he moved to the United States just before World War I and stayed there for a few years. However, his roots are in Europe, his old homeland, where he went back to in the twenties. The threat of World War II made him move to

190 See Asch’s letters to his wife, letter No. 24 from New York written in 1910, in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., pp. 29–30.

191 See Yitskhok Paner, *Sholem Ash in zayn letster heyim*, Tel-Aviv: Y.L. Perets 1958, p. 20  
יצחק פאנער, *שלוש אש אין זיין לעצטער היים*, תל-אביב: י. ל. פערעץ 1958, ז. 20.

192 See Asch’s letters to his wife, letter No. 219 from New York written in 1956, in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., pp. 233–234, here p. 233.

193 See Eliahu Elath, *Sholem Asch, The Man*, op. cit.

194 See [http://www.bat-yam.muni.il/show\\_item.asp?levelId=57805](http://www.bat-yam.muni.il/show_item.asp?levelId=57805) (7 February 2012); Yitskhok Turkov, *Beys Sholem Ash in Bat-yam*, in: Dovid Shtokfish (ed.), *Sefer Kutne vehas-vive*, op. cit., p. 259

יצחק טורקאָוו, *בית שלום אש אין בת-ים*, אין: דוד שטוקפיש (רעד.), *ספר קוטנה והסביבה*, שוין ציירט, ז. 259.

195 See among other obituaries, unknown author, *Obituary. Mr Sholem Asch*, in: *The Times*, 11 July 1957, p. 15.

the United States again, where he spent another several years, but never stayed for good. In the fifties, Asch and his wife came back to Europe, dividing their time between Great Britain and France, but not visiting Poland, probably because of the political situation there. Only at the end of his life did he build a dream house in Israel and settled among his compatriots.



## 4. Memory in Sholem Asch's novels

Memory takes a definite shape thanks to memory figures, "Erinnerungsfiguren," that is motifs, concentrated images, notions, scenes and events which give it substance.<sup>196</sup> Such memory figures can be found in most of Asch's books and they come to life in two different ways. In his novels there are many simplifications; what remains is as if the essence of things, but at the same time one can see the depths, bold shortcuts and metaphors. This was already noted by Mojżesz Kanfer in the 1930s, but he did not relate this to the author's creation of memory figures.<sup>197</sup>

The same critic pays attention to the fact that Asch strives not only to turn his novels into a reference point and a source of power, but also to make them influence life and, in a sense, to co-create the world of his readers. Mojżesz Kanfer writes that all books can be divided into those which just reflect the non-literary reality and those which deliberately try to modify this reality. Because of this, he sees similarities between the works of Stefan Żeromski (1864–1925, a Polish writer) and these of Asch. These similarities go beyond the structure of the novel or a division of the plot into several single episodes and express the authors' faith in man against all odds.<sup>198</sup>

When analyzing Asch's novels in respect of memory figures they contain, it is easy to notice that earlier novels, though usually shorter, are as if saturated with such figures, whereas in his later works, often much longer, memory figures are less numerous. This is directly related to certain narrative features of his novels—some of his later ones are visibly inferior. When one compares Asch's novels written over more than fifty years one can notice many repetitive patterns or close similarities. On the one hand recurring memory figures are more reliable, but on the other hand one could hastily conclude that the author simply lacks creativity and that when he embeds his own observations, experiences and original ideas in his novels, he cannot part with them in his later works. For instance, it is difficult to explain in a different way why an almost identical figure of a young teacher, who takes an excellent care of her pupils, especially of Jewish immigrants, because she herself as a child left Europe with her parents, appears both in *Amerika* and in *Di muter*.

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196 See Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, op. cit., pp. 37–42; Pierre Nora, *Entre Mémoire et Histoire*, op. cit., p. XIX.

197 See M[ożesz] Kanfer, *Asz jako oskarżyciel*, in: *Miesięcznik Żydowski*, 12 December 1931, pp. 566–569, here p. 566.

198 See *ibid.*, p. 569.

What memory figures appear in Asch's works? On the one hand they belong to two separate worlds: that of Jews and Christians and in a few passages of *Der veg tsu zikh* and *Dos gezang fun tol* also Muslims—they mostly deal with such issues as religion, tradition and customs—and that of a common world, cohabited by the two nations,<sup>199</sup> living in the same geographical place, surrounded by the same landscape, walking along the same streets, swimming in the same river, often attending the school together and then working together. On top of that there are active and intentional contacts, first of all trade ones. In this subgroup one could also include peculiar “anti-contacts,” or rather deliberate avoidance of others, e.g. when some Jews stay home during the Corpus Christi procession.

Many memory figures reappear in Asch's successive novels but the objects which provide substance for memory are variegated. Definitely they are individuals, such as a nobleman, a priest, a rabbi, an innkeeper, a laborer, a manufacturer, a Jewish mother, a Jewish teacher, a peasant man or woman, a quack and a doctor. Furthermore a significant role is played by man-made structures, such as a church, a synagogue, a monastery, a market square in a small town, a Jewish street, a town house, an inn, a manor house, town streets, bridges, trains or American skyscrapers. Also, there are products of human minds: on the one hand, religious books and belles lettres, on the other hand ideas, visions and dreams conveyed by characters, as well as language itself. Other objects which provide substance for memory are natural elements of nature and landscape: a river, fields, a forest, the sky and the weather. Memory is also invoked by means of characteristic events: the Corpus Christi procession, Cheder lessons, synagogue prayers, Talmud study, pilgrimage to a Tzadik, an evening in an inn, work in a field or in a factory, a fair, an elopement of a Jewish girl with a Christian lover and many other. I deliberately do not put in order entities within particular groups to signal their interdependencies and concurrent appearance in novels. We should not forget biblical motifs and historical events, which find their reflection in the represented world.

What is striking in the novels under discussion is the lack of any comprehensive presentation of an anti-Semite. Seemingly typical examples of such a figure are hardly ever mentioned, whereas characters who are presented in a more in-depth way, for instance Wolfgang von Sticker in *Bam opgrunt*, in reality turn out to be different than they seem to be at first. Wolfgang wants to kill Hans, a Jewish lover of his sister, but in the end he shoots her. Struck by pangs of conscience, along with Hans he tries to save the pregnant girl and dashes to call the ambulance. Pan Wiadomski in *Der man fun Natseres* is shown in a simi-

199 Depending on where the plot of a novel takes place, Asch's Jewish characters live among Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, Italians, Germans, Americans or Arabs.

lar way. Despite verbal anti-Semitism accompanying almost all his actions, he considers a young Jew his only true friend, though he never admits this, and when he dies, a small Jewish girl from the neighborhood brings flowers. Also Mary McCarthy's father from *Ist river* is first of all a drunkard who holds grudge against the whole world. The pope in *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen* is simply insane. It seems that this strategy of presentation was chosen by Asch to prove that as a matter of fact anti-Semitic behavior stems from a confluence of adverse circumstances and, just like any other pathological behavior, it cannot be a permanent feature of human character.

In some novels it is possible to notice that Asch intuitively creates focal points of memory and devotes to them particular passages in the text. Sometimes almost every chapter can be treated as a self-contained, short epic form related to one memory figure, which is often suggested by the title. A similar narrative strategy may be observed in, among other novels, *Dos shtetl* or *Der tilim yid*. Thanks to the main character who appears in every chapter all of them are combined into a larger, superordinate structure. One can say that although particular fragments of the represented world crystallize around minor memory figures, the represented world in its entirety can become coherent thanks to the major character of the novel.

Apparently a deliberate strategy of drawing the reader's attention to memory figures is present in *Meri*, where the artist Kowalski becomes enchanted by various scenes and views and even though he does not paint them, they become embedded in the reader's memory thanks to his attention to them. Asch's characteristic narrative strategy of creating images and scenes which become focal points for the plot has been noticed by his critics, for instance by Bogdan Wojdowski, who, reviewing *Der man fun Natseres*, writes that Asch creates his narration by means of images and scenes which are vivid and reveal profound meanings of the times described.<sup>200</sup>

Another strategy to draw the reader's attention to characters who are important for collective memory and in a sense symbolic is to provide the same names for similar characters in different novels. Thus a mother is often called Rokhel Leye, a father Shloyve Volf, and a young girl is Dvoyre. A Jew, a Polish patriot, is called Jaś, and a young Jewish revolutionary, who is convicted and shot to death, has a traditional Jewish name Dovid.

In the context of memory issues we should also mention the first sentence from *Der man fun Natseres*, in which the narrator claims that the basis of human

200 See Bogdan Voydovski, *Epos fun Yishu Hanoytsri*, in: *Folks-shtime*, 15, 3 May 1991, p. 7

באגדאן וואַידאַווסקי, עפאָס פון ישו הנצרי, אין: פֿאָלקס־שטימע, גר. 15, 03.05.1991, ז. 7.

existence is not remembering but forgetting.<sup>201</sup> In this particular novel it is forgetting one's previous life so that it does not come back in memory flashes, but also it may be understood as a necessity to make choices, to remember only what is truly important, so that the flood of memories does not paralyze normal life. Such choices are made for the reader by the author, who in his novels presents the history of the Jews and, through its prism, other important or critical elements of the history of the non-Jewish world.

As I have already mentioned, some Asch's novels, especially those that are shorter or written early in his career, are exceptionally rich in memory figures. Sometimes the focal points assume the same shape in many novels and sometimes they are few and far between. They all, however, are bricks used to build a coherent world, the memory of which is transmitted by the author. In this book it will often be necessary to make a choice to present, on the one hand, the most characteristic and significant focal points of memory which appear in Asch's novels, and on the other hand to make a decision which concrete examples should be quoted in the case of repetitive patterns or close similarities appearing inside particular works or between them.

## 4.1 The world of Asch's novels and their reception

Asch's novels may be considered in different groups. In the general chapter on his life and work they are enumerated chronologically, according to the date of publication. However, what is more important for the analysis of the represented world and for the novels' reception is classifying them from the point of view of when and where the plot takes place. In terms of time, there are five biblical novels, from among which two (*Moyshe*, 1951; and *Der novi*, 1955) are related to the Old Testament and three (*Mary*, 1949; *Der man fun Natseres*, 1939; and *The Apostle*, 1943) to the New Testament; three historical novels: *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen* (1921), on the events taking place in the 16th century, *Kidush hashem* (1919), on the times of Bohdan Khmelnytsky's uprising, *Der tilim yid* (1934), which takes place in 19th-century Poland; and two novels taking place at the beginning of the 20th century: *Dos shtetl* (1904) and *Reb Shloyme Noked* (1911).

Other novels take place in Asch's contemporary times and in a sense their geography reflects the author's experiences and voyages. Seven of them are set in Europe: *Motke Ganev* (1916); *Meri* (1913), related to the events of the Revolution of 1905; *Der veg tsu zikh* (1914); the three parts of *Farn mabl: Peterburg* (1929), *Varshe* (1930), and *Moskve* (1931), on the theme of the October Revolu-

201 See Sholem Ash, *Der man fun Natseres*, op. cit., Vol. 1, p. 9.

tion; as well as *Bam opgrunt* (1936) on the hyperinflation in the Weimar Republic in 1919–1923 and its social consequences.

One novel, *Dos gezang fun tol* (1938), presents Jewish settlers in Palestine, where part of the plot of *Der veg tsu zikh* also takes place.

Seven novels focus mostly on the life in the United States: *Amerika* (1911); *Onkel Mozes* (1918); *Khaim Lederers tsurikkumen* (1919); *Di muter* (1924); *Toyt urteyl* (1926); and *Gots gefangene* (1933). Although the proper plot of the latter takes place in Europe, what matters most is the recollections of the main character, thanks to which the reader is transposed to the United States. After World War II, Asch published two American novels: *Ist river* (1946) and *Grosman un zun* (1954).

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*Moyshe*, the first Old Testament novel, was published in 1951. It is devoted to Moses, the central Jewish figure of the Pentateuch and follows more or less faithfully relevant excerpts of the Old Testament, which are scattered in many different books: from the Book of Exodus to the Book of Deuteronomy. It contains the motif of forsaking and saving a son of a hero or a king, known also in other ancient mythologies. Also the motif of an escape to a foreign country and a subsequent return can be found in many legends of the Near East.

Just like in the Bible, in Asch's novel Moses leads his people through the desert but he himself never reaches the destination, as he dies at the age of one hundred and twenty years (Dt 34). The leading character in Asch's novel is rather uniform and conservative, as the author follows closely the Old Testament, occasionally supplementing the image with data taken from other Jewish sources and introducing slight modifications when it was necessary to maintain coherence.<sup>202</sup> According to the critic Edmund Fuller, the only place where Asch diverges from the Old Testament is the concluding scene which Fuller interprets as a reference to Jesus.<sup>203</sup> However, it is impossible to agree with this interpretation—it is only the Messiah who is mentioned in the novel and although He does not appear in a parallel biblical passage, He belongs to the Jewish tradition.

The novel reveals the author's strong faith as apparently he tries to expand the principles of Judaism and to ensure salvation for all nations in the world. First of all, this is exemplified in the final scene in which it is God Himself who announces that "the end of the world will not come and the Heavenly Kingdom

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202 See Vladimir Tumanov, *Novelizing Myth in Sholem Asch's "Moses,"* in: *Yiddish*, 11, 1–2, 1998, pp. 162–184.

203 See Edmund Fuller, *Portrait of the Lawgiver*, in: *Saturday Review of Literature*, 22 September 1951, p. 16.

will not reign until the laws of Mount Sinai are not received by all nations of the world.<sup>204</sup>

Asch considered *Moyshe* a peculiar continuation of his Christological works —among other things he writes that “the teachings of Jesus Christ and Moses have created the Judaic-Christian idea which has done so much to mold the world as we know it,<sup>205</sup> but at the same time in his letters to his wife he claims that *Moyshe* is important to him, though he does not consider the novel a comeback to his own religion and tradition as, after all, he never departed from them.<sup>206</sup> Asch considered the novel as a farewell to the comprehensive treatment of the biblical epoch in his works and according to his plans his future novels were rather to focus on the contemporary world.<sup>207</sup>

*Moyshe* was quickly translated into other languages, on the whole there appeared many positive reviews and a few critical works were published. It was Bernd Feininger who almost forty years after the publication presented an interesting interpretation of the novel. He believed that Asch’s understanding of the Torah retained its rabbinical power but philosophically and ethically it kept developing and because of that it became a set of laws for the new world and the new civil society.<sup>208</sup>

Asch’s novel may be treated not only as a religious and philosophical work but also as a historical one, providing a narrative shape to the history of the Jews in the 13th century BC. At the same time the book offers a link to the tragic events of modern times: Moses has a vision of rows of martyrs who are to be burnt in autos-da-fé and who are not only Jews but come from many different nations; they all believe in one God and suffer for observing His commandments.<sup>209</sup>

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204 Sholem Ash, *Moyshe*, Nyu-York: Moyshe-Shmuel Shklarski 1951, p. 488; *Der ek kon nit kumen un dos malkhes fun himl kon zikh nit onheybn, biz di toyre fun barg Sinay vet nit vern ongenumen ba ale felker fun der velt.*

דער עק קאָן ניט קומען און דאָס מלכות פון דימל קאָן זיך ניט אָנהייבן, ביז די תורה פון באַרג סיני וועט ניט ווערן אָנגענומען ביי אַלע פעלקער פון דער וועלט. שלום אַש, משה, ניו־יאָרק: משה־שמואל שקלאַרסקי 1951, p. 488.

205 Sholem Asch, *Some of the Authors of 1951 Speaking for Themselves*, in: *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, 7 October 1951, p. 24.

206 See Asch’s letters to his wife, letter No. 145 from Paris written in April 1951, in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., pp. 153–154, here p. 154.

207 See Asch’s letters to his wife, letter No. 147 from Florence written in 1951, in: *ibid.*, pp. 158–159, here p. 158.

208 See Bernd Feininger, *Tora der Wahrheit und der Vernunft; Tora-“Typologie” im Roman “Moses” von Sholem Asch*, in: *Paradeigmata*, II, 1989, pp. 803–815, here p. 811.

209 See Sholem Ash, *Moyshe*, op. cit., pp. 273–274.

In 1955 Asch published the novel *Der novi*, devoted to the prophet Deutero-Isaiah. As it was already mentioned, Asch claimed that *Moyshe* was his last biblical novel, but in *Der novi* he comes back to the oldest part of Jewish history, that is to the 6th century BC. In a letter to his wife, he wrote that upon reading his new book he came to the conclusion that from the spiritual point of view it was his greatest achievement, but artistically it lagged a little behind his other works. He hoped the Jews and the Christians would find the book valuable and thought it would be well received in Israel because it was “good for the Jews.”<sup>210</sup>

The protagonist of this next novel related to the biblical roots is an anonymous prophet who lived in the middle of the 6th century BC and during the Babylonian captivity made prophecies which are contained in chapters 40–50 of the Book of Isaiah. To this day, it has not been ascertained whether it was authored by one person or a group of persons. An important section of the prophecies is the so called *Songs of the Suffering Servant* (Is 42,1–9; 49,1–9; 50,4–9; and 52,13–53,12). It is likely they inspired Asch. Although in the Book of Isaiah *the Suffering Servant* is understood as the whole nation of Israel, sometimes it is clearly one person who is meant and who is thus described: “because He poured out His soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Is 53,12).<sup>211</sup> Within the context of the Old Testament, the idea of suffering for the sins of others is unique and for Christians it is a direct reference to Christ.

In the novel *Der novi* Asch uses this short biblical text to develop his vision of the history of the Jews at the time of Deutero-Isaiah and supplementing it with pieces of information taken from other Jewish sources. Additionally, the novel incorporates excerpts from the Book of Daniel, including the well-known vision:

and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man. [...] And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed (Dan 7,13–14).

Also because of this the novel is seen by many readers as a continuation of Asch's Christological works and has been praised by many Christian critics and censured again by Jewish ones. On the one hand Asch is called one of the best

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210 Asch's letters to his wife, letter No. 186 from New York written in 1955, in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., pp. 202–203, here p. 202. יין עס איז גוט פאר יידן. *es iz gut far yidn*.

211 All biblical quotations in English come from The Ignatius Bible Revised Standard Version-Catholic Edition (RSV-CE), Ignatius Press, see <http://jmom.honlam.org/rsvvc/> (20 July 2013).

biblical novelists,<sup>212</sup> on the other hand he is severely criticized. For instance, the latter is true in the case of Irving Howe's article, who writes, among other things, that Asch's last novel is "so shocking in its intellectual and literary vulgarity that one's sympathy for Asch as a lonely rejected old man is quickly dissolved, and one comes to realize that in a way far deeper than even his most hostile critics have charged, Asch has betrayed his culture and himself."<sup>213</sup>

At the same time some readers see the novels *Moyshe* and *Der novi* as the fourth and fifth volume of the Christological cycle, as the works which continue the themes of previous novels, this time based on the Old Testament. Some critics go so far as to call the set Asch's personal Pentateuch.<sup>214</sup> However, both Asch's comments and the text of the novel seem to contradict such a simplistic categorization. All sections which have been interpreted as related to Christ may relate to Moses, and Asch's Isaiah declares openly that God's will is to "bring all people to the God of Israel, to the house of the God of Jacob."<sup>215</sup> It is hardly possible not to understand this as Asch's clear and full identification with the religion of his people.

*Der novi* has its weak points too. Critics censured Asch for developing a too wide biblical paraphrase to provide a context for his protagonist but not developing the plot instead, and for not creating characters who the reader could identify with, which is seen as a flaw. Another problem is the quality of the English translation, though obviously Asch was only tangentially responsible for this.<sup>216</sup> True as it may be that the book does not present one memorable character, we can consider the people of Israel as a collective character, thanks to whom the plot acquires a new dimension and Isaiah becomes the novel's unifying figure.

Another group of Asch's biblical novels are the Christological works, written prior to those focusing on the Old Testament: *Der man fun Natseres*, *The*

212 See F.N. Magill, *The Prophet*, in: F.N. Magill (ed.), *Survey of Contemporary Literature*, 12 vols., Englewood Cliffs: Salem 1977, Vol. 9, pp. 6091–6094, here p. 6091.

213 Irving Howe, *Sholem Asch: The Inner Loss*, in: *Midstream*, 2.3, 1956, pp. 81–87, here p. 81.

214 See Bradford Smith, *Life of Isaiah-II*, in: *Saturday Review of Literature*, 5 November 1955, p. 18 and 31, here p. 18; Mary Hornaday, *The Birth of the Messianic Idea*, in: *Christian Science Monitor*, 3 November 1955, p. 6; Charles Angoff, *In the Christological Vein*, in: *Congress Weekly*, 5 March 1956, p. 14; Meyer Levin, *Prophet of the Return*, in: *New York Times Book Review*, 6 November 1955, p. 4; Judd L. Teller, *Unhistorical Novels*, in: *Commentary*, 21 April 1956, pp. 393–396.

215 Sholem Ash, *Der novi*, Tel Aviv: Letste naves, 1956, p. 98; *tsu brengen ale felker tsum Got fun Yisroel, tsu dem hoyz fun Got fun Yankev*.

שלום אַש, דער נביא, תל־אביב: לעצטע נייעס 1956, ז. 98; צו ברענגען אלע פעלקער צום גאָט פון ישראָל, צו דעם הויז פון גאָט פון יעקב.

216 See Bradford Smith, *Life of Isaiah-II*, op. cit., p. 31.



*Apostle*, and *Mary*, the third volume of the trilogy, which, however, deals with earlier biblical times than those presented in the two other volumes. In his trilogy, Asch recreates the lives of St Mary, Christ and St Paul as presented in the New Testament. At the same time he reconstructs the details of contemporary social and political life and tries to underline religious bonds existing between the Jews and the Christians in the hope of creating mutual understanding and a better world.

In passing, it is worth pointing out that for Sholem Asch the coexistence with the Christians was quite natural; for instance, he borrowed certain phrases from them as can be seen in a letter to his wife in which he writes that he promised his son to see his mother “נאָ באַזשע נאַראָדזעניע” (*na Bozhe Narodzenye*, that is at Christmas).<sup>217</sup> In a letter written to his wife during a sea voyage from North America to Europe on 2 February 1939, Asch let her know that he had just rewritten *Der man fun Natseres*. He was of the opinion that the book contained the truth and that he himself was not a bad writer. He also believed that there was a God of artists who forced them to write in a specific way, even if it was detrimental to their well-being.<sup>218</sup> It seems he sensed the uproar which would follow the publication of his new book, though he did not realize the full extent of it.

The novel *Mary* (1949) is devoted to St Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. Asch presents her with “loving piety and pastoral artlessness”<sup>219</sup> and, just like in other Christological novels, he tends to be faithful to the New Testament. According to critics, this part of the trilogy is artistically much inferior. The novel is “excessively schmaltzy,” which was the reason why Maurice Samuel, Asch’s excellent translator, refused to translate it. In his autobiography, Samuel makes it clear that artistic reasons were the only ones that made him refuse to produce a translation and that he never doubted the author’s attachment to Jewish tradition and the integrity of his mind which would never let him write at the behest of non-Jewish readers.<sup>220</sup>

Also some critics pay attention to the novel’s weak points; they try to justify them by claiming Asch wanted to write something more than just a novel and therefore made some historical errors and introduced a few anachronisms. The school Jesus attends resembles a European Cheder and the Wedding at Cana

217 Asch’s letters to his wife, letter No. 58 from Berlin written in 1912, in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., pp. 60–61, here p. 61.

218 See Asch’s letters to his wife, letter No. 105 from the ship written on 2 February 1939, in: *ibid.*, pp. 107–108.

219 Charles A. Madison, *Yiddish Literature. Its Scope and Major Writers*, New York: Frederick Unger 1968, p. 256.

220 See Maurice Samuel, *Little Did I Know*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1963, pp. 273–275.

brings to mind Hasidic nuptials. Contrary to what the Gospel says, Jesus dreams about converting pagans, whom he has been living with since his childhood, whereas most of the people he grew up with were actually Jewish.<sup>221</sup>

Despite the criticism, the publication of *Mary* was an important literary event, appreciated by, for instance, the journal *Saturday Review of Literature*, which on 8 October 1949 published a review of the novel and the author's biography, which was signaled on the cover by a collage consisting of Asch's large face and a drawing of the nativity scene in Bethlehem, with St Mary wearing a blue robe and leaning over the manger and an ox peering through the window.<sup>222</sup> Although the collage is of low artistic value, it renders the atmosphere which accompanied the publication of the novel. What is interesting, Edmund Fuller, the reviewer, believed that from among the three Christian novels it was *Mary* which was the most valuable, because it was simple, and it did not have complex ramifications of *Der man fun Natseres* or the breadth of *The Apostle*: this is why it could move the readers most.<sup>223</sup>

It is clear that Asch himself did not find any drawbacks in the novel; on the contrary, he was convinced that *Mary* was one of his best novels and that it would foment revolution among Jews and Christians alike.<sup>224</sup> At the same time he believed that although the novel did not cross the boundary of the Jewish thought and sensitivity, it nevertheless parted with tradition established by rabbis and priests, who, according to Asch, "dug ditches and stretched barbed wire among people."<sup>225</sup> The novelist writes that he would like to begin where the rift appeared, that is in the times of the first Christians, and to proclaim the unity of Judaism and Christianity.<sup>226</sup>

The writer presents the life of Mary as it is in the Gospel but at the same time he supplements and enlivens particular events and themes, including elements which go beyond the beliefs and faith of the majority of Christians, like, for instance, Jesus' siblings.<sup>227</sup> Moreover, the figure of Mary resembles other women and mothers presented in Asch's novels, though understandably she re-

221 See Sholom J. Kahn, *Two Latter-Day Gospels*, in: *Commentary*, 8, 1949, pp. 607–608, here p. 607.

222 See *Saturday Review of Literature*, 8 October 1949, cover.

223 See Edmund Fuller, *Mother of Christ*, in: *Saturday Review of Literature*, 8 October 1949, pp. 19–20, here p. 19.

224 See Asch's letters to his wife, letter No. 123 from Nice written in 1948, in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., p. 128.

225 Asch's letters to his wife, letter No. 142 from Kent (USA) written in 1949, in: *ibid.*, pp. 149–151, here p. 150; *hobn [...] gegrobn griber un getsoygn shtekhike drotin tsvishn mentsh un mentsh.*

גאַבן [...] געגראָבן גריבער און געצויגן שטעכיקע דראָטן צווישן מענטש און מענטש.

226 See *ibid.*

mains unique. Some reviewers believed that a more suitable title for the novel would be *Mother*, but another, earlier novel by Asch bore the same name.<sup>228</sup>

Besides, it is worth noting that although the eponymous Miriam<sup>229</sup> is a significant character in the novel, in the course of the plot she is gradually relegated to the background and her place is taken by her firstborn son. The novel is definitely schmaltzy but thanks to its idyllic simplicity it resembles Asch's early works, such as *Dos shtetl* or *Reb Shloyme Noked*. The image of life on the outskirts of the town, in harmony with nature which surrounds Miriam and Joseph's house, is complemented by various scenes from Yeshua's childhood and adolescence. He questions some teachings of rabbis at an early age, and claims, among other things, that God loves all creatures, from sacrificial animals to people, regardless of their social position. When Yeshua is fourteen, Joseph dies and the boy assumes the responsibilities of the head of the family for the next fifteen years—he works in his father's workshop and takes care of his mother and younger siblings. Then comes the time of his wanderings and teaching—the narrator focuses on the parables known from the New Testament which fit very well into the atmosphere of the novel.

Unlike in *Dos shtetl* and *Reb Shloyme Noked*, in *Mary* the idyllic image of simple life is relatively soon questioned by harsh reality. As a young boy, Yeshua witnesses bands of Roman soldiers plundering the town they are crossing, and along with his parents sets off to help the inhabitants of the burnt capital of the region. They are only able to bury some victims and to share their last morsels of food with the captive men, women and children who are led in shackles to be sold. When they approach the looted town, they decide to turn back as they realize they will not be able to help anyone. Besides, they are scared by the number of corpses and the crosses standing along the road; on one of them Yeshua recognizes the corpse of his neighbor.<sup>230</sup>

Sholem Asch had a very specific attitude towards Christ, which can be seen in one of his letters to his wife, where he writes: "Today is Good Friday, the day

227 The Gospel according to St Matthew (Matt 12,46 and 13,55–56) mentions Jesus' relatives, but it is debatable whether the original terms should be translated as "brothers" or "cousins."

228 See Edward Wagenknecht, *A Novel of Mary*, in: *New York Times Book Review*, 9 October 1949, p. 5.

229 The novel's title is *Mary*, but the name is not used in the novel at all—the protagonist is always called Miriam. It is likely that by giving the novel such a title Asch and his translator wanted to make a reference to the mother of Jesus, but the fact that in the body of the novel the Hebrew name Miriam is consistently used was an attempt to emphasize the Jewish origin of Mary.

230 See Sholem Asch, *Mary*, translated by Leo Steinberg, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons 1949, pp. 198–206.

Jesus died, and to me it is always like Yom Kippur,<sup>231</sup> I am always very sad on this day.”<sup>232</sup> He also lets her know that he visited a Catholic church, where everything reminded him of a Jewish burial service.<sup>233</sup>

In *Der man fun Natseres* Jesus is seen as a pious Jew, thanks to which the Jewish faith is presented to the Christian reader not as something alien, but as part of his own religion, as a tradition without which Jesus Christ would not be able to live. On the other hand Christianity is presented to the Jewish reader as a schism in Judaism, as something familiar rather than alien.

Asch employs an interesting concept of a frame novel whose plot takes place in Warsaw. The first-person narrator is a young Jew who finds employment as a Hebrew teacher with Pan Wiadomski, a Polish ultra-Catholic and anti-Semite. Within the 20th-century framework of narration, the story of Jesus Christ is gradually recounted during the meetings between the two men. Pan Wiadomski believes that he is a reincarnation of a Roman military commander, the chiliarch of Jerusalem, who, he surmises, is responsible for the death of Christ and for this crime was condemned to become a perpetual wanderer. In this way Asch creates a reversed equivalent of the concept of the Wandering Jew. The talks about the ancient story are complemented by the text of an ancient document which Pan Wiadomski tries to read with the help of his young Jewish friend. The document turns out to be the fifth Gospel, the Gospel according to Judas.<sup>234</sup>

Following the official Jewish views,<sup>235</sup> in the novel Asch tries first of all to replace “the Jewish guilt” for Christ’s death with “the Roman guilt.” Besides, he presents Christ as a figure who is deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition. In this way the Christian reader has a chance to change his often negative attitude to-

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231 The Day of Atonement or the Day of Judgment, one of the most important Jewish feasts. It is the day of atonement and repentance—the faithful go to the synagogue to confess their sins and remember the deceased.

232 Asch’s letters to his wife, letter No. 153 from Nice written in 1952, in M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., pp. 165–166, here p. 165; *Haynt iz grod der “guter fraytik,” der tog fun Yezus toyt, un der tog iz shtendik ba mir a halber yomkipper, ikh bin zeyer troyerik in dem tog.*

דיינט איז גראָד דער „גוטער פרייטיק”, דער טאָג פון יעזוס טויט, און דער טאָג איז שטענדיק ביי מיר אַ האַלבער יום־כיפּור, איך בין זייער טרויעריק אין דעם טאָג.

233 See *ibid.*

234 See Sholem Ash, *Der man fun Natseres*, op. cit., Vol. 1, pp. 252–253.

235 See Ben Siegel, *The Controversial Sholem Asch*, op. cit., pp. 140–145. The apocryphal texts that are commonly called the Gospel according to Judas were discovered only in the 1970s, so their content was not directly known to Asch. However, the existence of these texts is mentioned for the first time by St Irenaeus (ca. 140–ca. 202) in his work *Adversus haereses* from about 180.

wards the Jews, which is symbolized in the novel by the budding friendship between Pan Wiadomski and his young teacher.

Sholem Asch was not the only Yiddish writer in whose works the figure of Jesus appears. For instance He appears in *פון מגדלה מרים* (*Miryem fun Magdala*, 1910), the drama by Dovid Pinski,<sup>236</sup> in which He resists an attempt by Mary Magdalene to seduce Him, but among well-known Yiddish writers it was Asch who devoted to Jesus a whole novel.

*The Apostle* (1943), again closely based on the New Testament, is the story of St Paul, who is presented as an inspired fanatic undergoing a transformation from a persecutor of early Christians to a missionary zealot. Asch uses the Acts of the Apostles and other available sources, but also adds a great deal; a part of the novel consists of quotations from St Paul's letters along with the author's commentaries. At the same time *The Apostle* is not only a story of St Paul but also a presentation of the early years of Christianity—the author presents Christian ideas and rituals as having their sources in Judaism and in the novel many early Christians remain followers of Judaism.

As in the case of Asch's later biblical novels *Moyshe* and *Der novi*, also here the critics pointed out similar flaws, such as the lack of the protagonist. According to Orville Prescott, St Paul is an artificial creation, he is not attractive and serves as a mere vehicle to present a theological discussion. Other characters are not multi-dimensional or appealing to the reader either. The reviewer also criticizes the lack of the plot development and the absence of humor.<sup>237</sup> However, many other reviewers did not share such negative views and instead praised the author for transporting the reader to the first years of Christianity and creating a vivid image of those times.<sup>238</sup>

Both sides are right, though. There are many repetitive passages in the novel, which is nearly eight hundred pages long, and virtually nothing happens apart from St Paul's journey, his meetings and talks with successive followers of the new faith, and debates with its opponents, in which St Paul invariably uses the same arguments. At the same time the author presents the community of the first Christians and the momentum the new religion has, but there are no convincingly developed characters nor descriptions of landscapes, nature or towns, so characteristic of Asch's other novels and always adding to their charm. In

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236 דוד פֿינסקי (1872–1959) was a dramatist and prose writer.

237 See Orville Prescott, *Outstanding Novels*, in: *Yale Review*, 33, 1, September 1943, pp. VI and VIII, here p. VIII.

238 See Rose Feld, *St Paul, Great Prophet, Great Politician*, in: *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review*, 19 September 1943, p. 3; Karl M. Chworowsky, *St Paul the Jew*, in: *Christian Century*, 6 October 1943, p. 1136.

contrast to Asch's novels on the European Diaspora, *The Apostle* is void of any comic episodes.

Asch's story about St Paul begins in Jerusalem after the death of Christ. Saul of Tarsus, a young Pharisee, meets in the Temple with others who just like him see the new faith as a real threat to Judaism. They turn their hatred against those Jews who acknowledge that Christ is the Messiah. Saul's undertakings lead to many deaths among the first Christians. Because Damascus is considered to be the hotbed of the new faith, Saul travels there to nip in the bud what he considers evil. On the way, he has his first vision of Christ. It changes his whole life: now he begins to preach the new religion with the same zeal he showed when persecuting it. He assumes the Roman name Paul and in all he does he is an excellent organizer and a shrewd politician. For instance, when he fears the sentence of the Jewish tribunal, he claims his Roman citizenship as an argument for the court in Rome, which exonerates him because he did not break any Roman laws. However, ultimately he is put to death and in the last minute before he dies he utters the first words of the prayer *Shma Yisroel*,<sup>239</sup> which plays the role of the Jewish credo. This is an additional illustration of what is so obvious elsewhere in the novel, that is Asch's emphasis on the kinship and spiritual affinity between Judaism and Christianity.

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Asch's historical novel *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen* was published in installments in 1921. It takes place in 16th-century Rome. A painter enchanted by a beautiful Jewish woman uses her as a model to paint the picture of Virgin Mary. Pope Paul IV<sup>240</sup> accuses the Jewess of appropriating the face of St Mary and sentences her to death at the stake as a witch.

*Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen* makes a clear reference to *Kidush hashem*, written earlier but set in later times, not only because of one episode, which is the death of a beautiful Jewish girl for her faith, but because of the similarity of the general message: it questions the sense of suffering of the Jews in the Diaspora and analyzes their ancestors' trust in God, the trust for which they are ready to sacrifice their lives. Like *Kidush hashem*, *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen* echoes the bloody events in the Ukraine after World War I and blends historical

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239 See Sholem Asch, *The Apostle*, translated by Maurice Samuel, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons 1943, p. 803. The prayer comes from the Book of Deuteronomy (Dt 6,4): "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord" and it says that there is only one God who Israel venerates.

240 As the pope in the years 1555–1559, Giovanni Pietro Carafa (1476–1559) reorganized the Italian Inquisition and in 1555 created a ghetto in Rome, which the Jews were forbidden to leave at night.

facts with literary fiction. While looking for historical data to write *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen*, Asch probably used *Geschichte der Juden* (1853–1875, Yiddish edition: *די יידישע געשיכטע* *Di yidische geshikhte*, 1913) by Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891), from whom he borrowed certain episodes, for instance, an order issued by Pope Paul IV to set fire to all Jewish dwellings, the description of the annihilation of Marranos in Ancona or the figure of Gracia Mendes Nasi.<sup>241</sup> The old man Yankev and his granddaughter Yefte, the fugitives from Castile, are fictitious though. They resemble two other literary characters: Menakhem and Rokhel from Dovid Pinski's drama *דער שטומער משיח* (*Der shtumer Meshiyekh*, 1911), whose plot revolves around the expulsion of Jews from France in the 14th century.

In the introduction, Asch writes that many events did take place and many other could have taken place considering the atmosphere of those times. He admits, however, that on the whole the Jews fared well in Rome and that he deliberately moved some events from other places to the papal city because the pope as the head of the Church was responsible for them, no matter where in the world they took place.<sup>242</sup>

Two years earlier, in 1919, the novel *Kidush hashem* was published. In the novel, the author expresses his admiration for the ancestors' tenacious clinging to their faith in the face of death and glorifies the martyrs of 17th-century massacres during the uprising led by Bohdan Khmelnytsky (1595–1657). Sparsely populated territories of the Ukraine that belonged to Poland at the time were the destination not only of the Polish Jews but also the Jews from Germany and Bohemia, who fled the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). As a result, the Jewish population in the Ukraine increased fourfold between the middle of the 16th century and the middle of the 17th century. Khmelnytsky's Cossacks and their allies, Crimean Tatars, murdered thousands of Jews living in the eastern part of Poland and the Ukrainian Jewish communities ceased to exist for many years to come.

241 See Eugenia Prokop-Janiec, *Wstęp*, op. cit., p. 11. On the other hand, the allegedly successful pleading with the pope by the Turkish sultan, induced to intervene by Dona Gracia Mendes, which led to the release of all imprisoned Marranos is not consistent with historical data. Although the intervention did take place, it was not entirely successful—only Turkish subjects were released. Gracia Mendes Nasi (1510–1569) also appears in other Yiddish works, e.g. in the drama *נאָכן גאָט פֿון מיַדבֿר* (*Nokhn Got fun midber*, 1949), written by the poet קאַדיע מאָלאָדאָווסקי Kadye Molodovski (1894–1975).

242 See Sholem Ash, *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen*, Nyu-York: Sholem Ash Komite 1923, pp. I–III

שלום אַש, די כּשׁוּף-מאַכערין פֿון קאַסטיליען, ניו־יאָרק: שלום אַש קאָמיטע 1923, I–III.

The year of Khmelnytsky's massacres coincided with the Jewish year 5408, when according to the beliefs of many Jews the Messiah was to come.<sup>243</sup> Messianic hopes, enhanced by tragic events, became a theme of many Yiddish literary works written by such authors as, among others, Moyshe Kulbak,<sup>244</sup> Arn Tseytlin,<sup>245</sup> Yekhiel-Yeshaye Trunk,<sup>246</sup> Leyvik Halpern,<sup>247</sup> using a pen name of H. Leyvik or Isaac Bashevis Singer,<sup>248</sup> Asch's novel belongs to this tradition. The waiting for the Messiah is also the major theme of the satirical novel by Moyshe Nadir,<sup>249</sup> *משיח אין אמעריקע* (*Meshiyekh in Amerike*, 1919–1921).

The plot of *Kidush hashem* revolves around Mendel and his family, the only Jews living in Złoczów. The most important event presented in the first part is

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- 243 See Itzhok Niborski, *Sholem Asch l'écrivain de la cohésion et de l'éclatement*, in: Sholem Asch, *La sanctification du Nom*, translated by Aby Wieviorka, Lausanne / Paris: l'Age d'homme 1985, pp. 9–20, here p. 14; Heinrich Graetz, *Historja Żydów*, translated by St[anislaw] Szenhak, Warszawa: Judaica 1929, 9 vols. in 3 tomes, Vol. 8, p. 367.
- 244 יעקב קולבאָק Moyshe Kulbak (1896–1937, shot during the Stalinist purges) was a poet, dramatist and prose writer. Among other works, he wrote a historical drama *יעקב פראַנק* (*Yankev Frank*, 1923) on Jacob Frank (1726–1791), a leader of an 18th-century Messianic movement which developed after the failure of the 17th-century Messianic movement of Sabbatai Zevi.
- 245 אַרן טשײטלין Arn Tseytlin (1898–1973) was a poet, dramatist, prose writer and literary critic. At the outbreak of World War II, he was accidentally in New York, and so survived the war as the only member of the family. After the war he remained in the United States and, among other works, he published the play *יעקב פראַנק* (*Yankev Frank*, 1929).
- 246 יעקל-ישעי' טרונק Yekhiel-Yeshaye Trunk (1887–1961) was a writer and literary critic. The author of, for instance, the novel *משיח געווישער* (*Meshiyekh geviter*, 1961) on Sabbatai Zevi.
- 247 H. Leyvik (1888–1962, real name: לייװיק האַלפערן Leyvik Halpern) was a poet, dramatist, and publisher. Among other works, he wrote the play *דער גולם* (*Der goylem*, 1921), in which the Messiah appears disguised as a beggar. However, He is not accepted by people, because He comes too early to the world which is not ready to receive Him.
- 248 יצחק באשעװיס זינגער Yitskhok Bashevis Zinger (1904–1991, known as Isaac Bashevis Singer) is the only Nobel Prize laureate in Yiddish literature and the author of the novel *דער שטן אין גאָרײ* (*Der sotn in Goray*, 1935), which presents town inhabitants consumed by Messianic ecstasy under the influence of an emissary of Sabbatai Zevi. The events of Khmelnytsky's uprising and the hopes related to Sabbatai Zevi find their echoes also in the novel *דער קנעכט* (*Der knekht*, 1967). Bashevis Singer also wrote a fictionalized biography of Jacob Frank *דער זינדיקער משיח* (*Der zindiker Meshiyekh*, 1935–1936) and the novel *דער מאַן פון חלומות* (*Der man fun khaloymes*, 1970–1971), apparently based on recollections of a Frankist.
- 249 משה נאָדיר Moyshe Nadir (1885–1943, real name: יצחק רייז Yitskhok Reyzy) was a comic writer who in his works presented, among other things, a disillusionment with the life in New York.



the opening of the local synagogue and the marriage between Shloyme, Mendel's eight-year-old son, and Dvoyre, an equally young daughter of a rabbi. In the second part, the young couple grow up but at the same time the tragic events of Khmelnytsky's uprising take place. Mendel's Christian servant tries to save Dvoyre, dressing her up as a peasant woman. In spite of the effort, Dvoyre is killed by a Cossack who is in love with her. Shloyme is captured and sold to the Tatars. Along with other Jews, Mendel and his wife are murdered in Tulczyn, having been handed over to the Cossacks by the Poles. The only survivor in the family is Shloyme, who is ransomed from captivity by Turkish Jews. A recurring character is Tzadik Nistar,<sup>250</sup> who appears as a tailor, a teacher of young Shloyme, a salesman or an old lyricist. In the last symbolic scene, Shloyme, who comes back to his homeland, meets Tzadik Nistar, who encourages passers-by to enter a shop where nothing is stored on the shelves except for faith and trust.

Asch used the Jewish chronicles providing accounts of the massacres, first of all *Yiven Metsula* (Venice 1663) by Nathan Net Hanover (d. 1663), from which he borrowed the story of the siege of Niemirów and the episode of the Jewish girl who persuades the Cossack to kill her. At the same time the author complements the historical reality with his own interpretation; Itzhok Niborski believes that such an interpretation is Asch's claim that the Jews leased Orthodox churches.<sup>251</sup> Asch is visibly fascinated by the Jewish heroic readiness to lay down one's life and he contrasts the persecutors' arrogance with the holiness of the victims. In some scenes, the critics find a premonition of the Shoah.<sup>252</sup> Soon after its publication, the book was counted among the classic historical novels in Yiddish thanks to its literary qualities, highly praised by literary critics and thanks to its gripping image of Jewish history. Positive press reviews emphasized not only a skillful presentation of the Jewish life and customs but primarily

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250 According to the Talmud (the *Talmud Bavli*, the *Sanhedrin* tractate, p. 304 and the *Sukka* tractate, p. 68) there are 36 righteous Tzadikim in each generation worldwide. Jewish tradition says it is thanks to them that the world is not annihilated. The righteous ones are not recognized as such and sometimes they themselves do not realize who they are. As the number 36 is represented by the Hebrew letters *lamed* and *vav*, לָו, the 36 righteous ones are often called Lamed Vav Tzadikim or Tzadikim Nistarim.

251 See Itzhok Niborski, *Sholem Asch l'écrivain de la cohésion et de l'éclatement*, op. cit., pp. 19–20. Niborski is not right because also other literary works mention that the keys to Orthodox churches were deposited with the Jewish innkeeper, which suggests it was a historical rather than a purely literary fact; this was also confirmed by Heinrich Graetz, see Heinrich Graetz, *Historja Żydów*, op. cit., Vol. 8, p. 365.

252 See Michał Friedman, [Introduction], op. cit., p. 9.

Asch's ability to render a life philosophy, a specific stoic fatalism which let the Jews accept but also overcome successive defeats.<sup>253</sup>

To celebrate Asch's fiftieth birthday, Mojżesz Kanfer wrote an article about *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen* and *Kidush hashem* in 1930, in which he claims that due to their pathos, mysticism, simplicity and beauty they are so dangerous. According to Kanfer, such literary works tranquilize us and make us believe that "in this dance macabre of crime and absurdity, which has consumed hundreds of thousands of our brothers, there is some sense, that in this thoughtless brutal cruelty there is some deeper meaning."<sup>254</sup>

This is an important aspect of how the author's works have been received. Although one can understand Asch, who, full of hope and optimism, tries to find a flicker of hope in anything, yet in the face of bloody massacres many readers expected condemnation and exposition of sheer absurdity of these tragedies.

In 1934 *Der tilim yid* was published. The main theme of the novel is faith or more precisely, as Yitskhok Kharlash put it, deep, all-embracing faith.<sup>255</sup> Moreover, the novel presents a fragment of history of the Polish Jews in the 19th century, first of all a comprehensive picture of the Hasidic movement.

At the time of writing *Der tilim yid* Asch had been living for many years outside Poland and the story of Yekhiel was to him, just like to many of his readers, a rediscovery of a long-gone world. The writer, hoping to provide an example and a foundation to his people—especially to young Jews—at a historically difficult time, so that they could use it to gather strength, took special care to research the novel. He read a great deal, and also traveled in Poland, looking for the traces and signs of old epochs and ideals, and for inspiration. The novel blends literary fiction with echoes of historical facts, and the figure of Yekhiel, the protagonist, is based on Yekhiel-Meyer Lipshits (1815–1888), a real rabbi from Gostynin, who was called "tilim-yid,"<sup>256</sup> which the novel's title refers to.

The main thread is the life of Yekhiel, who was born in a poor Hasidic family and finds it hard to study the Talmud. Although faith is an extremely serious and profound concern to him, he makes his father worried when he expresses his love for God standing on his head or whistling<sup>257</sup> during a service in the synagogue. Here Asch uses motifs which can be often found in Jewish literature, as

253 See Richard Denis Charques, *Two Jewish Novels*, in: *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 June 1927, p. 406.

254 M[ojżesz] Kanfer, *Szalom Asz (Z okazji 50-lecia urodzin poety)*, op. cit., p. 51.

255 See Yitskhok Kharlash, *Ash Sholem*, op. cit., col. 189.

256 See Shmuel Niger, *Sholem Ash. Zayn lebn un zayne verk*, op. cit., pp. 213–215.

257 See Sholem Ash, *Der tilim yid*, Nyu-York: Moyshe-Shmuel Shklarski 1952, p. 28

ש'לום אש, דער תהלים י"ד, ניו-יאָרק: משה-שמואל שקלאַרסקי 1952, ז. 28.

noticed, for instance, by Alexander Scheiber.<sup>258</sup> Reproached by his father and older brother, Yekhiel gives up studying and instead helps his mother at the market. However, he is still pious and tries to find his own religious way, eventually joining a group of simple craftsmen who meet and read the psalms together. As in other novels, also here Asch shows his respect for simple people, full of faith and trust in God. Yekhiel's father and brother set off for the Tzadik's court and never come back, so the burden of supporting the family falls on the shoulders of Yekhiel's mother, whom he tries to help as much as he can. The Tzadik introduced in Asch's novel is Reb Mendele Kotsker,<sup>259</sup> a well-known historical figure, who appeared in Jewish literature before. Probably the first to write about him was Yosef Opatoshu<sup>260</sup> in *אין פוילישע וועלדער* (*In poylishe velder*, 1921).<sup>261</sup> Yekhiel's fame is growing and soon he is recognized as a saint and a miracle man; the Jews and peasants come to see him with their cares and problems. Yekhiel gives away everything he has and offers help and advice to everyone, but he does not believe he can work miracles. He changes his mind when his father comes and takes him to the Tzadik in Kock, who confirms the boy has a special gift.

Shmuel Niger wrote about the novel in Yiddish. His two reviews were published in the journal *צוקונפט* (*Tsukunft*) in 1953.<sup>262</sup> In both he draws the line between historiography, which is concerned with past events only, and a historical novel, in which the author, while presenting past events, tries to find their implications for the present times and for the future.<sup>263</sup> Niger is convinced that Asch's novel, rooted in the past, may appeal to the contemporary reader and while analyzing its meaning, he tries to point out timeless aspects of the work. At the same time he believes that it was for a long time that Asch was looking for Yekhiel, a protagonist who would find the sense of life. In his earlier works, the

258 See Alexander Scheiber, *Alte Geschichten in neuem Gewande*, in: *Fabula*, 11:1/2, 1970, p. 144.

259 Menakhem Mendel Morgenshtern of Kock (1787–1859) was a Hasidic Tzadik, well-known as an expert on the Talmud and Kabbalah and a student of the famous rabbi Simkhe Bunam of Przysucha (1765–1827), who is also mentioned in *Der tilim yid*.

260 Yosef Opatoshu (1886–1954) was one of the leading Yiddish novelists writing in America, the subjects of his novels were Jewish life in Poland and the history of the Jews.

261 See Shmuel Niger, *Eyn epokhe—tsvey romanen*, in: *Tsukunft*, April 1935, pp. 242–244, here p. 242

שמואל ניגער, איין עפאכע - צוויי ראמאנען, אין: צוקונפט, אפריל 1935, ז. 242–244, דא ז. 242

262 See *ibid.*; Shmuel Niger, *Di kunst fun gloybn. Sholem Ash: Der tilim yid*, in: *Tsukunft*, January 1935, pp. 53–57

שמואל ניגער, די קונסט פון גלויבן. שלום אש: דער תהלים-איד, אין: צוקונפט, יאנואר 1935, ז. 53–57.

263 See *ibid.*, p. 54; Shmuel Niger, *Eyn epokhe—tsvey romanen*, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

author presents those who seek, whereas here for the first time the reader meets someone who has found an aim in his life.<sup>264</sup> Niger praises the author and his novel not only in these reviews but also in his book on Asch, in the chapter on *Der tilim yid*.<sup>265</sup>

In English, a longer review of the novel was written by Richard Dennis Charques in 1934. He is right to notice that the book is predominantly about faith.<sup>266</sup> The review which attracts attention among other, longer or shorter ones and which covers all important aspects of the novel is that by Irving Fineman, who believes it is a story mostly about the Hasidic movement. According to Fineman, Hasidism came into being as a kind of “tower of Babel,” an attempt to reach out to God; in a sense, at first it had much in common with early Christianity; later it became distorted but in the meantime it helped shape such wonderful individuals as Yekhiel.<sup>267</sup> Another interesting review was written by Louis Kronenberger, who pays attention not only to Yekhiel’s love for God, which is the essence of his life, but first of all for another man. This love is seen as compassion, shown especially to the poorest, simple people. Kronenberger also writes that it is not for the first time that Asch expresses his own beliefs and emotions.<sup>268</sup> A similar message was contained in the review by Ludwig Lewisohn, who, among other things, writes that Asch’s novel is so beautiful because its author belonged to those few who knew how to live in peace and harmony with oneself and with the whole world. That is why according to Lewisohn *Der tilim yid* is a universal work, which, although based on a specific experience and example, carries universal truths and values.<sup>269</sup> In 1939 *Der tilim yid*, in its English version by Maurice Schwartz (1889–1960), was staged in the Yiddish Art Theater in New York. This adaptation also earned positive press reviews.<sup>270</sup>

In 1934 the novel was translated into German. It enjoyed positive reception in German Jewish-language press; for instance, it was reviewed in the bimonthly *Der Morgen*. The anonymous author noticed the strong points of the novel: the wonderful rendition of individual characters and group scenes, the presentation

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264 See Shmuel Niger, *Di kunst fun gloybn. Sholem Ash: Der tilim yid*, op. cit., p. 55.

265 See Shmuel Niger, *Sholem Ash. Zayn lebn un zayne verk*, op. cit., pp. 213–227.

266 See Richard Denis Charques, *Salvation*, in: *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 September 1934, p. 618.

267 See Irving Fineman, *A Tower of Babel in Jewish Poland*, in: *Saturday Review of Literature*, 29 September 1934, p. 142.

268 See Louis Kronenberger, *Profound Compassion*, in: *New York Times Book Review*, 7 October 1934, p. 7.

269 See Ludwig Lewisohn, *Epic Art*, in: *The Nation*, 17 October 1934, pp. 451–452.

270 See W.S., *Yiddish Art Theater Opens*, in: *New York Times*, 29 September 1939, p. 19.

of deep faith and, which was so characteristic of Asch, standing up for simple people.<sup>271</sup>

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Chronologically, the first novel written by Sholem Asch was *Dos shtetl*, published in installments in 1904 and much closer to Asch's own times. This romantic panorama of a Jewish town was a novelty in Yiddish literature and helped the writer gain more fame. Reb Yekheskiel Gombiner, the leading character, may be seen as a literary image of Asch's father, whereas the described town resembles Kazimierz nad Wisłą and the author's home town Kutno,<sup>272</sup> represented in the novel as Kozmer.<sup>273</sup>

*Dos shtetl* is a rich source of information about the Jewish life in an undoubtedly idealized town. The plot shows its Jewish inhabitants living in almost complete isolation, in harmony with the rhythm of Jewish holidays marked in the calendar; however, already in this early novel, Asch introduces their Christian neighbors. In a symbolic scene, the synagogue and the church urge the town dwellers to pray to the same God.<sup>274</sup>

Asch's specific presentation of a Jewish town is seen by many critics as an original achievement, because prior to the publication of his novel inhabitants of a shtetl were usually scorned at in Yiddish literature.<sup>275</sup> Although the protagonist is apparently Reb Yekheskiel Gombiner while other characters just complement the picture, one could venture an opinion that the novel has a collective protagonist, which is the whole town. The novel is deeply rooted in Jewish tradition—the author presents the inhabitants of the shtetl in almost all seasons, but their lives are guided by Jewish holidays.

The form of the novel is equally interesting: its concise successive images are turned into a unity by the character of the wanderer. At the beginning of the novel he comes to the town carrying a bundle on his back, and the reader is

271 See tom I, *Schalom Asch. Der Trost des Volkes*, in: *Der Morgen*, year 10, 6, 1934, pp. 330–331.

272 See Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Kazimierz czy Kutno? Zagadki powieści i przekładu*, op. cit., pp. 224–227.

273 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, in: Sholem Ash, *Geklibene verk band I*, Nyu-York: Ikuf 1947, pp. 7–131, here pp. 28 and 113

שלום אש, דאָס שטעטל, אין: שלום אש, געקליבענע ווערק באַנד I, ניו־יאָרק: איקוף 1947, ז. 7–131, און 113.

The name *Kozmer* is ambiguous. Kazimierz nad Wisłą was known in Yiddish as *Kuzmir* or *Kazm(i)erzh*, see Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Kazimierz czy Kutno? Zagadki powieści i przekładu*, op. cit., p. 225.

274 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., pp. 93–94.

275 See Ben Siegel, *The Controversial Sholem Asch*, op. cit., pp. 23–28.

promised he will learn about everything the wanderer shall see. At the end of the novel the wanderer leaves the shtetl and vanishes into thin air, just as the black river fades away in the surrounding landscape.

In 1911 Asch published the novel *Reb Shloyme Noked*, in which he returns to the idyllic world of a shtetl. By readers and critics alike, the title protagonist is seen again as a literary image of Asch's father; the author confirms that and claims that although he could not follow his father in life, he tries to follow him in his dreams and that is why he dedicates the novel to him. It is also easy to notice that the plot of *Reb Shloyme Noked* takes place in the author's homeland—Asch mentions the towns of Gostynin, Gąbin, Żychlin, and Krośniewice, which are all close to Kutno.

Written in poetic language, the novel opens with a description of Sabbath at the home of the merchant Shloyme Noked and ends with the betrothal of his son to a Tzadik's granddaughter. In the idyllic life every day and every season have their right place; one can see the affinities with *Dos shtetl*: at an inn, during a fair, the Jews and peasants drink vodka together and cry, "There is only one God in the world."<sup>276</sup>

However, there are marked differences between the two novels, which are signaled by different titles. The first title refers to a group of people, whereas the second one to an individual. Shmuel Niger believes that the difference is due to the fact that it is impossible to show the charm of the shtetl twice.<sup>277</sup> Therefore the second novel is devoted first of all to Reb Shloyme Noked. Niger also believes that although it is impossible to praise the artistic aspect of the novel, it is possible to understand its message—it is a book about trust and peace, about a deep faith in God and a readiness to accept His will, no matter what it happens to be, a novel which helps one find hope in tradition and one's roots.<sup>278</sup>

The year 1916 brought the publication of *Motke Ganev*. Motke, born in poverty, at an early age learns how to steal and how to take advantage of all opportunities that cross his path. Asch shows how external circumstances shape the life of the boy, who becomes a thief. For a few years he finds a safe haven with goyim, a group of laborers in a glassworks, but later he joins a circus troupe. Motke and Maria, a tightrope walker who is forced to become a prostitute, escape to Warsaw in the hope of making their lives better. Motke does not have a passport so he kills Maria's other suitor and adopts his identity. In Warsaw he

276 Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noked*, in: Sholem Ash, *Geklibene verk band I*, Nyu-York: Ikuf 1947, pp. 133–218, here pp. 184–185; *Eyn Got iz nor af der velt*.

שלום אש, ר' שלמה נגד, אין: שלום אש, געקליבענע ווערק באַנד I, ניו־יאָרק: איקוף, 1947, ז. 133–218, דאָ 184–185; איןן גאָט איז נאָר אויף דער וועלט.

277 See Shmuel Niger, *Sholem Ash. Zayn lebn un zayne verk*, op. cit., p. 106.

278 See *ibid.*

turns into a prospering pander, whereas Maria becomes his best girl, bringing in much money. The boy falls in love with Khanele, a well-mannered, young Jewish woman and decides to change his life. After the betrothal he no longer wants to live under a false identity so he confesses his crime to Khanele, who lets her parents know about it. He is arrested as a murderer but he cannot understand why his fiancée denounced him in the first place.

Also this novel met with positive reviews and critical articles. Asch was praised for an excellent presentation of Motke's social background and of the Jewish Warsaw underworld. At the same time the author created an interesting and convincing character while forsaking realism, so characteristic of his other novels, and dabbling with naturalism; at the same time he explains Motke's character and behavior referring to behaviorism.<sup>279</sup> In its play version, *Motke Ganev* was staged in the theaters around the world, including the United States, the interwar Poland, and, many years after the author's death, Israel.<sup>280</sup>

In 1913 Asch published the novel *Meri*. Because of its revolutionary contents he was afraid that the novel would not be published in Yiddish, that it would be censored; in one of his letters he writes that the German edition, which he brought out earlier, was confiscated.<sup>281</sup>

The plot of the novel takes place in tsarist Russia at the beginning of the Revolution of 1905 and focuses mostly on an undefined Dnieper town and on Saint Petersburg. Misha, a young Zionist from a rich Jewish family, falls in love with Meri, who, however, does not reciprocate his love because she is looking for something more, living in a dream world. Eventually she gives her heart to Michał Kowalski, a painter, with whom she lives for some time in Saint Petersburg, relishing high society in city salons. Kowalski decides it is his duty to return Meri to her parents so as to save the young Jewish girl from the pernicious influence of bohemian life. At the same time Misha concludes his love for Meri is a mistake and marries the sister of his friend Dovid, who is sentenced to death

279 See Louis Kronenberger, *Sholem Asch's Novel of a Thief's Career*, in: *New York Times Book Review*, 27 October 1935, pp. 8 and 24; Ellen D. Kellman, *The Image of Jewish Warsaw in Sholem Asch's Novel "Motke Ganev,"* in: Eleonora Bergman, Olga Zienkiewicz (eds.), *Żydzi Warszawy. Materiały konferencji w 100. rocznicę urodzin Emanuela Ringelbluma*, Warszawa: ŻIH 2000, pp. 99–110.

280 See unknown author, "Motke Ganev" fun Sholem Ash ufgefürt in yidishn teater in Yisroel, in: *Folks-shtime*, 27, 18 October 1991, p. 3

אויטאָר ניט באַקאַנט, „מאָטקע גנב“ פון שלום אַש אויפגעפירט אין יידישן טעאַטער אין ישראל, אין: פאלקס־שטימע, נר. 27, 18 אָקטאָבער 1991, ז. 3.

281 See Asch's letters to his wife, letter from Vilnius No. 38 written in 1911 and letter No. 50 written in 1912, in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., pp. 41–42 and 52.

for his revolutionary activity. The novel comes to an end when Meri flees her home, believing the life in the small town is too difficult for her.

*Meri* and its sequel *Der veg tsu zikh* (1914) tell the story of the Jews who parted ways with Jewish life and, rootless now, have been trying to find their own place in the world. According to A.H. Bialin, the youth presented in the novels are cosmopolitan, also because they do not feel attached to any country.<sup>282</sup> Meri is a rich, well-educated girl but she is alienated as her family passed on to her neither religion nor tradition. That is why she feels lost and cannot find any objective in her life. However, despite the title, which suggests that the novel focuses on the title character, it is not devoted to Meri or any other figure. Rather, Asch aims at showing the whole group and at presenting Jewish life at the beginning of the 20th century. That is why Shmuel Niger is right when he calls *Meri* a novel about the Diaspora, the constant search and wandering, in a sense about Ahasver.<sup>283</sup>

In *Der veg tsu zikh*, Misha and his young wife Rokhel leave for Israel to follow their youthful ideals there. However, it soon turns out that Misha cannot find his place in Israel, so he decides to leave for the United States, as he believes he should be there where most of the Jews are. It is likely that Misha's decision reflects Asch's search, as at the time of writing *Der veg tsu zikh* he was also trying to find a place in the world for himself and his family. In the novel, while traveling through Germany on the way to the United States, Rokhel takes care of a typhus-stricken Jewish girl, as she has no one else to turn to. Soon Rokhel becomes infected and dies. Misha goes back to his Russian hometown and, following in the footsteps of doctor Leyzerovitsch, Dovid's and Rokhel's father, he settles in a poor town district, where he becomes a teacher of destitute children.

The chapters about Misha and Rokhel are interspersed with the chapters about the fate of Meri. Like all other rich Jews, the whole family moves to Berlin to wait the bad times out. Yet Meri cannot find her own place in Berlin either, so she resolves to go to the town of Zakopane, where she hopes to meet Kowalski. However, once she is in Zakopane, it turns out the painter has already found a different lover, so the girl yields to the persuasion of Jaś, a Polish Jew, and marries him. Jaś goes through a mental breakdown and leaves Meri. The girl, who is pregnant, returns to her hometown, where she begins helping Misha in his school and is happy that after a long search she has finally found her place in the world.

The next novel, set in Asch's contemporary times, is *Farn mabl* (1929–1931). The trilogy presents a broad panorama of Jewish life in Russia before and

282 See A.H. Bialin, *Sholem Ash*, op. cit., p. 50.

283 See Shmuel Niger, *Sholem Ash. Zayn lebn un zayne verk*, op. cit., p. 108.



during the October Revolution. The three volumes bear the names of the three great cities of the Russian Empire: פֿעטערבורג (*Peterburg*, 1929), וואַרשע (*Varshe*, 1930), and מאָסקווע (*Moskve*, 1931). As usual, when writing the novels, Asch took advantage of his experience and knowledge—after all, he got to know Saint Petersburg and the local community inside out while visiting it before World War I to prepare Russian editions of his novels<sup>284</sup> and to help convince rich Jews to finance Kletskin's publishing house.<sup>285</sup> It is very likely that the author included some of his personal experiences in the novel.<sup>286</sup>

The trilogy has several layers of meaning. One of them, well known from Asch's other novels, consists of charming descriptions of landscapes and characters. Asch was not only quite adept at creating illusions and allowing the reader as if "to enter the imagery" but also presented nature with much fondness.

Another layer contains the story of Zakhari Mirkin and other fictitious characters, who, however, are often intricately related to the historical layer of the novel, which brings up facts and events and alludes to real people. *Farn mabl* is both a historical and a developmental novel, an *Entwicklungsroman*; Asch used the pattern to introduce the reader into a complex world of religion and, partly, Jewish philosophy of the times. The reader follows the story of Zakhari Mirkin, his growth, search for the aim of his life, for God, love, the family, the homeland and friends, from his birth to his mature age; simultaneously, the reader learns about the world in which Mirkin lived and about historical events, often shown from the perspective of a participant.

The historical layer, presented through the stories of the characters, explained and commented upon by an omniscient narrator, focuses on the situation of the Jews in the tsarist Empire before the revolution, on their fate during the revolution and on the revolution itself. Although Asch wrote the novel just a few years after the described events, he proved a profound observer of the changes he related. Thus the trilogy *Farn mabl*, which is first of all a work of fiction, may be treated as a powerful testimony to the times. It not only demonstrates how a contemporary Jewish writer saw the Soviet Revolution but also it is an in-

284 See Asch's letters to his wife, letter No. 69 from Saint Petersburg written in 1912, in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., pp. 69–70.

285 See Asch's letters to his wife, letter No. 71 from Saint Petersburg written in 1912, in: *ibid.*, pp. 71–72. באָריס קלעצקיין Boris Kletskin (1875–1937) was a well-known patron of Yiddish literature of the interwar period. In 1910 in Vilnius, he founded one of the most important publishing houses bringing out Yiddish academic works, literature and journals, all meeting European standards, see Joanna Lisek, *Między Warszawą a Wilnem. Kontakty środowisk literackich w okresie międzywojennym*, in: *Studia Judaica*, 9, 1(17), 2006, pp. 69–81, here pp. 76–77.

286 See Mikhail Krutikov, *Russia between Myth and Reality: From "Meri" to "Three Cities"*, in: Nanette Stahl (ed.), *Sholem Asch Reconsidered*, op. cit., pp. 81–105, here p. 83.

teresting contribution to a political, social and literary debate on the revolution which started in Europe and the United States after 1917. Asch describes just a few years of the history of the Jews in the Russian Empire, but the opinions and fates presented in the novel are rooted in the long past of the Jewish people in Russia. Knowing the scope of discrimination and persecutions in the traditionally anti-Semitic Russian Empire, the reader finds it easier to understand why so many Jews took part in the revolution or at least supported it, seeing it as the only hope to become equal to other people living in the land which the Jews had accepted as their own.

Zakhari Mirkin is the only son of Gabriel Khaimovitsh Mirkin, a rich merchant and a Russian king of timber. He grows up in Yekaterinburg in a thoroughly Russianized family. As a child he does not know he is a Jew, he attends a Russian Orthodox church, and observes Christian feasts.

In the trilogy, Asch shows revolutionary efforts and the revolution in the eyes of the Jewish characters. In the first part, the reader meets rich Jews of Saint Petersburg. They are merchants and lawyers whose families are almost entirely assimilated, but they have a deep sense of belonging to the Jewish people, especially in view of the injustices done to the Jews in Russia. Upon completion of his law studies Zakhari starts practicing law in Saint Petersburg with Salomon Osipovitsh Halpern, a well-known counselor, and becomes engaged to Ninotshka, his daughter. However, he prefers passing his time in the company of Olga Mikhailovna, her mother, who has her own circle of admirers, one of whom is the so called "Englishman," who, because of his penchant for antiques, for paintings of famous artists, and for well-tailored clothes resembles Asch himself. Disillusioned with Saint Petersburg, Zakhari sets off for Warsaw, where he hopes to find a new mother personified by Rokhel Leye, a Warsaw Jewish woman he met earlier.

In the house of Hurvits, her husband, a teacher and a maskil, who is a follower of a cultural trend initiated by the Jews under the influence of European Enlightenment at the end of the 18th century, Zakhari meets some representatives of the Warsaw Jews. They are: Kenigshtayn, Hurvits' best friend, who dreams of going to Palestine, the Socialist Zhakhliner, and Zoška and Dovid, Hurvits' children and future revolutionists. Later in his life, Dovid kills a Russian officer during a First of May demonstration and, in punishment, he is executed by shooting. Another interesting guest at Hurvits' house is a young Hasid from the countryside and a self-taught writer, who is being helped in the early stages of his literary career by "a well-known Jewish writer." In this way Asch pays homage to Perets, who helped him when he moved to Warsaw. Seeing the problems of the poor, Zakhari finally recognizes his calling, which is to help the Jewish masses.

Soon World War I breaks out. Mirkin organizes assistance for Jewish refugees, he tirelessly crisscrosses the whole country, sometimes putting his life at jeopardy. Thanks to Hurvits' daughter Zoška he establishes contact with the Bolsheviks and suddenly finds himself overwhelmed by the October Revolution in Moscow. He believes that the revolution involves all people, including the rich ones, and that it will enable everyone to live and work in peace. The counselor Halpern is sent abroad along with his son. However, they fall into the hands of the Cossacks who kill the counselor but spare Misha because he is a Russian officer and does not look like a Jew. The story of Halpern and his son is just a reminder of real historical events, in which almost a hundred thousand Jews were murdered in the pogroms started by the leaders of the counterrevolution, who accused them of pro-revolutionary sympathies. Halpern's wife and daughter, just like many real emigrants, run from a holiday spa in the Caucasus to Paris. On the other hand, the old Mirkin does not want to leave his homeland because he still believes in it. However, as his company is not efficient enough, the secret police accuse him of sabotage and sentence him to death without considering his explanations. Zakhari fails to save his father, which at long last makes him lose his faith in the revolution. That is why he decides to escape to Poland. The trilogy ends with his arrival in Warsaw.

In *Farn mabl*, Asch chooses an interesting way to present his religion to a non-Jewish reader. Although formally Zakhari is a Jew, the author lets him accept his religion, language and tradition as if he were an outsider. Though brought up by his father as a young Russian, Zakhari Mirkin discovers the soul of his people and his own heart. Sometimes he asks seemingly naïve questions, for instance why the Jews are so different when they pray. Yet because of such questions the reader may better understand the significance of Jewish religion and tradition and the Jews' admirable attachment to faith, irrespective of external events.

*Farn mabl* is one of those novels by Asch which clearly discuss Russia and describe Jewish life in that country. Besides, in the trilogy one can see the author's tendency to impose a symbolic meaning on reality and to fit the narrated events into a broader mythological context of history.<sup>287</sup> At the same time—as Harry Slochower believes—it is a literary masterpiece, rightly regarded as a Jewish equivalent of *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910, a Russian writer), written in 1865–1869.<sup>288</sup>

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287 See Mikhail Krutikov, *Russia between Myth and Reality: From "Meri" to "Three Cities,"* op. cit., p. 82.

288 See Harry Slochower, *Franz Werfel and Sholem Asch: The Yearning for Status*, in: *Accent*, 5, August 1945, pp. 73–82, here p. 79.

*Farn mabl*, the Yiddish title of the novel, means “before the deluge.” Here one can see a possible reference to *The Deluge*, a novel by Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1916, a Polish writer) or to the novel *דער עבול* (*Der mabl*, 1907) by Sholem Aleykhem, already mentioned above, based on the events related to the Kiev pogrom of 1905, but most of all to God’s biblical decision to bring deluge to the world (Gen 6,11–13), which in a way forces the reader to morally judge the world before the revolution and the revolution itself. Did Asch compare the world of the Russian Jews before World War I and before the revolution to the biblical world before the deluge? If so, did he suggest that the two catastrophes were sent by God to purify the sinful world? We can only speculate about Asch’s real intentions as they are not made explicit in the novel. The sinful world is inhabited by the rich city dwellers of Saint Petersburg, who do not know what to spend their excessive amounts of money on and pass their time in cabarets, drinking champagne and nibbling on sweet cherries ordered from abroad in the middle of a cold Russian winter. The deluge should not spare the Russian ruling class either, because it oppresses its own citizens just like it does the subjugated peoples. The next sin appears in the second volume—it is the sin of putting the whole nation in a desperate situation, as well as the sin committed by the rich Jews of Warsaw who do not help the starving ones during a severe winter, and the sin of the factory owners in Łódź, who do not employ Jewish workers. Furthermore, the third part of the trilogy opens with a presentation of Vasil Andriyevitsh, a Russian landowner, who prefers his animals to “his” peasants. Definitely both the Jewish and the Christian worlds shown by Asch deserve a deluge.

Zakhari resembles Noah, the one rescued from the disaster. The question remains what it was that let him survive. Most likely it was his deep faith in humanity which he expressed while talking about war with the teacher Hurvits and the comrade Zhakhliner. It seems that Asch tries to impart the same truth to the reader: one should believe in people, in every single human being, poor or rich, no matter what his or her nationality or religion may be.

*Bam opgrunt*, published in 1936, is Asch’s last novel set in Europe. It may be seen as a continuation of *Farn mabl*, but this time the characters are German Jews, rather than Russian or Polish ones. The author’s analysis of the situation in Germany after World War I is quite penetrating—it shows the tragedy of the Jewish, but also of the German people, who do not see any way out of the hopeless circumstances. Just like in *Farn mabl*, also here Asch tries to fit the represented events into a larger context, showing their roots in World War I and analyzing the impact of the crisis and hyperinflation on the subsequent development of Nazi ideology in Germany. Similarly to *Farn mabl* again, *Bam opgrunt* is a combination of a social novel and a novel of manners thanks to a broad perspec-

tive on the Jewish society in Germany.<sup>289</sup> In his review of *Bam opgrunt*, Louis Kronenberger pays attention to its important aspect, also seen in other novels by Asch: he is not a propagandist but a moralist—he does not seem to prefer one political system to another and he puts his faith in a human being and his ability to draw a line between the good and evil.<sup>290</sup>

The leading characters of the novel are the Bodenheimers, a family of Jewish bankers. There are three sons: Max continues the family banking tradition, Adolf is an art connoisseur, and Heinrich is a scientist. Max marries a Christian woman who, out of respect for Max's father, converts to Judaism, but their son Hans is baptized soon after his grandfather's death. Then the tragedy sets in: Max commits suicide because of bankruptcy due to inflation. Also Robert von Sticker, the father of Hans' friend Lotte, chooses death the moment he realizes that all his savings will suffice to cover the cost of a "second-class" burial only. Lotte is murdered by her brother, who is Hitler's follower. Wolfgang von Sticker cannot accept the fact that his sister enters into a relationship with a Jew and becomes pregnant.

At the same time the novel, which counts almost 800 pages, presents the fate of Arn Yudkevitch, an East European Jew. A minor profiteer, he leaves Russia after the revolution and, via Gdańsk, goes to Berlin. Showing business acumen, he earns more and more money in the times of crisis and finally takes over the respectful Bodenheimer family business. Ultimately he loses everything and moves to Paris, following in the footsteps of Adolf Bodenheimer, who could not stand the oppressive atmosphere in the country.

Not all reviews were positive. For instance, Helene Woodward believes that, apart from some episodes, the novel is boring and that Asch did not know too well the German Jews; whatever he knew, he had borrowed from other authors.<sup>291</sup> However, this claim is not well founded. In the period he describes in the novel he would often travel to Germany and even stay briefly in Berlin. Other critics do not share Woodward's views. They are of the opinion that the novel's plot is rich and that the author makes a profound and accurate analysis of the presented characters, which in many cases is definitely based on his own observations.<sup>292</sup>

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289 See Louis Kronenberger, *Sholem Asch Dramatizes Germany's Years of Inflation*, in: *New York Times Book Review*, 15 November 1936, p. 4.

290 See *ibid.*

291 See Helene Woodward, *Battle in a Mist*, in: *The New Republic*, 9 December 1936, pp. 184–185, here p. 185.

292 See Richard Denis Charques, *Germany in 1923*, in: *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 October 1936, p. 831; Fanny Butcher, *The War Goes On*, in: *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 31 October 1936, p. 14.

In Yiddish literature, the times of inflation in Germany and the degradation of the German society are presented by, among other writers, Moyshe Kulbak, already mentioned before, in his poetic work *דיסנער טשיילד האַרעלד* (*Disner Tshayld Harold*, 1933), telling the story of a young Jew's journey from a Belarusian town to Berlin and of Berlin's surrender to violence and fascism.

The novel *Dos gezang fun tol*, a poetic image of the lives of settlers in Palestine, was published in 1938. The settlers are inexperienced but eager to build a settlement and to obtain land for cultivation. Despite initial setbacks they manage to complete the task. The difficulties they encounter are related, on the one hand, to their fear of the Arabs living above the settlement valley and on the other hand, to their constant struggle with insects, malaria and rains flooding the valley. This, however, does not deprive them of their joy of having their own home and their own land.

Asch presents the difficult life of the first Jewish settlers in Palestine and also introduces individual characters: the idealist Khaimovitsh, his wife Sore, who is seen as a symbol of the Israeli mother,<sup>293</sup> the young women Khane and Leye and also Mahatma,<sup>294</sup> the Arab woman, who helps the settlers. What is striking is a discord between an idyllic, sentimental atmosphere of the novel and the hard life of the settlers; the reader has an impression that all adversities are suffered as a kind of "holy joy."<sup>295</sup> Apparently the author was so much fascinated by the fact that the Jews could return to the Land of Israel that all other problems lost their immediate relevance and the novel acquired a generally optimistic tone.

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In 1911 Asch published *Amerika*, a novel about the fate of a Jewish boy who along with his family emigrates to the United States. His father Meyer leaves first and as he cannot bear being away from his wife and children, whom he left behind in the shtetl, he buys tickets on credit so that the family could join him after a year of separation. However, his youngest, beloved son Yosele is sent back to Russia because of the rash he developed when he had typhus. A few years later he crosses the Atlantic again only to learn how much his family have changed in the meantime. Despite the fact that his mother, older brothers, and the teacher from the American school are trying to help him, he misses the shtetl, the study of the Talmud and the Jewish way of life. He sinks into himself,

293 See Eda Lou Walton, *Song of the Valley*, in: *New York Herald Tribune Books*, 26 March 1938, p. 10.

294 Mahatma is not an Arab name; most likely, Asch borrowed the nickname from Gandhi (1869–1948), fascinated by the latter's pacifism and efforts to win national independence; in the novel's translations the same Arab woman was usually called Fatima.

295 See Eda Lou Walton, *Song of the Valley*, op. cit.

stops eating and becomes indifferent to the world. Finally he dies when the heat wave engulfs New York. The pain suffered by new immigrants is well seen in the last scene of the novel, in which Yosele's mother comes back from her son's burial and feels it is her son's tomb that finally is a lasting link with her new homeland.

In the story of Yosele, Asch shows the tragic fate of many Jews who remained homeless forever. The theme recurs in Asch's later, American novels, in which he also shows the immigrants' longing for their homeland and their difficulties with getting adjusted to the new life.<sup>296</sup>

Upon the publication of a German translation of *Amerika*, Arthur Silbergleit published a review in *Ost und West*. On the one hand he finds defects in Asch's literary skill, especially in his ability to create the novel's structure, which he believes is just a collection of separate novellas, but on the other hand he credits the author with an ability to render Jewish life and characters as well as the atmosphere.<sup>297</sup>

Many years later, in 1931, Asch gave an interview about his experiences related to his visits in the United States. In the interview he recalls that on the first occasion the visit left him cold so he decided to go back to Europe after a few months. It was only in 1914 when he visited the US again and when he realized the tragedy of spiritual dilemmas of Jewish immigrants. He spent there five years and everywhere he would meet fathers almost organically attached to the Old Testament and their children, who adopted the comforts of modern life. Asch believes that the deepest tragedy of the Jews has always been and will always remain a discord between their attachment to tradition and their efforts to gain a better financial standing.<sup>298</sup>

Asch's next novel about Jewish life in the United States is *Onkel Mozes* (1918). Uncle Mozes is a rich manufacturer who takes care of new immigrants coming from his native town by providing them with jobs, helping them, and organizing their lives. He is so much absorbed in his work and the pursuit of money that he neglects his wife, who soon dies and leaves him childless. After many years of living alone, Uncle Mozes falls in love with Masha, a beautiful daughter of one of his workers. He pays to raise the standard of living of her whole family, takes care of her, brings her presents, offers her father higher wages and thus forces Masha to marry him. Initially he is happy—he has the family he has always dreamed about as Masha gives birth to his son. However,

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296 See Ben Siegel, *The Controversial Sholem Asch. An Introduction to His Fiction*, op. cit., p. 47.

297 See Arthur Silbergleit, *Amerika*, in: *Ost und West*, year 11, 11, 1911, p. 1000.

298 See unknown author, *Szalom Asz i Ameryka*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 243, 9 September 1931, p. 11.

after some time she leaves him and again he is alone. He concludes that he will never be happy and that it is his own fault as he neglected his first wife, who loved him all her life despite his indifference. He feels that he tried to build his subsequent life on the tomb of his wife.

Harry Sylvester believes that in the novel the author reveals the depths of his understanding of the Jewish soul.<sup>299</sup> According to some other American critics, the novel vibrates with the Jewish life of New York and its translations enable non-Jewish readers to get acquainted with the life of Jewish immigrants in the best possible way.<sup>300</sup>

A year later Asch published *Khaim Lederers tsurikkumen* (1919), another American novel. In the book, Khaim Lederer, an old owner of a shirt-producing company, decides to retire and leave the firm to his oldest son. Suddenly it turns out he does not know what to do with his free time—he tries to read but the books do not provide him with the answer about the sense of life. The family urge him to set off on a journey but he believes the journey will not help him to find his soul.

Khaim Lederer finds inner peace only when he resolves to go back to work as a simple tailor. He felt happiest at the beginning of his career, when he was just a laborer. His dear ones cannot understand his decision and think that such a behavior of the head of the family will ruin their social status. One day the father disappears, taking with him just small change. Rumor has it that Khaim Lederer has been seen working in a company in a different town, but his family cannot find him. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that while the protagonist searches for the meaning of his life, everyone around him supposes he has lost his mind.

Critics compare the novel to Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, a novella written in 1886, emphasizing that being less didactic, Asch's novel is much better.<sup>301</sup> Shmuel Niger claims that Khaim's disillusionment with his life achievements and his search for the sense of life may be also understood on the autobiographical level as Asch himself was not satisfied with what he had gained and was exploring other venues.<sup>302</sup> To some extent, similar themes can be

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299 See Harry Sylvester, *Three Novels*, in: *Commonweal*, 11 November 1938, p. 78.

300 See Irving Howe, *Immigration Problems in Recent Fiction*, in: *New York Times Book Review*, 16 January 1921, p. 10; C. Edward Morris, *Uncle Moses*, in: *The New York Times Book Review and Magazine*, 20 February 1921, p. 24; Cheryl Amy Alexander, *Major Themes in Selected American Novels by Sholem Asch*, op. cit., pp. 29 and 54.

301 See John Courmos, *From the Yiddish*, in: *New York Times Book Review*, 2 October 1938, p. 21.

302 See Shmuel Niger, *Khaim Lederers tsurikkumen*, in: *Bikher-velt*, 4 July 1928, pp. 46–51, here p. 51



found in *דער בעל-תשובה* (*Der bal-tshuve*, 1974), a novel by Isaac Bashevis Singer, in which the protagonist flees from materialism and the violence of modern life, trying to find an answer to the question about the aim and sense of life in religion.

Asch's fourth novel devoted to the United States is *Di muter* (1924). The author mentions the work in a letter he wrote many years later to his wife, describing it as likeable, sentimental and close to simple people. He is happy with the old German edition and plans to bring out the book in English in Great Britain.<sup>303</sup> In the United States, the reviewers' opinions were divided: some praised the novel and some criticized it for its lack of a wider perspective, sentimentality, a touch of parochialism and cliché characters, although all admitted that the author skillfully described everyday Jewish life.<sup>304</sup>

Sore-Rivke and Anshel have little money, the mother miraculously conjures up food for family dinners and once a year she somehow manages to provide clean, though second-hand and stitched up clothes for all members of the family. Anshel, a respected bal-koyre reading the Torah in the synagogue, can hardly earn any money, so early on the oldest children are forced to help their mother. Shloyme, a cobbler, saves money to go to the United States, Dvoyre earns her living as a seamstress and Moyshe buys and sells. Shloyme manages to leave for the States and after some time sends tickets for the whole family. In the United States they all go through ups and downs—finally the father starts working and brings money home, whereas Shloyme and Dvoyre move out and set up their own families. Dvoyre, deeply in love with the sculptor Bukhholts, feels she should be more of a mother to him than a wife and that is why she decides to have an abortion. Finally she moves back to her family home and takes care of her younger siblings after their mother's death. In this way Dvoyre assumes the role of a Jewish mother who dedicates her life to her family.

The novel is definitely interesting—at times it keeps the reader in suspense and it details the Jewish life first in the shtetl and then in the United States. However, the author is not entirely consistent, as he often puts Sore-Rivke, the true Jewish mother, in the shade and at some point lets her die. At the same time

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שמואל בניגער, חיים לעדערערס צוריקקומען, אין: ביכער-וועלט, נר. 4, יולי 1928, ז. 46–51, דף ז. 51.

303 See Asch's letters to his wife, letter No. 146 written in 1951 from Nice, in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., pp. 156–158, here p. 157.

304 See Leonard Ehrlich, *Jewish Life*, in: *Saturday Review of Literature*, 8 November 1930, p. 307; Horace Gregory, *The Frontier on Avenue A*, in: *New York Herald Tribune Books*, 26 October 1930, p. 21; Frances Lamont Robbins, *Six Novels*, in: *Outlook and Independent*, Vol. 156 (3 September–31 December 1930), 1 October 1930, pp. 187–188; Harold Strauss, *An Early Indiscretion*, in: *The Nation*, 25 December 1937, p. 724; Louis Untermeyer, *An Intimate Saga*, in: *Saturday Review of Literature*, 30 October 1937, p. 15.

the sections about the mother are interspersed with other themes. Dvoyre's assumption of the role of the mother is not convincing either, and her traumatic experience related to abortion is presented as nothing unusual.

The plot of *Toyt urteyl*, the novel published in 1926, also takes place in the United States. Stone, the Jewish protagonist and a banker, knows that his wife is not faithful to him and that is why he procrastinates, perhaps subconsciously, leaving New York to celebrate the birthday of his daughter, who spends summer with her mother in Connecticut. Finally, the last train departs. Stone does not want to go back home, he stays in a hotel. There he meets a strange couple: an elderly man and a girl named Leonora.<sup>305</sup> When they talk, the girl calls the old man her daddy. It turns out, however, she is not his daughter but his mistress. Leonora seduces the banker and visits his room at night. They are surprised by her guardian, who is accidentally strangled by Stone during the tussle. The banker trusts that his trial will be just and when he is sentenced to death, he accepts the ruling calmly. The prosecution bases its argumentation on the fact that, among other things, Stone does not want to explain his reluctance to visit his wife and daughter. His lawyers want to appeal, but the man refuses, believing that he is guilty not only of killing the old man, but also of having lived his life as it was. At the same time he trusts that his wife will appeal, but she does not. He does not receive pardon and is electrocuted.

In its English translation, the novel was published in the United States along with *Onkel Mozes* and *Khaim Lederers tsurikkumen*, which in a sense suggests their common focus: they all present the figure of a Jew who makes it in the United States and provides for his family, but ultimately notices that he lacks something in life. Stone is younger than the other protagonists but just like them he arrives at the sad conclusion about his life shortly before his death, when he awaits his execution in prison.

According to Shmuel Niger, *Toyt urteyl* belongs to Asch's most interesting works, because it is very well planned, self-contained, and, in a sense, dry and down-to-earth, which is not typical of the author. Niger sees this as another step in Asch's literary development, as a search for new means of expression.<sup>306</sup>

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305 It is possible Asch borrowed the name from Giuseppe Verdi's opera, *The Force of Destiny* (1862). Don Alvaro, in love with Leonora, visits her at night as they plan to elope in view of her family's opposition to their marriage. The girl's father suddenly enters the room and Don Alvaro, who wants to show his good will, throws the gun on the floor, which accidentally fires and kills her father. Asch's novel bears resemblance to Verdi's work not only because of the name of the girl, but also because Vintseler claims he is her father and is killed inadvertently.

306 See Shmuel Niger, *Toyt urteyl*, in: *Bikher-velt*, April 1928, pp. 47–52, here p. 48

שמואל ניגער, טױש־אורטייל, אײן: ביכער־וועלט, אפריל 1928, ז. 47–52, דאָ ז. 48.

Along with a new style, Asch introduces a new protagonist, who comes from a different social class, the American Jewish bourgeoisie, so far absent from his novels.

This class is also shown in *Gots gefangene* (1933), another novel by Asch. Having written the comprehensive and multi-plot trilogy *Farn mabl*, which narrates the landmark events in the life of European Jewry: revolution, industrialization and Poland gaining independence, Asch chooses an individual, subdued and timeless theme, that is the sad fate and love of a woman. In this novel too Shmuel Niger finds analogies with the author's life, who also seemed to need rest and quiet.<sup>307</sup> Emilye is an American Jewess who goes to Europe, to the French Riviera. This shows again that Asch liked to set the plots of his novels in the geographical surroundings he knew well.

The novel opens with Emilye's coming to the Côte d'Azur. For the first time in her life she feels free and recalls the life which she has lived so far and which she wants to escape. She comes from a rich American Jewish family of German origin. She marries early in her life under the pressure of her family but it turns out that her husband does not love her, treats her as a step in his career and at night he is brutal. Emilye's parents believe that it is her fault and that she should know how to check her husband; they are also afraid of a scandal in case of a divorce. Emilye resigns herself to her fate when she becomes pregnant. When her daughter marries, she feels there is nothing to keep her home and decides to leave for Europe for some time. In the Riviera she meets Frank, an American, and they fall in love with each other. The novel's plot is mostly one-dimensional, it concentrates on Emilye and Frank's thoughts and exchanges about their former lives, their love and their future. They explore the Côte d'Azur together and are happy in each other's company, but Emilye is not ready to spend the night with Frank. He understands that she will never be able to sever her links with the family once and for all. Anyway, they go to Paris together, where Emilye wants to start divorce proceedings. Days go by without any decision and finally Emilye furtively leaves Paris and embarks a ship to the United States.

The novel shows to what extent women of the past were mentally enslaved by tradition, upbringing and the community they lived in. Emilye tries to free herself but she is not strong enough. Asch succeeded in presenting Emilye's problems with herself and the outside world, her fears, dreams and desires. The title reflects the contents accurately: throughout her life the woman is enslaved

307 See Shmuel Niger, *Sholem Ash's nayer roman "Gots gefangene,"* in: *Tsukunft*, July 1933, pp. 420–424, here p. 420

שמואל ניגער, שלום אש'ס נייער ראָמאַן, „גאָטס געפֿאַנגענע“, אָיך: צוקונפֿט, יולי 1933, ז. 420–424, ד. 420.

mostly by what is inside her, in her soul, and the phrase *Gots gefangene* may be understood only if we acknowledge that the enslavement is God's work. The novel was translated into just a few languages and its publication did not meet with much response in the press, probably because it did not appeal to most of traditional readers.

In the novel *Ist river* (1946), published after World War II, Asch comes back to the world of poor immigrants. As *Onkel Mozes*, the novel presents Jewish life in the United States, but in this case along with the Jews we meet the Irish, the Poles and the Italians, which enables the author to carry on the Jewish-Christian theme, especially in reference to the mixed marriage of Irving Davidovski and Mary McCarthy. According to Robert van Gelder, Asch pays attention to an interesting aspect of the theme, which is the fact that in Europe closer contacts between the Jews and the Christians are maintained mostly by representatives of rich social classes while the masses lead separate lives, whereas in the United States the coexistence concerns all social classes, including the poorest ones.<sup>308</sup>

Predominantly, the novel focuses on the fate of two Jewish families, that of Moyshe Davidovski and that of Harry Grinshtok. It is Moyshe and his disabled son Nosn who express the Jewish views on God and man, seen by the critics as the views of Asch himself.<sup>309</sup> *Ist river* is not only a story of individual immigrant families but also a contribution to the discussion about the process of assimilation and acculturation of Jewish and non-Jewish immigrants from Europe, coming *en masse* to the United States. Besides, the novel abounds in historical references, e.g. to Tammany Hall<sup>310</sup> or to the fire in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory.<sup>311</sup> Asch proved a keen and insightful observer of economic and social forces shaping New York at the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>312</sup>

Unlike in some other novels by Asch, the plot in *Ist river* is fast and keeps the readers in suspense. Mary McCarthy finds a job in a factory, where she al-

308 See Robert Van Gelder, *Asch Returns from the Past*, in: *New York Times Book Review*, 28 April 1940, p. 16.

309 See Cheryl Amy Alexander, *Major Themes in Selected American Novels by Sholem Asch*, op. cit., p. 58.

310 Tammany Hall was a political organization set up in 1789 to support the Democratic Party. It intermittently controlled most of the elections in New York until the 1960s, and helped many immigrants, especially those from Ireland, to make a political career.

311 The fire in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York broke out on 25 March 1911. It was the greatest disaster in the history of the city until 11 September 2001. 148 workers died in the fire; most of them were women who either burnt alive or died while jumping through the windows on the ninth floor, see <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/> (1 February 2012).

312 See Henry Feldschuh, *East River*, in: *New York History*, 28:3, July 1947, p. 361.

most dies in the fire. The experience fundamentally changes her life and she wants to escape the poverty which surrounds her. In this she resembles Nosn's younger brother Irving. They fall in love with each other and Mary becomes pregnant. In the meantime Harry, who is the father of Rokhel, Mary's school friend and Irving's fiancée of many years, has an accident. Before his death he would like to see his daughter's wedding. His family summons a rabbi and they gather at Harry's bedside, with the exception of the bridegroom, who does not come because he decides to be with Mary. They are both rejected by their fathers and live without families and friends, getting all their joy from Nat, their boy. They plan their son will decide about his religious affiliation when he is grown-up. That is why Nat is neither circumcised nor baptized. Mary goes to confession and the young priest persuades her to baptize the child without the father's consent. The girl does not regret the decision even when Irving leaves her because of it. She becomes filled with remorse and regret about her hitherto life, which was mostly driven by money without consideration for other people. As a result, she resolves to take her child and go back to the poor district, where she stays at the house of her Jewish father-in-law, Moyshe Volf. This makes Shmulevitsh the zealot expel him from the synagogue as he accuses Moyshe Volf of sheltering his Christian daughter-in-law and her child in his house. Moyshe Volf is so concerned about the accusation that he has a heart attack and his sickness gathers all members of the family in his house. Moyshe Volf along with his wife and Nosn are to move to a new apartment close to his rich son. Before the move, Moyshe Volf wants to visit the local Hasidic synagogue and to see his friends for the last time. At night he dies, full of joyful memories of the Sabbath.

Asch's last novel which is set in the United States is *Grosman un zun* (1954). It tells the story of Ayzik Grosman, an old Jew, who in 1904 stole twenty-seven and a half dollars from Jan Mateusz Kowalski, a Pole, which helped him find a better job and consequently become wealthy. Now he tries to find the Polish man and to make up for the wrongdoing. Also in this novel Asch presents three generations of a Jewish family. At the same time, independently of the main plot of the novel, the author expresses a negative opinion on contemporary psychiatrists, who in the novel declare Grosman insane because of his obsessive search for Kowalski. It is evident that Asch was well acquainted with Polish realities and stereotypes, as the man who is so difficult to find is called Jan Kowalski. His name symbolizes a typical Pole and, because of its popularity, it makes Grosman's search even more difficult.

In a sense, Ayzik Grosman resembles Uncle Mozes, Khaim Lederer or the banker Stone from Asch's earlier novels. Also in *Grosman un zun* we meet a wealthy Jew who in financial terms has achieved almost everything, but realizes

that because of his prosperity he lost even more. Likewise, his search for the sense of life meets with the lack of understanding in the community he lives in. Although the critics notice some flaws in the plot and stylistics, they appreciate the novel as a message of the seventy-five-year-old author, who believed that in the times of all-encompassing materialism, all theological disputes pale when confronted with the need for faith, any faith, as long as it is honest.<sup>313</sup>

Ayzik Grosman works at a second-hand clothes store. This is where one day he meets Jan Kowalski, who wants to buy a suit for his daughter's wedding. In the fitting room he loses his wallet. In his old age Ayzik Grosman feels pangs of conscience and he tries to return the stolen money. Grosman's son is terrified by the situation, as he is afraid the family may lose its reputation, especially in view of the fact that his father goes to Kowalski's home town where he spends money on various charitable causes. He even wants to build social housing in one of the districts and to call it Kowalski Village. As a consequence his son asks the court to incapacitate his father and send him away to a psychiatric clinic for observation. Neither he nor the doctors ask the question about the motivation behind Ayzik's obsessive search: they all treat it as an illness and are sure Kowalski never existed. It is only Grosman's grandson Robert who believes his grandfather and asks a rabbi he knows for help. As a result, they find Kowalski's tomb and his confessor, who assures them that the Pole forgave Grosman many years before.

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The novels of Sholem Asch describe the world seen through the author's eyes, from the biblical times to his contemporary times. A variety and abundance of themes and stories and the vividness of description testify to the author's literary talent and creative imagination. When reviewing the list of his works, it is worth paying attention to how the author interweaves novels set in his contemporary times with those describing the past, including the biblical past. It is clear that in his difficult moments, related either to his private life or to the tragedies that befell the Jews, he would escape into the past, either that of East European shtetls or, more often, that of the biblical times, to find the strength and means to overcome contemporary problems. This is confirmed by the important role he assigned to history, including the biblical history, and to the memory of it.

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313 See Norman Podhoretz, *The Interfaith Temperament*, in: *Commentary*, 16, 1953, pp. 492-494, here pp. 493-494.

## 4.2 Asch's novels and the problems of the form

What is often discussed in reviews and articles is the language of Asch's works. We should remember that modern Yiddish literature gained momentum as late as the turn of the 20th century and in comparison with other European languages and literatures Yiddish culture was in a difficult situation because there was no country that would take care of standardizing and advancing the Yiddish language and literature. The turning point was the above mentioned conference in Czernowitz in 1908, at which Yiddish was proclaimed the Jewish national language and then, in 1925, the establishment of YIVO,<sup>314</sup> a research institution concerned with the Yiddish language and literature. Because of that the authors writing in the first half of the 20th century did not have too many literary models, they did not learn Yiddish systematically at schools and could not study it at universities. That is why they faced a difficult task: on the one hand they wrote literary works just like other authors writing in different languages, but on the other hand they had to struggle to improve the language which they used when writing.<sup>315</sup>

The language used by Asch in his novels is rich, but also simple and clear—it is well suited to render romantic passions and realistic descriptions of places and people. Although in the majority of his novels the author does not attempt to experiment with style, in a sense he could be called a master of literary expression, which is confirmed by, among other critics, Shmuel Niger.<sup>316</sup> Shloyme Bikl also praises Asch's narrative skill and although he mentions a few minor vocab-

314 ייווא אינסטיטוט: וויסנשאַפֿטלעכער ייִדישער ידisher visnshaftlekher institut: yivo, see <http://www.yivoinstitute.org/index.php> (1 February 2012).

315 The problems with the language as such can be seen in the original quotations from Asch's novels, in which he does not use uniform spelling and, especially in his early novels, tries to make Yiddish spelling resemble German spelling and overuses the so-called *nekudes*, that is additional vowel signs used in Hebrew. Various spelling forms depended to some extent on the author's manuscript but also on the editor and on fluctuating publishing standards. Sometimes in the original Yiddish text one can find editing or typesetting mistakes, for instance different forms of spelling the same word on the same page, repetitions and occasional use of upturned typeface. We should emphasize that until this day the Yiddish language has been neither codified in a comprehensive dictionary nor has its grammar been scholarly compiled in its entirety. The transcription used in the book does not include spelling alternations of the source texts, as it uniformly uses standard pronunciation and spelling, see Dovid Katz, *Grammar of the Yiddish Language*, London: Duckworth 1987; Uriel Weinreich, *Modern English–Yiddish Yiddish–English Dictionary*, op. cit. On teaching Yiddish at schools and on standardizing Yiddish spelling and grammar see Marion Aptroot, Roland Gruschka, *Jiddisch. Geschichte und Kultur einer Weltsprache*, Beck: München 2010, pp. 138–144.

316 See Shmuel Niger, *Sholem Ash. Zayn lebn un zayne verk*, op. cit., pp. 378–380.

ulary lapses, at the same time he emphasizes the essence of his style, dynamic and variegated, which possesses “animated tone, [...] twinkle in the eye, [...] pathos of sound and imagery,”<sup>317</sup> which are more convincing than words and which, according to Bikl, are more important than vocabulary choices. On the other hand Asch’s language has been criticized too. For instance, in his otherwise positive article, Mojżesz Kanfer writes:

It is unlikely Asch has ever woken up in the middle of the night, having been tormented by the thought that he misused a word or let something out which could not be expressed in language. He writes effortlessly and does not work incessantly on improving his vocabulary choices—that is why his style is uneven and slovenly at times. Often he is tempted by rich and vivid words and he does not know that words can betray.<sup>318</sup>

However, the already mentioned Yiddish writer Melekh Ravitsh admires Asch’s literary artistry. He believes that a grammatical lapse can always be corrected, whereas Asch’s style, romantic and poetic at the same time and so characteristic of his novels, is unique and is a product of a true artist, something inimitable.<sup>319</sup>

Ravitsh also notices another characteristic feature of Asch’s writings, that is lack of humor. He believes that the novels which are completely void of humor will not survive. He adds, however, that the Bible also lacks in humor and it has stood against time.<sup>320</sup> A similar objection is raised in other reviews. Although Asch’s novels do not include comic scenes, the critics are not entirely right. Asch deals with serious matters and his protagonists do not have too many reasons for merriment or laughter, but from time to time he introduces small, well-crafted episodes which contain light, intelligent humor which may be rightly called typically Jewish. The episodes easily sink into memory and appeal to the reader, the more so as they contrast with the rest of the text.

Asch’s literary artistry can be seen in his description of a crowd, beginning with events otherwise insignificant for the novel’s plot, such as people bathing

317 Shloyme Bikl, *Shrayber fun mayn dor*, Nyu York: Matones 1958, pp. 377–378; *balebter ton [...] flaker fun di oygn [...] patos fun bild un klang*.

שלמה ביקל, *שרייבער פון מיין דור*, ניו יארק: מתנות 1958, ז. 377–378; באַלעבטער טאָן [...] פּלאַקער פון די אויגן [...] פאַטאָס פון בילד און קלאַנג.

318 M[ożesz] Kanfer, *Szalom Asz (Z okazji 50-lecia urodzin poety)*, op. cit., p. 50.

319 See Melekh Ravitsh, *Literarische eybikhey un Sholem Ash*, in: Dovid Shtokfish (ed.), *Sefer Kutne vehasvive*, op. cit., pp. 252–253, here p. 253

מלך ראָוויטש, *ליטעראַרישע אייביקייט און שלום אַש*, אין: דוד שטאָקפּיש (רעד.), *ספר קוטנה והסביבה*, שוין ציטירט, ז. 252–253, דאָ ז. 253.

320 See Melekh Ravitsh, *Mayn leksikon 1*, op. cit., p. 28.



in the sea<sup>321</sup> or a beach in the town of Sopot,<sup>322</sup> to significant ones, like the First of May<sup>323</sup> demonstration or the marching army during World War I.<sup>324</sup> The art of realistic illusion the author learned from 19th-century literary models creates grand-scale images that the reader may identify with. The description of historical events and the evaluation of their meaning is carried out in two ways: first, the author introduces an omniscient narrator, a standard strategy in historiography, and second, he develops individual threads, introduces dialogues and halts the action, all typical devices used in literary fiction.

While examining descriptions of historical events in Asch's novels, one should pay attention to a few characteristic elements of his narration. The first one, common to other novels of the kind, is the author's interweaving non-literary reality and literary fiction, which was already mentioned above. The second significant feature of Asch's writing is his alternating the presentation of events and landscapes, an innovative strategy in Yiddish literature. We should bear in mind that Asch knew and read world literature so he had models to follow. What is interesting, not all great writers appealed to him; in one of the letters to his wife he writes that Fyodor Dostoyevsky is "terrible."<sup>325</sup>

What is striking in the majority of his works—with the exception of e.g. *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen*, where the Inquisition torture chambers are described in detail, or *The Apostle*, where first Christians are torn to death on the Roman arena—is almost complete absence of violent or cruel scenes. The author does not bend historical facts: for instance, in *Farn mabl* the reader learns about the methods uses by the tzarist police, the fate of Jews drafted into the Russian army, persecutions and pogroms during the civil war as well as injustice and cruelty accompanying the revolution, visible in the fate of the characters and retold by the author in his summaries. On the whole, however, Asch avoids brutal scenes, but sometimes certain carefully selected facts are more telling and memorable than drastic descriptions used by other writers.

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321 See Sholem Ash, *Onkel Mozes*, Nyu-York: Sholem Ash Komite 1923, p. 129

שלום אש, *אנקעל מאזעס*, ניו־יאָרק: שלום אש קאָמיטע 1923, ז. 129.

322 See Sholem Ash, *Bam opgrunt*, Varshe: Kultur-lige 1937, p. 30

שלום אש, *ביים אָפּגרוּנט*, וואַרשע: קולטור־ליגע 1937, ז. 30.

323 See Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, Varshe: Kultur-lige 1930, pp. 389–393

שלום אש, *וואַרשע*, וואַרשע: קולטור־ליגע 1930, ז. 389–393.

324 See Sholem Ash, *Moskve*, Buenos-Ayres: Tsentral-farband fun poylishe yidn in Argentine 1949, pp. 132 and 375

שלום אש, *מאָסקווע*, בוענאָס־אייִרעס: צענטראַל־פאַרבאַנד פון פּוילישע יידן אין אַרגענטינע 1949, ז. 132 און 375.

325 Asch's letters to his wife, letter No. 149 from Nice, written in 1951, in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., pp. 160–161, here p. 160; *shreklekh* שרעקלעך.

Another stylistic strategy used by Asch is breaking the illusion, when, for instance, his consistent third-person singular narration is suddenly interrupted by a direct, first-person singular address to the reader, which serves to announce that although a given character is not important for the whole plot, nevertheless the author will devote to this figure the entire chapter.<sup>326</sup> In another novel, the narrator, who wants to present the events that took place before the ones he reports, says: “Many, many years before the present story begins.”<sup>327</sup> Although today critics do not appreciate such narrative strategies, yet they signal the author’s will to establish direct contact with the reader, which is known from oral tradition and classic Yiddish literature, that is the works of Sholem Aleykhem and Mendele Moykher Sforim. What is certain is that the author’s novels are deliberately didactic, as his aim is to make others appreciate the Jewish world or understand certain responses and modes of behavior. They are meant to entertain and to arouse interest, but also to force the Jewish reader to think. It is likely that because of this strategy to reach out to two different communities of readers, Asch makes it a point not to pass negative judgment on certain events or even traditions. For instance, it is clear he did not support marriages arranged by parents, but he never says so directly. Descriptions of betrothals and their reasons or the initial terror felt by the young people are usually described in emotionless, matter-of-fact language. The assessment is left to the reader and the author tries to be objective by introducing many couples who, despite the inauspicious beginning, live happily together and love each other.

Beside realistic descriptions there are some isolated symbols in Asch’s selected novels. In *Motke Ganev* the crippled daughter of the boy’s guardian who works in a glass factory may be seen as a symbol of the soul, of Motke’s conscience. His conscience awakes when he is in the company of friendly people, but he decides to get rid of it once and for all, so he carries the crippled girl to the forest, leaves her there and joins a circus troupe passing by.<sup>328</sup> Rich symbolism can also be seen in *Farn mabl*, even in its title, and in other references to the biblical deluge, which is particularly evident in Zakhari Mirkin’s speech: “Who runs the war? It is men who run it. Well, I believe in the man. What is human

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326 See Sholem Ash, *Di muter*, Varshe: Kultur-lige 1928, p. 47

שלום אש, די מוטער, ווארשע: קולטור-ליגע 1928, ז. 47.

327 Sholem Ash, *Onkel Mozes*, op. cit., p. 30; *Far a shtik, shtik tsayt frier, befor undzer geshikhte fangt zikh on*

פאר א שטיק, שטיק צייט פריהער, בעפאך אונדזער געשיכטע פאנגט זיך אן.

328 See Sholem Ash, *Motke Ganev*, Nyu-York: Sholem Ash Komite 1923, pp. 137–138

שלום אש, מאַטקע גאַנב, ניו־יאָרק: שלום אש קאָמיטע 1923, ז. 137–138.

[...] may be deadened, flooded [...], but what is human will wake up in him [...]. I don't know for how long the man enters a black forest."<sup>329</sup>

Here Asch uses the metaphor of a black forest as a symbol of evil and war. At the same time he cherishes hope that evil will purify the man, who will leave the forest better and stronger. The black forest has a similar meaning in a poem by Khaim Grade<sup>330</sup> (ביים שייך פון דער לבנה (*Bam shayn fun der levone*), which was included in the first volume of his poetry, brought out in 1936. Among other things, Grade writes about coming out from the dark forest to the new world and about the fact that the man is too much of an animal to become God.

In *Bam opgrunt* moral values are compared to securities that Arn Yudkevitch trades in. The narrator reports that Yudkevitch does not count on the value rise but on the value fall and nobody really knows how low human values may sink. It is not Yudkevitch who is a trader but life itself.<sup>331</sup> Here Asch deliberately plays on words, as in Yiddish specific securities and the abstract notion of value are denoted by the same noun: *vertn*, i.e. values.

Another characteristic element of Asch's novels is a number of individual Christians, mostly Polish, who are very well sketched. In this context, the perspective often changes: the third-person singular narrator, seeing the world from the vantage point of the protagonist, becomes an omniscient narrator. Thus Pan Wiadomski (*Der man fun Natseres*), Pan Kwiatkowski (*Farn mabl*) or Pan Widowski (*Der tilim yid*) come to life regardless of how much or how little the Jews presented in the story know about them. In consequence, Asch no longer transmits memory related to his own people only, memory confined to a specific, isolated group. By introducing an omniscient narrator he supplements this memory with facts and events borrowed from the social and geographical environment and, additionally, he combines it with a broader system of all-human memory.

329 Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, op. cit., pp. 438–439; *Ver makht di milkhome?—Di milkhome makhn mentshn. Un ikh gloyb in mentshn. Dos mentshlekhke [...] kon farshumt vern, fartrunkn vern [...], nor dos mentshlekhke vet zikh in em ufvekn [...]. Ikh veys nisht, af vi lang geyt der mentsh in shvartsn vald arayn.*

ווער מאכט די מלחמה? — די מלחמה מאכן מענטשן. און איך גלויב אין מענטשן. דאס מענטשלעכע [...] קאן פארשטומט ווערן, פארטרונקען ווערן [...], נאר דאס מענטשלעכע וועט זיך אין אים אויפועקן [...]. איך ווייס נישט, אויף ווי לאנג עס גייט דער מענטש אין שווארצן וואלד אריין. זייער גוט פרוי געשריבן דעם בוך. דעמאלט זי ס'נישטא מעשוגע. דאוונען אז די פרוי איז ריבארן.

330 Khaim Grade (1910–1982) was a poet, prose and essay writer, and a member of Yung Vilne (Yung Vilne), a Vilnius literary group. In 1962 he published a volume of poems *Der mentsh fun fayer*, which contains the well-known elegy (*Ikh veyn af aykh mit ale oysyes fun dem alef-beyes*), written in honor of Yiddish writers shot at the order of Stalin in 1952.

331 See Sholem Ash, *Bam opgrunt*, op. cit., p. 26.

When describing particular characters, Asch often devotes separate chapters to the description; for instance, he presents young people in *Dos gezang fun tol* in a very interesting manner. The settlers dance in a circle and sing a simple Hebrew song, whereas the narrator briefly characterizes each of them and recalls their past in Europe.<sup>332</sup>

For the writer himself, language and style were inseparable elements of the creative process, a way to express thoughts and feelings. That is why his literary idiom was often impossible to analyze rationally—what was important to him was the expression of what was inside him.<sup>333</sup> At the same time it is hard to make any statement on apparently many grammatical or stylistic errors present in his novels and discussed, among others, by Shloyme Rozenberg, Asch's secretary of many years.<sup>334</sup> Manuscripts of novels written by Yiddish authors, including those by Asch, would pass through many hands before they were published in their final form. First, most of them would be serialized in newspapers and magazines, which usually obtained a rewritten manuscript and, before publication, submitted it to a proofreader. Publishing houses which would subsequently have the novels printed did not base the publication on the original manuscript but on the version which had been proofread and corrected sometimes more than once, and in turn was submitted to another editor once again.<sup>335</sup> That is why it is impossible to characterize Asch's literary language in full without examining some of the manuscripts kept in archives.

What is certain, however, is that Asch's style is not uniform. On the one hand, some of his novels are better and some worse, which is reflected in the number of translations into foreign languages and in the subsequent editions in Yiddish, though what counted, apart from stylistic considerations, was the topic and other criteria, such as the quality of translation or the efforts of the author, who considered some of his novels more important than others. On the other hand, we can often notice sections of different artistic value. Sometimes Asch has a tendency to produce long descriptive passages, which in the case of landscape descriptions are not detrimental, but which prove tiresome when the author tries to present the protagonists' thoughts or to introduce events that do not have any impact on the plot, especially when they are repetitive.

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332 See Sholem Ash, *Dos gezang fun tol*, Nyu-York: Ikuf 1949, pp. 30–38

שלום אש, *דאָס געזאַנג פֿון טאָל*, ניו־יאָרק: איקוף 1949, ז. 30–38.

333 See Khaim-Shloyme Kazdan, *Sholem Ash*, Nyu-York: Tsiko 1966, pp. 74 and 77

חיים־שלמה קאַזדאַן, *שלום אש*, ניו־יאָרק: ציקא 1966, ז. 74 און 77.

334 See Shloyme Rozenberg, *Sholem Ash fun der noent*, op. cit., pp. 66–67.

335 See Khaim-Shloyme Kazdan, *Sholem Ash*, op. cit., pp. 74–75.

What defines the novel as the most important epic genre of modern times is narration itself and its object, that is the presented world, which consists of characters and events, making the plot. In view of this exceptionally broad definition, Asch's novels certainly meet the criteria of the genre. However, a closer examination reveals certain doubts.

Some of Asch's novels may be treated as sets of novellas, sketches or short stories, related to each other by means of the protagonist or some other element. The impression that his works consist of separate fragments is additionally strengthened by the author, who provides different titles to particular chapters of similar length, which ensures their separate status. Additionally, the author often contains one thread, having a relatively simple plot, in as if one installment, and the installments are spatially and temporally removed from each other; sometimes they introduce different protagonists too. This is the case of *Dos shtetl* (1904), *Amerika* (1911) or *Reb Shloyme Noked* (1911). This is very characteristic of Asch's early novels, as he made his literary debut publishing sketches and short stories and apparently needed some time to develop his narrative skills. Many works by Yiddish writers were first serialized in newspapers and magazines, which may be an additional reason for such a make-up of Asch's early, longer novels.

Another characteristic feature of his early works is their relative conciseness. In Yiddish, some of them have no more than a hundred pages and their plots are not elaborate, so sometimes they are called long short stories. This is the case of *Reb Shloyme Noked* (1911), *Kidush hashem* (1919), *Khaim Lederers tsurikkumen* (1919), *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen* (1921) or *Toyt urteyl* (1926). Shmuel Niger notices that in the first few years of the 20th century, Yiddish writers, especially younger ones, would mostly write sketches, short stories and plays. The novel in Yiddish re-emerged a few years later. Niger believes that Asch's first novel is *Meri* (1913), which the author began writing in 1911, but according to Niger that is not tantamount to claiming that Asch's narrative and stylistic skills found their fullest expression in this work.<sup>336</sup>

What is interesting is that apparently Asch was trying to make up for the small volume of his early novels, as those written in the last twenty years of his life are often long and relatively difficult to read, e.g. the novels *Der novi* or *The Apostle*, the latter of which was characterized by one of the critics as four times longer than an average novel.<sup>337</sup>

By definition, the plot of a novel should be individual and unique and should not copy the story that is already known. If so, then we should reconsider

336 See Shmuel Niger, *Sholem Ash. Zayn lebn un zayne verk*, op. cit., p. 107.

337 See Orville Prescott, *Outstanding Novels*, op. cit., p. VI; Clifton Fadiman, *Paul*, in: *The New Yorker*, 18 September 1943, pp. 78 and 81.

the novel *Moyshe*, which provides a narrative framework for what is otherwise an exact story from the Old Testament. On the other hand it is not the case of *Der novi*, because the biblical data used there are scarce and require a number of modifications and additions. In this context it is *The Apostle* that resembles *Moyshe*—in her review Rose Feld proposes that the book is not a novel but a fictionalized biography.<sup>338</sup> Asch's other novels based on the Old Testament, *Der man fun Natseres* and *Mary*, selectively use biblical information which, on the other hand, the author amplifies and adjusts to make it fit his own perspective.

Any attempt to provide a biblical framework for a story creates other problems as well. A traditional novel requires precision and coherence, that is the two features which religion and mythology lack.<sup>339</sup> Definitely Asch must have found the task of matching the self-contradictory biblical account with the genre of his choice a difficult one. For instance, in the case of *Moyshe* it is clear that the author is overwhelmed by biblical data and spends plenty of creative energy on making the plot believable.

As to the plot, it is worth noting that especially in his early novels Asch often walks a fine line between a story and a fairy-tale. Sometimes it is individual chapters that closely resemble a fairy-tale, such as the one about Rokhele's and Yosele's safe return from the United States to the Russian shtetl in *Amerika*—the journey abounds in dangers, involves a voyage by the ship, a great city, Berlin, and crossing the Russian border, but thanks to the help of good people all obstacles are eventually overcome.<sup>340</sup> Likewise, fairy-tale echoes are present in the story of the Jewish soldier in *Farn mabl*. Although the story reflects Asch's respect for the deep faith of Ester Hodel's son, it resembles a fragment of *Mayse bukh*<sup>341</sup> rather than the Russian reality at the beginning of the 20th century, mostly because of its ending, which recounts how the czar, thanks to the intercession of high ranking court officials,<sup>342</sup> pardoned the Jew and made him exempt from military service. Because of this the character of Ester Hodel's son loses credibility. Often it is shorter passages which have a fairy-tale flavor, such as conversations about the old Tzadik from Gostynin in *Reb Shloyme Noked*,

338 See Rose Feld, *St Paul, Great Prophet, Great Politician*, op. cit., p. 3.

339 See Vladimir Tumanov, *Novelizing Myth in Sholem Asch's "Moses,"* op. cit., pp. 162–163.

340 See Sholem Ash, *Amerika*, Varshe / Nyu-York: Progres 1911, pp. 85–91

שלום אש, *אמעריקא, ווארשע / ניו־יאָרק: פראַגרעס 1911*, ז. 85–91.

341 See Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, Varshe: Kultur-lige 1930, pp. 362–364

שלום אש, *פעטערבורג, ווארשע: קולטור־ליגע 1930*, ז. 362–364.

342 *Mayse bukh*: a collection of 257 short stories in Yiddish based on legends, often having hagiographic elements when presenting famous figures from Jewish history, published in Basel in 1602 by Jacob ben Avrom, a Polish Jew from the town of Międzyrzec Litewski.

who apparently freed enchanted souls haunting a fish pond<sup>343</sup> and he even coped with the devil himself.<sup>344</sup> *Reb Shloyme Noged* may be regarded as an extended fairy-tale, which is additionally highlighted by an ending typical of the genre: in the last sentence the narrator expresses his own decision not to disclose what kind of psalms Reb Shloyme Noged said because it was his secret.<sup>345</sup>

In this context one should pay close attention to *Toyt urteyl*, which in its entirety resembles a comprehensive parable telling the truth about human life; its climax is a lost battle with Satan and then submission to inevitable death. The novel *Grosman un zun* has a similar atmosphere—here the plot revolves around the sense of guilt and the protagonist makes all possible efforts to make up for the wrong he once did to another man before he dies.

An interesting element of the plot of Asch's novels is the literary works his protagonists plan to write. Meri has long dreamed about writing a novel which opens with a scene showing a dying countess who begs her son to become a Catholic priest. On the other hand the novel's plot focuses on the young man's dilemma whether he should follow the voice of his heart when he falls in love, or whether he should fulfill his mother's will.<sup>346</sup> However, such themes are rare in Asch's novels.

Practically in all Asch's works there are love threads of various scope and endings. It is either love between two young people or love in marriage, which Asch often presents with a high dose of eroticism. It is clear that the author believes that love themes are an important, if not downright indispensable element of the novel; it is for instance obvious in *Meri*, where Asch describes Misha's mother and writes she had a romantic soul, highly valued love and read many novels.<sup>347</sup>

In his novels Asch employs a variety of genres, which he combines more or less successfully. In *Meri* the chapters about Kowalski and Meri may be regarded as fragments of a psychological novel, whereas most of the second part of the novel, which abounds in descriptions of the Saint Petersburg salons, resembles a novel of manners.<sup>348</sup> The trilogy *Farn mabl* is, on the one hand, an *Entwicklungsroman*, and on the other, a historical novel. *Motke Ganev*, in turn, is poised between a novel of manners and a thriller.

343 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noged*, op. cit., pp. 194–197.

344 See *ibid.*, pp. 213–214.

345 See *ibid.*, p. 218.

346 See Sholem Ash, *Meri*, New York: Sholem Ash Komite 1923, p. 9

שלום אש, מערי, ניו־יארק: שולם אש קאמיטע 1923, p. 9.

347 See *ibid.*, p. 46.

348 See Shmuel Niger, *Sholem Ash. Zayn lebn un zayne verk*, op. cit., pp. 110–111.

In general, time and space play an important structural role in novels, but in the case of Asch's works they acquire an additional function of transmitting memory in its various forms. Some of them, related mostly to space, are purely static; they are, for instance, the descriptions of small, characteristic objects or of nature. Other forms, which oscillate around time, acquire dynamic and comprehensive dimensions—a good example is historical events. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, it is impossible to separate time from space. In the literary chronotope their features blend, condense and they are creatively shaped, space becomes more intensive and is absorbed in the movement of time. Its features appear in space, which, thanks to time, acquires sense and dimension.<sup>349</sup>

In the context of the time–space relation it is worth paying attention to the concept of time in *Dos shtetl*, which is as if suspended beyond time and the successive stages of the plot development are marked by seasons and Jewish feasts related to them. This strategy makes the reader see the presented space also beyond the framework of time and the real world, thus creating an eternally alive and apparently unchangeable reference point. Bakhtin calls such a concept of time the idyllic time, making it refer to none other than the space-time of a provincial town.<sup>350</sup> The author's individual treatment of the problem of time has been noticed by Mikhail Krutikov, who claims that at the beginning of his writing career Asch treated time as a cyclical, unchangeable pattern, defined by seasons and the religious calendar. It was only the Revolution of 1905 which made the writer interested in the concept of time as a sequence of individual, dramatic events.<sup>351</sup>

Whereas in *Dos shtetl* seasons are determined by Jewish feasts, in *Der tilim yid* the author makes another step and refers to the world of the Pentateuch, remote from the real world but for Yekhiel the most real one. To the young boy, the books of the Bible, successively studied at the Cheder, determine the course of the year as sacred time. In this way the Jewish memory committed to paper ages ago becomes alive and current, providing the sense and the framework for an individual's life. Beginning with Yekhiel's childhood, his world was two-partite and consisted of a small, unimportant one, which in a way was a vestibule to the proper one, which was eternal and true, hidden in the letters and mysteries of the Book. Thus for instance God made children happy when He let them read the most moving chapters of the history of creation when snowstorms were raging outside.<sup>352</sup>

349 See Michail Bachtin, *Problemy literatury i estetyki*, op. cit., p. 279.

350 See *ibid.*, pp. 474–475.

351 See Mikhail Krutikov, *Russia between Myth and Reality: From "Meri" to "Three Cities,"* op. cit., p. 81.

352 See Sholem Ash, *Der tilim yid*, op. cit., pp. 13–14.



Among the forms determined by the time-space, Bakhtin includes the meeting, in which time is more important than space and which is emotionally charged; as well as the road, often linked to the meeting, but having a lesser emotional value. In the novel, the road is the place of accidental meetings, which otherwise could not happen, because the characters who participate in them are either socially or spatially removed from each other. Roads come to life when time flows into space and they usually lead through the homeland. As an example taken from Asch's novel one could quote the meeting between Zakhari Mirkin and Reb Borekh Khomski in the trilogy *Farn mabl*. Another chronotope of Bakhtin is the castle, full of historical data, and the salon, which has a similar meaning and function to the road, but in this case the meetings are not accidental and very intimate scenes are intermingled with general ones, having a historical meaning. In Asch's works the salon is mostly exemplified by the Saint Petersburg salons which appear in his Russian novels. According to Bakhtin, a comprehensive chronotope is a small town, which has various forms, including the idyllic one. In the town, time does not develop historically—everything is cyclic. This can be seen in *Dos shtetl*. Among minor forms Bakhtin includes the threshold, which is related to the meeting but first of all symbolizes a crisis and a turning point in life. The extension of the threshold is the hall, the waiting-room and, in the opposite direction, the staircase. As an example we should mention here the waiting-room at the office of the counselor Halpern in *Farn mabl*, but also the threshold of the hotel room used by the banker Stone from *Toyt urteyl*. By letting Leonora cross it, the banker seals his fate. Bakhtin believes that collective scenes, the ball and the carnival, are the chronotope which appeared already in the Middle Ages, if not in the antiquity. They are also present in Asch's novels, e.g. the scenes taking place in house interiors, because often the private perspective is used to show the events taking place outside. Other chronotopes proposed by Bakhtin are nature, the family idyll or the work idyll, for instance farming. Another important chronotope which recurs in Asch's novels is language understood as the treasury of images. Bakhtin writes that in the works of a given author one could usually isolate many chronotopes and their structure or mutual links are characteristic either of an individual work or all the *oeuvre*.<sup>353</sup>

Most of the chronotopes mentioned by Bakhtin appear in Asch's novels, though some of them have their Jewish counterparts, e.g. the castle or the salon are often replaced by the Jewish inn. That is why it is such an interesting challenge to study their structure and meaning. At the same time one can note that this comprehensive set of chronotopes and their specific ways of influencing the

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353 See Michał Bachtin, *Problemy literatury i estetyki*, op. cit., pp. 469-477.

reader have replaced the function of Assmann's figures of memory.<sup>354</sup> It has been possible because, among other things, the specific time-space of the novels makes it possible to present the true reality and to use its elements in creating the novels' artistic value. Although Bakhtin claims that the real world and the fictional one can never unite, they always influence each other.<sup>355</sup>

## 4.3 Memory's formation and transmission in Asch's novels

### 4.3.1 Landscape and nature

For Asch, the natural environment of his characters is closely related to their public and inner life. He is deeply attached to the land, which is for him a natural extension of home and family. That is why he often compares natural phenomena with major family members, e.g. in *Dos shtetl*, where the woods is a green grandparent and the skies is the father. In the same novel he also writes about the Mother Earth, which thanks to God's grace gets younger in spring.<sup>356</sup> This feature of Asch's narration was noted by, among others, Shmuel Niger.<sup>357</sup> Other natural phenomena become familiar because they are personified; for instance, in *Dos shtetl* the night looks into the windows through gray glasses and in the morning everyone greets the newborn day by following morning routines: there is singing, chopping wood by servants or even firewood snapping, which thus acquires human traits too.<sup>358</sup> According to Bakhtin, the creation of such links between human life and nature is one of the characteristic traits of an idyll, which uses the common language to express natural phenomena and events in human life.<sup>359</sup> Asch's works seem to corroborate this claim—an exceptional tendency to relate the life of the protagonists to nature can be seen in *Dos shtetl* and *Reb Shloyme Noked*, the novels which have an idyllic character. Nature plays a significant role in *Mary*, too.

Recollections often concern landscapes seen in the past; Asch takes advantage of this and creates memory figures related to the look of the fields, meadows, skies, woods, rivers, mountains and the sea, thus assigning an important

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354 See Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, op. cit.

355 See Michail Bachtin, *Problemy literatury i estetyki*, op. cit., pp. 477–480.

356 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., p. 50.

357 See Shmuel Niger, *Sholem Ash. Zayn lebn un zayne verk*, op. cit., p. 19.

358 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., pp. 12 and 13.

359 See Michail Bachtin, *Problemy literatury i estetyki*, op. cit., p. 449.

place to nature in his readers' world of memory. This way he describes nature is deeply poetic and the writer does not limit himself to presenting images and personifying nature, but he also tries to convey his ideas. For example, this is how he presents fields surrounding a town: "Fields around and around they all got blended, as if knowing they belonged to the same God. And the field of green grass extends ahead."<sup>360</sup> To strengthen the sense of unity, the narrator makes tree branches reach for each other and get entangled along the road. In this way nature—seen by the reader as objective but also as trustworthy, because it was created by God—is used by Asch to illustrate his own beliefs.

There are romantic descriptions of nature in his novels, which are usually short but successfully capture the beauty of a given moment. Sometimes they may refer to the fields surrounding the town and at other times they are brief observations of the type: "No skies in the world have such petty silver clouds and are so magnificently lit [...] like the skies in the Jewish town on a Friday evening."<sup>361</sup> Here personified Nature makes her contribution to the holiness of the Sabbath.

Other images are purely lyrical, though at the same time they are full of religious meanings, praising the creation, e.g. the image presenting the area around Moscow: "Each blade of grass has a mother. Each leaf is cuddled in the airy arms of the wind. But no grass and no leaves have been cuddled so long against the warm, snow-white, motherly breasts as the deep, shady green of the birch woods around Moscow."<sup>362</sup>

Asch finds beautiful fields not only in Eastern Europe: his description of spring fields around Berlin is also poetic. Their verdure is sprinkled with the

360 Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., p. 59; *Di felder arum un arum, azoy vi visndik, az zey gehern tsu eyn Got, hobn zikh ale oysgemisht. Un a yam fun grinem groz lozt zikh vayt avek.*

די פֿעלדער אַרום און אַרום, אַזוי ווי וויסנדיק, אַז זיי געהערן צו איין גאָט, האָבן זיך אַלע אויסגעמישט. און אַ ים פֿון גרינעם גראָן לאָזט זיך ווייט אַוועק.

361 Sholem Ash, *Der tilim yid*, op. cit., p. 47; *Ka himl in der velt farmogt nisht azelkhe zilberne volknlech un iz nisht azoy herlekh baloykhtn [...], vi der himl freytog-farnakht in a yidishn shtetl.*

קיין הימל אין דער וועלט פאַרמאָגט נישט אַזעלכע זילבערנע וואָלקנדלעך און איז נישט אַזוי הערליך באַלויכטן [...], ווי דער הימל פֿרייטאָג־פֿאַרנאַכט אין אַ אַידיש שטעטל.

362 Sholem Ash, *Moskve*, op. cit., p. 5; *Yedes grezele hot a muter. Yeder blat vert getsertlt in di luftike orems fun vint. Nor ka shum groz un ka shum blat vert nisht azoy lang getulyet unter di varime muter-shneybristn, vi dos tife shotndike grins fun di bchozke-velder arum Moskve.*

יעדעס גרעזעלע האָט אַ מוטער. יעדער בלאַט ווערט געצערטלט אין די לופטיקע אָרעמס פֿון ווינט. נאָר קיין שום גראָן און קיין שום בלאַט ווערט נישט אַזוי לאַנג געטוליעט אונטער די וואַרימע מוטער־שייבריסט, ווי דאָס טיפע שאַטנדיקע גרינס פֿון די בושאָקע־וועלדער אַרום מאַסקווע.

white and pink shower of apple tree blossom and the trees stand side by side like dressed-up bridesmaids. However, nature's freshness and joy serve here to emphasize the contrast between happy fields and tired, hungry people who walk them, trying to find some rest.<sup>363</sup> Asch uses the same poetic language to describe the landscape around Nazareth, where the skies spread the stardust light which illuminates the night air, and small houses stand in the darkness of the valley, guarded by cypresses and olive trees. On the hills one can spy every blade of grass, which trembles and swings as if in prayer.<sup>364</sup>

Asch was one of the first Yiddish writers who would introduce nature descriptions into their writings. Nature is also present in many poetic works written in Yiddish, e.g. in the series of sonnets "שטערן אין שני" (*Shtern in shney*, 1935) by Avrom Sutskever. Sometimes the images of nature are related to the glorification of farming, this is true in the case of the quite original poetics works, such as "ליטע-פייזאזשן" (*Lite-peyzazhn*, 1910) by Leyb Naydus.<sup>365</sup>

An important element of a Jewish town is the river, which, in the case of *Dos shtetl*, is inseparably related to the fate of the shtetl inhabitants. Everyone swims in the river, every year the river demands human sacrifice,<sup>366</sup> Yekheskiel Gombiner's timber is floated down the river, and the small house of the ferryman Khaim, where Reb Yekheskiel meets Reb Mordekhay Konsker, the father of his daughter's future husband, stands by the river. The same area becomes the battleground to save timber that normally would be floated but in this case may be washed away by spring floods.<sup>367</sup> What is taken for granted is that a Jewish town must be located by the river. This can be explained by the fact that, among other things, in Jewish documents, including a letter of divorce, the name of the birthplace should be accompanied by the name of the river. That is why those who lived in riverless areas would get divorce with a rabbi from a different town. This is confirmed, among others, by Israel Joshua Singer in his already mentioned autobiographical book *Fun a velt vos iz nishto mer*.<sup>368</sup>

What accompanies the events taking place by the riverside in the novel *Dos shtetl*, is a slightly negative but humorous description of a clash between the Jews and the Christians on Friday afternoon. The Jews who swim and frolic in the river are chased away by a land agent accompanied by a dog and sent by the

363 See Sholem Ash, *Bam opgrunt*, op. cit., pp. 505–506.

364 See Sholem Asch, *Mary*, op. cit., p. 1.

365 See Leyb Naydus (1890–d. 1918 of diphtheria) was a poet whose most important achievement is the introduction of pastoral tradition and Arcadian themes into Yiddish poetry.

366 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., pp. 92–94.

367 See *ibid.*, pp. 22–34.

368 See Yisroel YOSHUA Zinger, *Fun a velt vos iz nishto mer*, op. cit., p. 98.

landowner, because the river belongs to the town but the fields on the river banks belong to the landowner. The town is delivered from the gentiles by Jewish butchers carrying thick clubs who hasten to the relief. Similar scenes can be found in *Der tilim yid*, where Christian boys wielding whips attack the Jews swimming in the river and throw their clothes into the water. When they meet Yekhiel alone, they pull at his sidelocks and ask: "You little Jew, why did you crucify Jesus Christ?"<sup>369</sup> Yekhiel does not understand what this is all about but he accepts the humiliation, believing that this is the way the world is, that it was God Himself who chose the fate of the Jews living in the Diaspora.

At the same time in Asch's novels there are many poetic and religiously inspired descriptions of water, such as the one in *Dos shtetl*: "Like a silent prayer which I would like to say to thank You for everything, the one and only Father, the water beyond the town rippled in waves from foreign lands to foreign lands."<sup>370</sup>

In *Meri* the painter Kowalski comes to paint rural landscapes and his acquaintances lead him to the Dnieper River, which "overflowed the curved river bed like a piece of the sky and made its way from one end of the horizon to the other through the fields, woods and high green banks."<sup>371</sup>

An important element of the landscape presented in Asch's novels is the Vistula River. The historical Yekhiel (*Der tilim yid*), the already mentioned Yekhiel-Meyer Lipshits, came from Gostynin, a place situated twenty kilometers away from Kutno, the author's native town, and about ten kilometers from the Vistula River. In the novel, however, the protagonist's fictitious shtetl is placed on the river bank and the river itself becomes a magic place, as if a borderline between the tangible world and the fairy-tale one. For Jewish boys the Vistula is the Jordan and the hill across the river is Mount Ararat, where Noah's ark came to rest.<sup>372</sup> Moreover, the river bank is the place of farewells: it is here

369 Sholem Ash, *Der tilim yid*, op. cit., p. 33; *Kleyner zhidek! Farvos hoste gekreytsikt Kristus 'n?*

קליינער זשידעק! פארוואס האסטו געקרייצט'ן?

370 Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., p. 51; *Un dos vaser hintern shtetl hot vi a shtil gebet, mit welkhn es volt dikh danken gevolt, Tate eyntsiker, far alts, zikh gegosn khvalye-oys, khvalye-eyn, fun fremde lender in fremde lender.*

און דאס וואסער הינטערן שטעטל האט ווי א שטיל געבעט, מיט וועלכן עס וואלט דיך דאנקען געוואלט, טאטע איינציקער, פאר אלץ, זיך געגאסן כוואליע-איוס, כוואליע-איינ, פון פֿרעמדע לענדער אין פֿרעמדע לענדער.

371 Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., p. 35; *hot zikh vi a shtik himel oysgegosen in a krumer korete, un oysgekerevet zikh a veg fun eyn ek horizont tsum andern ek, iber felder, velder un grine hoykhe kustes.*

האט זיך ווי א שטיק הימעל אויסגעגאסען אין א קרומער קארעטע, און אויסגעקערעוועט זיך א וועג פון איין עק דאָרױזאָנט צום אַנדערען עק, אײבער פעלדער, וועלדער און גרינע הויכע קוסטעס.

372 See Sholem Ash, *Der tilim yid*, op. cit., p. 18.

that men who want to see the Tzadik embark the ferryboat and it is here that women who see them off are afraid they will never see them again.<sup>373</sup> In summer, wood logs lying on the river bank are the evening resting place for Jewish women.<sup>374</sup>

The river is an important element of the European landscape, in terms of contrast this is particularly obvious in *Ist river*, where the Jews, the Poles, the Irish and the Italian, that is the immigrants living nearby, come to visit the river, although it is polluted and surrounded by old, run-down warehouses and other buildings.<sup>375</sup> In spite of this, in the urban desert of New York, the river offers a possibility of rest for the local inhabitants and, besides, it reminds them of their old homelands.

On the other hand, nature in Asch's novels is sometimes shown as a mysterious, inimical and alien power. In *Dos shtetl* this is true of the description of the poplars growing along the road that leads to the cemetery:

By the black road leading to the cemetery there are old, dead poplars, like wild hobgoblins with their legs and arms chopped off. They stand there like embodiments of demons, like visitors from the time before the six days of creation, like dumb witnesses of the time from the beginning of the world till the end ... At midnight "huge Germans with long scourges" come and stand behind the poplars playing mawkish, moving melodies on the poplars' branches, melodies which keep pulling at the heart, and with their songs they tempt passers-by astray from the right path to wild marshes ...<sup>376</sup>

It is easy to notice here a comparison between a German and a devil, well-known also in Polish culture, as exemplified by the proverb: Where a German

373 See *ibid.*, pp. 61–62.

374 See *ibid.*, p. 48.

375 See Sholem Ash, *Ist river*, Nyu-York: Elye Laub 1946, p. 70

376 Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., p. 67; *Af dem shvartsn veg, tsum besoylem tsu, shteyen alte, opgelebte topoln, vi vilde leytsim, mit opgehakte fis un hent. Zey shteyen vi gilgulim fun rukhes, vi ongekumene fun far sheyshes yemey breyshes, vi shtume eydes fun onheyb velt bizn sof velt ... Nakht, tsvelf a zeyger, kumen tsu geyn "hoykhe Daytshn mit lange baytshn," un shteln zikh hinter di topoln un tsiyen fun zeyere tsveygn di libste harts-nogndike nigunim, tsiyen, tsiyen bam harts, un farnarn mentshn mit zeyere gezangen in viste zumpn ...*

אויף דעם שוואַרצן וועג, צום בית-עולם צו, שטייען אַלטע, אָפגעלעבטע טאַפּאַלן, ווי ווילדע לצים, מיט אָפגעהאַקטע פֿיס און הענט. זיי שטייען ווי גילגולים פֿון רוחות, ווי אָנגעקומענע פֿון פֿאַר ששת ימי בראשית, ווי שטומע עדות פֿון אָנהייב וועלט בין סוף וועלט... נאַכט, צוועלף אַ זייגער, קומען צו גיין,, הויכע דייטשן מיט לאַנגע בייטשן", און שטעלן זיך הינטער די טאַפּאַלן און ציען פֿון זייערע צווייגן די ליבסטע, האַרץ-נאָגנדיקע ניגונים, ציען, ציען ביים האַרץ, און פֿאַרנאַרן מענטשן מיט זייערע געזאַנגען אין וויסטע זומפֿן...

stops, grass does not grow.<sup>377</sup> It is the proverb that must have helped transfer the idea to Jewish tradition.

As far as the forest is concerned, Ash presents it in all seasons and creates poetic images which bring to the readers' minds their native lands. In winter, the image is that of huge trees covered with snow, standing like old men from a different world, and the sunrays penetrating the branches light up every peck of snow.<sup>378</sup>

Apart from such general images, there are also more concrete and mundane, like those showing the Vistula valley around the Topolye estate. What the reader learns is that the valley extends along a sandy, steep river bank, is surrounded by unfathomable oak and spruce forests, and abounds in mellow, fertile chernozems and damp peat bogs crisscrossed with watercourses and studded with dark ponds.<sup>379</sup>

As a rule, Jewish towns were not located in the mountains, though sometimes they were surrounded by hills, yet the Jews would visit high mountain spas and resorts. Asch himself was enamored with the Polish town of Zakopane of the early 20th century, that is when the town was discovered by Polish writers and artists, whom he had befriended. It is not surprising then that it was Zakopane and the Tatra Mountains that found their place in his works. When Meri comes to Zakopane, at first the Tatra Mountains appear cold and alien to her, they seem to screen off the whole world. Later, however, she notices the beauty of coniferous forests and she is much taken by the joyful spectacle of the sun lighting up and melting the snow, and the appearance of streams and waterfalls.<sup>380</sup> The description of the mountainous landscape as seen by the painter Kowalski is even more poetic:

The sun was already setting behind Mount Giewont, lighting up the snow on its back and flowing down like boiling lava shining white. [...] Mountains of snowy clouds were moving across the blue sea of the sky. Demolished worlds, fragments of palaces and marble ruins—azure and light reigned the blue field.<sup>381</sup>

377 See Julian Krzyżanowski (ed.), *Nowa księga przysłów i wyrażen przysłowiowych polskich*, Warszawa: PIW 1970, Vol. II, p. 603.

378 See Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., pp. 150–151.

379 See Sholem Ash, *Der tilim yid*, op. cit., p. 131.

380 See Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, Nyu-York: Sholem Ash Komite 1923, pp. 63–68

שלום אש, דער וועג צו זיך, ניו-יאָרק: שלום אש קאָמיטע 1923, ז. 63–68.

381 Ibid., pp. 74–75; *Di zun hot zikh shoybn ongehoybn tsu zeitsn arunter hinter "Gevont" un hot af dem rukn fun "Gevont" tselozt dos likht afn shney un, vi a kokhende vays-baglentste lave, hot zikh es gegosn arop fun di berg. [...] Gantse berg shney-volkn hobn zikh arumgetrogn in dem bloylikhn yam fun himl. Khorevdike veltn, shtiker palatsn, ruines oys marmor, lazur un himel-shayn hobn zikh getrogn in shetech fun himl.*

However, the European, familiar mountains are not the only ones shown in Asch's novels. There is also the wild, dry and hot Sinai massif, rising up in the desert. Notwithstanding the harsh conditions, men are able to settle there in peace and to sustain themselves. Moses discovers the shade and innumerable green spots, which the sun did not manage to burn. Cacti can be used as fodder for sheep and sometimes one can come across a cave with a spring. Thistles, thorny bush and other minor plants grow in limestone cracks and fissures. The mountains are steep and rugged like rocky fingers pointing at the sky.<sup>382</sup>

Usually Asch's nature is simply beautiful, sometimes it is mysterious but generally it is friendly. The exception is nature in Palestine, where it is the environment and climate that the settlers have to cope with. The mountain slopes are bare—there is nothing which could shelter people from the sun. Between the mountains, there is a valley which collects flowing water during the rainy season. The resulting bog may suddenly appear in a new spot and take a toll on travelers. Grass and reed overgrow the places where human settlements used to stand. A source, called by the Arabs the source of death, springs from the boggy land and neither people nor animals can safely drink the water it produces. Those who cross the boggy land are bitten by innumerable insects.<sup>383</sup>

Likewise, the mountains St Paul has to cross on his way to Tarsus are inimical to people. They abound in unfathomable precipices and one wrong step may mean death. Constant winds try to push travelers away from the path and so they nearly have to crawl. Finally they reach green terrain but for a change they are tormented by insects and scorpions. When they reach their destination, they are half-blind and soaked with blood.<sup>384</sup>

Lush landscapes which the author saw in reality and then presented in his novels are those belonging to the Mediterranean shores. In a hotel park “a magnolia blooms, just like some cherry trees. Like lit candles in branch candlesticks they stand magnificent [...], it seems the world adorned itself on the occasion of some special feast.”<sup>385</sup>

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די זונג האָט זיך שוין אָנגעהויבן צו זעצען אַרונטער הינטער „געבאנט” און האָט אויף דעם רוקען פון „געבאנט” צולאָזט דאָס ליכט אויפ'ן שונע און, ווי אַ קאָכענדע ווייס־בעגלענצטע לאָוע, האָט זיך עס געגאַסען אַראָב פון די בערג. [...] גאַנצע בערג שטענע־וואַלקען האָבען זיך אַרומגעשטראָגען אין דעם בלאַהליכען ים פון הימעל. חרוב'דיקע וועלטען, שטיקער פאַלאצען, רוינעס אויס מאַראַך, לאַוור און הימעל־שיין האָבען זיך געטראָגען אין שטח פון הימעל.

382 See Sholem Ash, *Moysh*, op. cit., pp. 104–105.

383 See Sholem Ash, *Dos gezang fun tol*, op. cit., pp. 7–15.

384 See Sholem Asch, *The Apostle*, op. cit., pp. 368–369.

385 Sholem Ash, *Gots gefangene*, Varshe: Kultur-lige 1933, p. 82; *Di magnolye hot zikh tseblit, azoy oykh eynige karshn-beymer. Vi ongetsundene likht in tsveygn-laykhter, shtheyen zey herlekhe [...], es hot zikh gedakht, az di velt hot zikh af a groysn yontev oys-*



Elsewhere, Asch writes: “the sea slept like a small child of the huge mother, lulled in the cradle of gulfs shrouded in mist, it slumbered peacefully.”<sup>386</sup> In this and other similar images created by the author, one can see his fascination with the Mediterranean landscapes and nature. To many readers who are not able to see such sights personally, the works containing such descriptions are a window on the world—they offer an insight into a non-literary reality and thus shape the reader's recollections.

As far as animals are concerned, in Asch's novels there are only farm or pack animals: goats, sheep, cows, donkeys, and horses, e.g. the horse the children ride in Harry Grinshtok's backyard. Additionally, there are brief mentions of cats and dogs in Harry's house. Thus animals cannot be treated as well-defined centers of memory formation—Asch does not use the concept of a pet or a man's friend in his novels, with the exception of the dog which Motke befriends and the dog which belongs to Pan Widowski, the Polish nobleman, in *Der tilim yid*.<sup>387</sup> Possibly the only exception here is pigeons which were bred first in Europe and then in the United States. In New York the arriving Jews were missing nature that used to surround their shtetls in Europe, so breeding pigeons became an important aspect of their new life and a link to their old homeland. It is pigeons which are the leading characters in the first chapter of *Ist river* and the human characters appear in the course of the story about the pigeons.

Two pigeon breeders, the millionaire Kesman and Harry Grinshtok, live in a New York quarter described in *Ist river*. Kesman imports an expensive Japanese pigeon and Harry hopes that it will become interested in one of his females. When the millionaire's pigeons appear up in the air, Harry releases his pigeons too. This alerts all his neighbors and the one who helps Harry in particular is Antoni Cholewa, a Pole working in a slaughterhouse, who is called אָלע באָגע (in Polish “olaboga,” meaning “oh my!” in English), because he often uses this interjection. When Harry is absent, the job of calling the Japanese pigeon falls to his Irish friend, Uncle Maloney, who sends neighbors to house roofs to drive pi-

*getsirt*.

שלוים אַש, גאַטס געפאַנגענע, ווארשע: קולטור־ליגע 1933, ז. 82; די מאַגאַליע האָט זיך צעבליט, אַזוי איך אייניגע קאַרשן פיימער. ווי אַנגעצונדענע ליכט אין צווייגן־ליכטער, שטייען זיי הערלעכע [...] עס האָט זיך געדאַכט, אַז די וועלט האָט זיך אויף אַ גרויסן יום־טוב אויסגעצירט.

- 386 Ibid., p. 84; *Der yam iz geshlofn, vi a kleyn kind fun a rizn-muter, ayngevigt in der toy-bakhoykhter zuniker bukhte-vig, er hot ruik gedrimlt*.  
 דער ים איז געשלאָפן, ווי אַ קליין קינד פון אַ ריזן־מוטער, איינגעוויגט אין דער טוי־באָהויכטער פוכטע־וויג, ער האָט רואיג געדרימלט.

- 387 However, this is not a characteristic feature of Yiddish literature as such; for instance, dogs and cats appear in the stories for children by Isaac Bashevis Singer, see Monika Adameczyk-Garbowska, *Polska Isaaca Bashevisa Singera. Rozstanie i powrót*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS 1994, p. 125.

geons in the right directions.<sup>388</sup> In this way the author introduces the readers to the main theme of the novel, which is a friendly coexistence of immigrants from various countries in Europe, which often turns into friendships or love.

In New York the role of the garden is played by the backyard. As mentioned above, Harry Grinshtok breeds his pigeons in the backyard but at the same time it is a paradise for other people and animals. Immigrants miss contacts with nature and that is why they take advantage of the backyard. The Pole Cholewa breeds rabbits and Harry keeps a pair of Chinese hens just for fun. Once, quite inexplicably, a small fox visits the backyard and Harry tries to domesticate it and keeps it along with a small ram and a goat. A junk man keeps a nag in the backyard's corner. Apart from animals, there are plants in the backyard: everyone tries to grow something that reminds him of his old homeland. Cholewa grows sunflowers, cabbage and mallows, the Italian Toni grows a fig tree and even the German baker Schulze, who does not count among Harry's friends, is permitted to grow a few potato plants. He does not need them to collect potatoes and eat them, but he just wants to see how they grow and bloom. On Sunday afternoons everyone gathers at Harry's: "In this way in Harry's backyard all the threads connecting various occupants of the house converge. In the backyard Harry rediscovers the days of his youth: the backyard exudes all the smells of the fields, the valleys overgrown with grass and the meadows covered with dew."<sup>389</sup>

The narrator's observation shows that the author knew how important a role nature played in forming memory—in *Ist river* plants and animals are kept especially to make the immigrants remember their old homeland. In his other novels, Asch offers ready images and descriptions which enhance memories of the world that often is lost forever.

Nature presented in his novels are well-known Eastern European landscapes, snapshots really, which help embed in memory blooming orchards, green pastures, lazy rivers, mysterious forests or dangerous yet beautiful mountains. What reinforces the reader's emotional attachment to these images is poetic language and personifications as well as looking at nature as God's work. As far as landscapes of Western Europe or the United States are concerned, they are scanty: if

388 See Sholem Ash, *Ist river*, op. cit., pp. 8–11.

389 Ibid., p. 22; *Es kumen azoy arum zikh tsunoyf in Heris hoyf ale fedim, vos farbindn di farsheydene eynvoyner fun blok. In Heris hoyf gefinen zey tsurik di teg fun zeyer yungshaft: Heris hoyf shmekt mit ale reykhes fun di felder, di grin-bagrozte toln, di toy-badekte lonkes.*

עס קומען אזוי ארום זיך צונגיף אין העריס הויף אלע פעדים, וואָס פֿאַרבינדן די פֿאַרשיידענע איינזאָוינער פֿון בלאַק. אין העריס הויף געפינען זיי צוריק די טעג פֿון זייער יונגשאַפֿט: העריס הויף שמעקט מיט אלע ריחות פֿון די פֿעלדער, די גרינ־באַגראָזטע טאַלן, די טוי־באַדעקטע לאַנקעס.

they appear at all, they bear resemblance to Eastern European ones. They are typical figures of memory, evoke childhood and let experience joy. Additionally, Asch creates a larger vision of the world; by including descriptions of particular places, he enables the reader, who does not know them and is unlikely to visit them, to see them. It may be the shores of the Mediterranean or the landscapes of Palestine, known to the reader from biblical sources and revived in memory thanks to particular novels. These scattered descriptions create an image of the space the reader lives in, both familiar and remote.

### 4.3.2 Town and city

In Yiddish literature, the reader may come across works which are set either in big cities or in small towns. This illustrates two areas traditionally occupied by the Jews.<sup>390</sup> Among the big cities appearing in Yiddish literature, there is Łódź, featured in *די ברידער אשכנזי* (*Di brider Ashkenazi*, 1936) by Israel Joshua Singer, in *פּוילן* (*Poyln*, 1944–1953) by Yekhiel-Yeshaye Trunk, and in *די גאַס* (*Di gas*, 1928) by Yisroel Rabon,<sup>391</sup> who presents Łódź in his other novels, as well as in his poetry. In his three-volume novel *דער בוים פון לעבן* (*Der boym fun lebn*), Khave Rozenfarb<sup>392</sup> describes the extermination of the Łódź Jews in 1939–1944. Many novels feature Warsaw, for instance, the already mentioned, seven-volume work *Poyln* by Trunk, but also the works by Isaac Bashevis Singer, such as *בית-דין-שטוב מיין טאטענס זאמלונג* and *בית-דין-שטוב מיין טאטענס זאמלונג* (*Mayn tatns bezdn-shtub* and *Mayn tatns bezdn-shtub hemshekhim-zamlung*), published in 1956 and 1966.

Shtetl, the Jewish town, is shown in many Yiddish literary works, for instance in short stories by Israel Joshua Singer or by Avrom Reyzen; an important response to Asch's *Dos shtetl* is the novel by Yitskhok-Meyer Vaysenberg.<sup>393</sup> In his novel, which bears the same title as the first edition of Asch's

390 See Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Odcienie tożsamości. Literatura żydowska jako zjawisko wielojęzyczne*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS 2004, pp. 20–21.

391 Yisroel Rabon (real name: רובין Rubin, 1900–1941) was most likely murdered by the Germans in Ponary near Vilnius. He was a talented interwar writer and poet; he is known for his poem *ייִדנפרעסער* (*Yidnfräser*), in which he combines elements of macabre and grotesque.

392 Khave Rozenfarb (1923–2011), who survived the Łódź ghetto, slave labor in Germany, and the concentration camp in Bergen-Belsen, was a poet and an author of epic works in Yiddish; after the war she lived in Canada.

393 Yitskhok-Meyer Vaysenberg (1878–1938) was a writer and editor who after Perets' death tried to assume the position of a mentor to young writers, in which he succeeded only partially. In his naturalistic works he offered a new view on Jewish life.

work, *א שטעטל* (*A shtetl*, 1906), Vaysenberg creates a lively, naturalistic image of life in a small town during the Revolution of 1905. Contrary to nostalgic works of Sholem Aleykhem and above all to *Dos shtetl* of Asch, in his novels Vaysenberg characterizes traditional Jews as representing the corrupt bourgeois world, whereas young Socialists who come to the town manage to enlist an increasing number of supporters of their cause.

In Asch's novels the figures of memory related to the town and to the city include permanent elements of urban landscape, e.g. a cemetery, a synagogue, an inn, a shop, a poor district, a rich city salon, a brothel, and a workshop, as well as recurring events: a fair and a market. Characteristic images related to representations of big cities are definitely a city train, a bridge, a restaurant or cultural institutions, which Asch just mentions: a theater, a concert hall or an opera. Another important figure of memory in the case of big cities and small towns is the contacts among their inhabitants.

In *Dos shtetl*, good relations between the Jews and the Christians can be seen in many minor scenes, e.g. when a Jewish woman carries a non-kosher duck for her Christian neighbor.<sup>394</sup> Such cooperation is also described in other literary works and present in oral tradition; for instance, there were cases when Christian restaurants would buy non-kosher eggs or other non-kosher products from the Jews. A similar situation is presented in *Motke Ganev*, but there it has negative consequences because the dayan, who makes decisions and helps the rabbi, pronounces everything non-kosher and Jewish women have to sell ducks or hens to local gentiles for nothing.<sup>395</sup>

The initial collaboration between the Jews and the Poles at the siege of Tulczyn during Khmelnytsky's uprising in the 17th century had a totally different character. The Jews and the Poles formed a kind of brotherhood: the Poles prayed in churches and the Jews in synagogues, asking God to advance their common cause. Also food was distributed fairly.<sup>396</sup>

Another type of collaboration develops on the Sabbath between the Jews and the gentiles in the novel *Motke Ganev* in Warsaw, when the Jews employ the Poles for a day. Thus on Friday afternoon a Polish woman stands behind the bar in Café Varshavski, because the Jewish owners do not want to give up the profit and do not close the café on Fridays. Just in case the owner's son accompanies the woman at the bar and makes sure that the money ends up in the cash register.<sup>397</sup>

394 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., p. 90.

395 See Sholem Ash, *Motke Ganev*, op. cit., p. 75.

396 See Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, Nyu-York: Sholem Ash Komite 1923, p. 157

שלום אש, קדוש השם, ניו-יאָרק: שלום אש קאָמיטע 1923, ז. 157.

397 See Sholem Ash, *Motke Ganev*, op. cit., pp. 251–252.

In *Ist river* the inhabitants of the quarter know each other very well and collaborate, for instance by catching the Japanese pigeon, which they then admire together. They all meet at Harry Grinshtok's backyard: the Irish Maloney, the Pole Cholewa, the Italian Toni, even the Hungarian restaurant owner Pan Neufeld, as well as Jewish friends and the Irish Mary, Harry's daughters' friend.<sup>398</sup>

Like the synagogue, another inseparable part of a Jewish settlement is the cemetery. That is why in *Kidush hashem*, an innkeeper, who lives far out in the steppe, must obtain permission from the Polish landlord not only to build a synagogue but also a cemetery, so as to encourage other Jews to settle down in the vicinity. In *Dos shtetl* the old cemetery is on a hill and trees grow among the matzevas. The novel shows a specific symbiosis between nature and people—the narrator observes that the cemetery “lies hidden in every tombstone behind the tree growing nearby. Behind the tree there is a soul—they all look down at the town.”<sup>399</sup> The cemetery is not just a half-scary, half-charming fragment of the townscape, described in poetic language. It is also a sad place which has a special significance as the near and dear are buried there. In *Amerika* the mother's visit at the graves of her dead children plays an important role, as it is her final farewell to her homeland. In the United States, Khane-Leye stands by Yosele's tombstone and feels that it binds her irrevocably to her new homeland.<sup>400</sup>

In Asch's novels there are not too many descriptions of synagogue architecture; usually the narrator focuses on prayers and other religious events taking place inside. An exception is the description of the synagogue in Złoczów contained in *Kidush hashem*. On the outside, the synagogue is small and humble so as not to draw too much attention of the gentiles, the narrator explains. Inside, however, it is big because it goes deep down into the ground. Architecturally, the interior is rich, the narrator presents it with all its details.<sup>401</sup> The design is not Asch's figment of imagination but is based on facts; however, the floor would be usually lowered in observance of the words of Psalm 130: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!” (Ps 130,1), which the narrator also mentions. Additionally, a Halakha law demanded that the synagogue should tower over neighboring

398 See Sholem Ash, *Ist river*, op. cit., pp. 14–16.

399 Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., p. 113; *bahaltm in yeder matseyve hinter ir boym. A neshome hinter a boym—un ale kukn zey in shtetl arunter.*

באהאלטן אין יעדער מצבה הינטער איר בוים. א נשמה הינטער א בוים - און אלע קוקן זיי אין שטעטל אַרונטער.

400 See Sholem Ash, *Amerika*, op. cit., pp. 41–43 and 124.

401 See Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit., pp. 38–39.

buildings and when it was technically impossible a high steel rod would be placed on the top of the roof.

A classical chronotope is an inn, as an element of the townscape and as the space where people from various walks of life—geographic, social or national—meet. The inn presented in *Dos shtetl* stands at the crossroads and is the meeting place of travelers from remote towns and lands.<sup>402</sup> This is symbolized by pictures of soldiers and generals, hanging on the walls, among them a picture of Napoleon and “a Jew in a weird hat, a cousin from a faraway country.”<sup>403</sup> This shows that the inn is not just the meeting place of the local Jews, but also the center where the Christian and Jewish lives intermingle. In *Kidush hashem*, an Orthodox priest comes to a Jewish inn to have a drink and he demands more and more alcohol, saying that he wants to drive Satan away from his soul. The innkeeper addresses the priest as פֿאָטערֿלי (foteril, in Yiddish “dear Father”) and explains that the more he yields to Satan, the more he will be pestered by him and gives the priest such a piece of advice: “Do not feed him, order him to dry up.”<sup>404</sup>

Sometimes a successful innkeeper enlarges the inn, which eventually becomes a hotel. In *Motke Ganev*, circus performers come to town and do not spend the night in their circus wagon but in the Królewski Hotel. The establishment is run by a Jew who has a beautiful daughter named Dvoyre. The narrator comments that apparently more than one guest lost money because of her. In the hotel there is a small room in which, as the word has it, she meets with men. She seems to do it on her own will. A different story concerns a beautiful tightrope walker who on the occasion of staying at the hotel is sold to a gentile who is in love with her.<sup>405</sup> The inn features in many Eastern European novels by Asch and often it is the background of events related to particular characters or scenes.

In many respects a shop is a similar place. Be it the shop of Moyshe Volf in *Ist river* or the shop of Zilbershtayn in *Grosman un zun*, it witnesses meetings, talks and events. In *Motke Ganev*, a Jewish shop is described in detail. Workers laboring in a glass factory which belongs to a Jew are not paid in cash but their wages are entered in the book—in real world it was practiced in many countries by Jews and non-Jews alike. In Asch’s novel the peasants may spend the money entered into the book in a Jewish shop owned by a relative of the factory owner. The Jews exploit the workers because in the shop everything is more expensive.

402 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., p. 81.

403 Ibid., pp. 84–85; אַ פֿרעמד היטל, אַ פֿעטער מיט אַ פֿרעמד לאַנד, *mit a yidn epes mit a fremd hitl, a feter fun a fremd land*.

404 Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit., p. 10; דו קאָרמע איהם נישט, דו לאָז איהם אויסדאַרען, *Du korme em nisht, du loz em oysdarn*.

405 See Sholem Ash, *Motke Ganev*, op. cit., pp. 170–176.

On the other hand, the workers, who are Catholics, may come to the shop to pray. As the Russian authorities forbade to build a Catholic church and the workers are afraid to gather on Sundays and pray at home, they come to the Jewish shop. During the prayer Motke is on guard and when he spies a Russian they hide the image of St Mary away and resume trading.<sup>406</sup> In this way the role of the inn and the shop goes beyond the usual business function—it becomes a place where people meet and learn to respect each other, which is often reflected in mutual collaboration and help.

The extension of the shop is a market and a fair. In *Motke Ganev*, in the fall especially, peasants come to the market to sell everything that grew and ripened in the summer. The market is full of fat hens, ducks and geese, fruit and vegetables. There are peasants with calves and sacks of potatoes, eggs, butter and milk—the market is very much alive and full of smell of ripe fruit.<sup>407</sup> The annual fair in the town of Reb Shloyme Noged brings together the Jews and the peasants living around there. It attracts minor vendors who argue over a prominent place at the fair as well as rich tradesmen who meet to discuss their businesses in Reb Shloyme Noged's house. Soon things get mingled: Jewish frock coats and peasants' russet coats, shawls worn by Jewish women and colorful headscarves worn by peasant women. The town fills with noise and tumult; people buy clothes or bead necklaces; at the animal market, pigs squeal and cows low. At some point a brawl ensues between the Jews and the peasants, but soon it is headed off by Reb Shloyme Noged, who is universally respected, also by the gentiles. Both sides conclude that the other side is just people like they are, former enemies wash under the pump and go together for a drink.<sup>408</sup> A characteristic image present in *Der tilim yid* is a whitewashed church standing in the square market and surrounded by a fence which peasants coming to town for a Sunday mass use to hitch their festively adorned horses to. Apart from Sundays, the gentiles flock to town on market days, that is on Tuesdays and Fridays. That is why the little Yekhiel naïvely believes that God created the gentiles so that the Jews had someone to trade with and so that the Jews could experience all pains of exile which God condemned the chosen people to.<sup>409</sup>

Different fairs take place in big cities. In *Motke Ganev*, the fair in Warsaw offers junk, antiques, bric-a-brac, clothes, shoes; you can come in rags and leave wearing a suit from New York, shoes made five years before in Paris and a hat bought once in a Berlin shop—all this costs nothing so you still have money for lunch. If you do not have money, you can swap your clothes for bread or a pack

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406 See *ibid.*, p. 134.

407 See *ibid.*, p. 65.

408 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noged*, op. cit., pp. 171–185.

409 See Sholem Ash, *Der tilim yid*, op. cit., pp. 31–32.

of cigarettes. The narrator explains that the only thing you cannot swap is your trousers, as there is a regulation forbidding not wearing them.<sup>410</sup> In *Kidush hashem* a major occasion is the fair in the city of Lublin. The city streets become packed with stands offering sheepskin coats, shoes or wool. Everything is colorful and one can hear conversations in many languages. Craftsmen from Nuremberg sell silverware and brassware, the Persians sell colorful fabric. The Jews from all over the world come to Lublin. They wear their own characteristic clothes: the German Jews wear velvet hats, the Czech ones black silk coats and the Italian ones wear colorful dresses and sport swords at their sides.<sup>411</sup> Also the description of a fair in Jerusalem at the times of Jesus Christ, contained in *Der man fun Natseres*, resembles that of a regular fair in the Diaspora. Here the fishermen bring fish they catch in Lake of Gennesaret and local farmers sell fruit and vegetables. It seems the author deliberately creates a repugnant image when he writes that the land around Jerusalem is soaked with the blood of sacrificial animals and that is why figs are so sweet and grapes are unusually juicy. Craftsmen work by their stalls or under the arcades, vendors sell olive oil, wine and honey, whereas the street corners are occupied by writers who offer parchment sheets with biblical verses.<sup>412</sup>

The market or the fair do not only stand for commerce but they also mean entertainment. Sometimes an organ grinder comes to a town or to a village and shows acts with a dog or a dancing girl; at times groups of artists come. In *Motke Ganev*, Motke joins such a group, consisting of a few people and a number of animals. They all try to earn as much money as possible by cheating and stealing at any place and any time. An older Jewish woman wearing a red dress holds a blue parrot which cries in Russian, "I love you!" Then the parrot draws lots from a box, they are written on small blue cards for everyone who is ready to pay five kopecks. A Jew wearing medals in his lapel addresses the audience in what appears to be a mixture of Polish, Russian, Yiddish, and thief lingo and announces the act of a famous Spanish strongman. The strongman is played by Motke, whose dress and hairstyle make him appear younger than he is.<sup>413</sup> Another thread present in *Motke Ganev* appears also in other novels: it is the story of a beautiful tightrope walker who is well-known in the area and her acts are watched even by Polish noblemen—quite a few married men fall in love with her, forsake their wives and children and come regularly to see her.<sup>414</sup> Similar, though more elaborate and varied scenes take place in *Onkel Mozes* on Coney

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410 See Sholem Ash, *Motke Ganev*, op. cit., pp. 224–225.

411 See Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit., pp. 76–77.

412 See Sholem Ash, *Der man fun Natseres*, op. cit., Vol. 1, pp. 93–94.

413 See Sholem Ash, *Motke Ganev*, op. cit., pp. 154–156.

414 See *ibid.*, pp. 154–159.



Island in New York. Charlie and Masha go to a Coney Island beach and then seek other attractions such as “the seven wonders of the world,” including a two-headed cow from India, Siamese twins from China, two dwarves, the heaviest woman in the world, who weighs two hundred and fifty kilograms, and a man with the face of a lion.<sup>415</sup> On the one hand, the writer shows the aura of fair acts, the mystery that sometimes surrounds them, and the admiration of the crowd who do not have other pastimes. On the other hand, however, he reveals the mechanism of cheating and fraud that accompany any fair, whether the fair takes place in an Eastern European townlet or in the American metropolis.

The image of Asch's shtetls combines their idealized, poetic character present in his early novels and the poverty shown in his later works. In comparison with the hustle and bustle of big cities, especially in the United States, small Jewish towns, the old homeland, are an oasis of quiet, calm and peace. Such images, which ensured Asch's popularity among readers, are present on almost every page of *Dos shtetl*. They also appear as recollections and expressions of nostalgia, like in the case of Yosele, terrified by the American street, who dreams of a quiet, evening street in a small town, of the sound of prayer coming from the synagogue and of the gentle moonlight.<sup>416</sup> A totally different image is produced by the narrator in *Meri*. In a nondescript town, situated somewhere on the bank of the Dnieper River, there is a poor Jewish quarter:

It was a deep ditch in a remote part of the town, walled on both sides with sandy banks. [...] In the “Ditch” there were no gutters. Streets were not paved and the sun avoided the place. [...] The children, who sat in the mud that would never dry up, became sick and crippled. Typhus would be present in every second household and other children would be sick with rickets.<sup>417</sup>

The descriptions of European and American cities can be found in many Asch's novels. Another city which can be found there is Jerusalem and, just like in the case of other cities, also here the author uses his own experience to describe it. To Asch, the wealthy salons are usually those of Saint Petersburg, shown in

415 See Sholem Ash, *Onkel Mozes*, op. cit., p. 133.

416 See Sholem Ash, *Amerika*, op. cit., p. 118.

417 Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., p. 49; *A tifer grobn iz es geven in a vinkl fun shtot, farshtelt fun beyde zaytn mit hoykhe, zamdike bregn*. [...] *Ka rinshtokn zenen in “Rov” nit geven. Di gesn nit geburkirt, di zun iz zeltm ven dort arayngkumen*. [...] *Di kinder, vos zenen gezesn in der shtendiker blote, flegn fun di krankhaytn kripels aroykskumen. In yedn tsveytn hoyz iz a tifus geven, yedes andere kind iz krank geven af di englishe krenk. א טיעפער גראבען איז עס געווען אין א ווינקעל פון שטאדט, פערשטעלט פון ביידע זייטען מיט הויכע, זאמדיגע ברעגען. [...] קיין רינשטאקען זיינען אין, ראַו” גיט געווען. די געסען גיט געברוקירט, די זון איז זעלטען ווען דאָרט אריינגעקומען. [...] די קינדער, וואס זיינען געזעסען אין דער שטענדיקער בלאטע, פלעגען פון די קראנקהייטען קריפעלס ארויסקומען. אין יעדען צווייטען הויז איז א טיפוס געווען, יעדעס אנדערע קינד איז קראנק געווען אויף די ענגלישע קרענק.*

*Farn mabl* or in the second part of *Meri*. It is evident the writer visited them in person, as he describes in great detail their interiors, women's rich dresses, silk scarves, Bukhara shawls, French brocade fabrics as well as men's elegant outfits.<sup>418</sup> Above all, Saint Petersburg is the city of rich Jews, as others are not permitted to settle in the capital of the Russian Empire. The images of Warsaw and Łódź created in Asch's novels are totally different.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Polish town of Warsaw, which fell in the Russian hands during the partitions of Poland, became the largest Jewish city in Europe. Social and economic differences within the Jewish community were more pronounced and at the same time the Polish capital became an important center of Yiddish literature, especially thanks to the presence of Yitskhok Leyb Perets, whose apartment became a mecca for many young writers. During World War I, thousands fugitives came to Warsaw and in 1918 the Jewish community of about 320 thousand was more than 40% of all the inhabitants. Later, in the twenties and thirties, the percentage fell, but still the Jews were more than 30% of the entire population of the capital.<sup>419</sup> Warsaw, during and after World War I, is described in the novel bearing the same title, which is the second part of the trilogy *Farn mabl*. The city, well-known to the author, appears on other occasions as well, e.g. in *Motke Ganev*, where it is the backdrop of many events. Among other things, the narrator reports that in the medieval part of Warsaw, marked by the Statue of Mermaid, "which is a symbol of a Warsaw seductress rather than of the city itself,"<sup>420</sup> where the labyrinth of streets hides houses which in themselves are also labyrinths, navigable only to permanent tenants, there is Café Varshavski, lit by night with two red lamps. At the tables outside there are "girls, younger and older, in strange negligés, half-dressed, in white smocks and white skirts, often very short, and they display red, blue or black tights and fashionable Warsaw shoes."<sup>421</sup>

418 See *ibid.*, pp. 158, 161–162 and 167.

419 See *Warszawa*, in: Jerzy Tomaszewski, Andrzej Żbikowski (eds.), *Żydzi w Polsce. Dzieje i kultura. Leksykon*, Warszawa: Cyklady 2001, pp. 521–522; Jerzy Tomaszewski, *Niepodległa Rzeczpospolita*, in: Jerzy Tomaszewski (ed.), *Najnowsze dzieje Żydów w Polsce*, Warszawa: PWN 1993, pp. 141–269, here p. 161.

420 Sholem Ash, *Motke Ganev*, op. cit., p. 224; *vos iz gikher a simbol far di varshever farfirerishe froy, eyder far der shtot*.

וואָס איז גיכער אַ סימבאָל פאר די ווארשעווער פערפיהרערישע פרוי, איידער פאר דער שטאָדט.

421 *Ibid.*; *meydlekh, yunge un eltere in a modne negligiz, halb oysgeton, in vayse kafftendlekh un vayse spadnitses, oft kurtse, un vayzn aroys di royte, bloye, shvartse shtrimpf un di varshever getokte shikhelekh*.

מיידלעך, יונגע און עלטערע אין א מאָדנע נעגליזשע, האלב אויסגעטאָן, אין ווייסע קאפטענדלעך און ווייסע ספאדניצעס, אָפט קורצע, און ווייצן ארויס די רויטע, בלויע, שווארצע סטרימפּ און די ווארשעווער געטאָקטע שיכעלעך.

As a matter of fact there is not much more about Warsaw in *Motke Ganev*, apart from a brief mention of a fair and a walk in the park described elsewhere in the novel—otherwise, there are no more details. In the interwar period the Jewish population constituted almost 35% of all the inhabitants of Warsaw. They worked as laborers, craftsmen and tradesmen, and a small group of them belonged to the rich financial elite.<sup>422</sup> In Asch's novel (*Farn mabl*), being in Warsaw is for the young Mirkin “being as if in an abandoned Asiatic desert, forgotten by the world. On the outside the world strides towards a brighter future, to civilization and progress, whereas they have been left in the mud. The whole nation has been left in the mud. This is where they procreate and are fertile.”<sup>423</sup>

The narrator's observation that the nation is fertile and procreates in the mud is full of tragic irony and resembles God's blessing given after the creation of man (Gen 1,28). On the other hand, the image of being left behind, of an abandonment of the weaker ones brings to mind Moyshe Kulbak's poem *די שטאָט* (*Di shtot*, 1920) and its refrain: “come on, come on, let's leave the weak.” Soon after the publication the poem became famous and Asch was likely to know it.

The cities of Western Europe present in Asch's novels include Paris, full of bohemian life, Italian cities proud of their architectural treasures, and Berlin in Germany. Asch describes in detail restaurants frequented by rich Jews like the ones in Berlin, where, as he writes in *Der veg tsu zikh*, one can enjoy unobtrusive music and where waiters serve oysters, caviar, champagne or wine.<sup>424</sup> Berlin, which wastes money on food and has a good time until the small hours, appears also in *Bam opgrunt*, where during the worst period of inflation people do not care any longer, because their money is not worth much and the price of dinner changes a few times during their stay in a restaurant, so the only thing they are left with is wild fun.

Asch knew New York very well, which may be the reason why the plot of the majority of his American novels takes place in this city, one of the world's

422 See *Lódź*, in: Jerzy Tomaszewski, Andrzej Żbikowski (eds.), *Żydzi w Polsce. Dzieje i kultura. Leksykon*, op. cit., pp. 298–299; Jerzy Tomaszewski, *Niepodległa Rzeczpospolita*, op. cit., p. 161.

423 Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, op. cit., pp. 273–274; *vi er volt zikh gefunen in a farvorfenem azyatishn midber, vos iz fargesn fun der velt. In droysn tret di velt mit rizike trit in der tsukunft arayn, tsu a likhtigern morgn, tsu tsvilizacye, tsu progres un zey hot men iber-gelozn shtekn in blote. A gants folk iz ibergeblibn in a zump. Un men mert zikh un men frukhpert zikh in dem zump.*

ווי ער וואָלט זיך געפונען אין אַ פאַרוואָרפענעם אַזיאַטישן מיַדבֿער, וואָס איז פאַרגעסן פֿון דער וועלט. אין דרויסן טרעט די וועלט מיט ריזיגע טריט אין דער צוקונפֿט אַרײַן, צו אַ ליכטיגערן מאָרגן, צו ציוויליאַזאַציע, צו פֿראַגרעס און זײ האָט מען איבערגעלאָזן שטעקן אין בלאַטע. אַ גאַנץ פֿאָלק איז איבערגעבליבן אין אַ זומפֿ. און מען מערט זיך און מען פֿרוכפערט זיך אין דעם זומפֿ.

424 See Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, op. cit., pp. 53–54.

major concentrations of Jewish population. As seen through the eyes of the immigrants, it appears as powerful, ominous and confusing machinery, which became their new home. In *Amerika*, Mayer has been working in a shirt factory for the past seven months but he is not absolutely sure yet how he gets there: “a countryman [...] led him to a deep basement, where he got on the train.”<sup>425</sup> The description reveals the author’s subtle humor but also the immigrants’ bewilderment at their transfer from a small, peaceful town to a world metropolis.

The city is even more frightening in the evening, especially as perceived by the little Yosele. Using a small, sensitive child as a narrator is an opportunity to emphasize the indifference of the world to the fate of an individual. The reader has an impression of an infernal fair, enhanced by the overpowering heat. In the evening “the street would become black with groups of people. [...] Every minute the city train clattered overhead, stopped, spit out a black group and started again.”<sup>426</sup>

Street vendors ply their wares, the later it is, the livelier the streets become, bars fill up with customers, the city bustles with nightlife, clowns show their tricks, barrel organs play their music, turmoil and noise pervade the streets and children play under the people’s feet but no one really minds them.<sup>427</sup>

This terrifying image of the city is also present in other novels. In *Onkel Mozes Williamsburg Bridge*<sup>428</sup> was like a living iron giant, which spread over the East River holding both banks in his hands and legs. On its back trains kept speeding like wild iron animals with heads on fire, a train after a train. Animals sucked into their bellies thousands of people, who stood shoulder by shoulder and, terrified, looked out through animal eyes-windows.<sup>429</sup>

425 Sholem Ash, *Amerika*, op. cit., p. 19; *Der landsman [...] hot em arayngefirt in a tifn keler, un er iz mit a ban ahin geforn.*

דער לאנדס־מאן [...] האט איהם אַרײַנגעפירט אין אַ טיפֿען קעלער, און ער איז מיט אַ באַהן אַהין געפֿארן.

426 Ibid., p. 116; *hot zikh dos gesl tsu shvartsn ongehoybn fun makhnes mentshn. [...] Fun minut tsu minut hot geklopt der eleveyter (di shiotban) ibern kop, opgeshtelt, aroysgeshpien fun zikh a shvartse makhne un vayter gelofn.*

האָט זיך דאָס געסעל צו שוואַרצען אַנגעהויבען פֿון מחנות מענשען. [...] פֿון מינוט צו מינוט האָט געקלאַפֿט דער עלעװעטער (די שטאָדט־באַהן) אײַבער'ן קאָפּ, אַבגאַשטעלט, אַרױסגעשפּינגען פֿון זיך אַ שוואַרצע מחנה און װײַטער געלאָפֿען.

427 See *ibid.*, pp. 116–119.

428 It is a hanging bridge in New York, built in 1903 over the East River. At the time of its opening it was the longest hanging bridge in the world.

429 Sholem Ash, *Onkel Mozes*, op. cit., p. 6; *iz geven vi an ayzerner lebediker riz volt zikh oysgetsoygn iber dem Ist river un mit zayne hent un fis ongekhaft di beyde bregfn fun taykh un iber zayn rukn zenen gefloygn, vi vilde ayzerne hayes mit ongetsundene kep, eyn ban nokh dem andern. Un di hayes hobn gehat in zeyere beykher ayngeshlungen toyzender un toyzender mentshn. Zey zenen geshtanen kep af kep un mit dershrokene*

By comparing technological advances with living, legendary beings, Asch shows his admiration for the products of human minds and hands, but at the same time expresses his fear of the power and momentum of technology development. Here one can see a reference to contemporary literary trends, first of all to expressionism.

The United States is not only symbolized by poor quarters, but also by theaters, operas, fashion shows, resplendent hotels and spas. Asch knew very well that his readers were also interested in the world of high life and rich people. That is why he offered them a chance to experience luxury, even if vicariously, on the pages of his novels. In a sense this makes his books similar to modern TV soap operas which draw audiences for the same reasons. *Grosman un zun* opens with a description of a ballroom in an opulent hotel in Florida. It is there that extremely popular cocktail parties are thrown twice a week. A luxurious bar, discreetly lit with rose-blue light, is placed in a niche, under a canopy. In another niche there are tables covered with white tablecloths, laid with appetizers, such as Russian caviar, goose liver pâté in crystal bowls, a variety of cheeses, cold meats, marinated fish, and salads. The middle of the room, smooth and shiny in the light emitted by crystal chandeliers, is set aside for dancing. A jazz orchestra, well-known in the whole country, occupies a corner of the room. The light bathes the congregated women, glistens in their tiaras, dresses and décolletés, fashion models circle the room showing off their dresses, fur coats and jewelry offered for sale by hotel boutiques.<sup>430</sup> Just like the descriptions of exotic landscapes in faraway countries, these scenes from the life of rich people, beyond the reach of the author's contemporary readers, are a specific extension of the figures of memory which are accessible in their immediate experience and as such complement the non-literary worlds embedded in human memory.

Just like among the landscapes presented by Asch there are those of the Holy Land, in the novels by this quintessentially Jewish writer, there are scenes from Jerusalem. In *Der veg tsu zikh*, there are only brief mentions but a more comprehensive view on the city can be found in biblical novels. In *The Apostle*, Bar Naba sits in front of his house and looks down at Jerusalem, the city built on hills covered with white houses, which flow down to the valleys, while the tow-

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*gereytshe oygn aroysgekukt fun di fentsterlekh, fun di ayzerne hayeshe fentster oygn.*

איז געווען ווי אן אייזערנער לעבעדיגער ריען וואָלט זיך אויסגעצויגען איבער דעם איסט ריווער און מיט זיינע הענד און פיס אָנגעכאפט די ביידע ברעגען פון טייך און איבער זיין רוקען זיינען געפליגען, ווי ווילדע אייזערנע חיות מיט אָנגעצונדענע קעפּ, איין באַהן נאָך דעם אנדערען. און די חיות האָבען געהאַט אין זייערע בייכער איינגעשלונגען טויזענדער און טויזענדער מענשען. זיי זיינען געשטאַנען קעפּ אויף קעפּ און מיט ערשראַקענע גערייצטע אויגען ארויסגעקוקט פון די פענסטערלעך, פון די אייזערנע חיה'שע פענסטער אויגן.

430 See Sholem Ash, *Grosman un zun*, Nyu-York: Moyshe-Shmuel Shklarski 1954, pp. 5–6

שלום אַש, גראַסמאַן און זון, ניו־יאָרק: משה־שמואל שקלאַרסקי 1954, ט. 5–6.

ers, walls and palaces rest at the foot of the temple hill. His eyes move further down to the sandy dunes of the desert, which extends to the Dead Sea. According to the narrator beyond this point the world ends, there is a border, not only of space but also of time.<sup>431</sup> Because of this the Jewish sacred city acquires a timeless dimension. Also the Jerusalem Temple presented in *Der man fun Natseres* seems to exist beyond time; lit by the sun, it looks as if “it does not consist of buildings constructed by humans using earthly materials, but a phenomenon that fell from the skies. Walls, gates and roofs on fire.”<sup>432</sup>

Producing or recovering figures of memory, Asch recreates his own path from a small town to the big world, understood as, on the one hand, metropolises and, on the other, the world of the rich, who can afford luxuries, entertainment and travels. In Asch’s early novels, the town stands for an idyll and Arcadia: town people live close to nature and close to God. Gradually this image erodes—poor people, with no hope for the future, appear, as well as thieves. Already in the early novels one can find characteristic chronotopes: the inn or the market and the cohabitation of the Jews and the Christians is presented in positive terms. The next stage is the big cities, often terrifying with the magnitude of urban architecture and the range and pace of technological advancements. Society becomes clearly stratified into the rich and the poor, who live separate lives without any chance of entering the other stratum. This is where literature comes into play, because it supplies the missing images to the members of either group, showing the rich readers how the poor live and giving the poor a glimpse of the life led by the rich. Nowadays the role of Asch’s novels is even more important as it allows the readers an insight into the past.

### 4.3.3 Home and family

Family is the foundation of Jewish life. Its unique character, enhanced by religious commands, has always influenced the specific meaning of their family life, making the Jews so much different from the neighbors. In Asch’s novels the Jewish home is traditionally hospitable—travelers are fed, the young people who learn or study are offered board and lodging, the poor are invited for the Sabbath. At the same time it is the home where the mother cooks and brings children up and occasionally earns money on the side, whereas the father takes

431 See Sholem Asch, *The Apostle*, op. cit., pp. 59–60.

432 Sholem Ash, *Der man fun Natseres*, op. cit., Vol. 2, p. 187; *Nisht vi er volt bashtanen fun binyonim, geboyt fun mentshlekhe hent, mit erdishe materyaln, nor vi a dershaynung, vos iz aropgefaln fun himl,—flamedike vent, flamedike toyern, flamedike dekher.*

נישט ווי ער וואלט באשטאנען פון בנינים, געבויט פון מענטשלעכע חענט, מיט ערדישע מאטעריאלן, נאר ווי א דערשיינונג, וואס איז אראפגעפאלן פון הימל, - פלאמעדיקע ווענט, פלאמעדיקע טויערן, פלאמעדיקע דעכער.

care of the religious upbringing of his children and of following Jewish tradition. Jewish sons either study or earn their living but Jewish daughters are expected to marry early, which is arranged by the parents. Such an image is presented by Asch in the majority of his novels, and although he pays attention to various problems it connotes, in the reader's mind he preserves the traditional character of family life and the traditional division of labor. One of the figures of memory related to home in Asch's novels is its appearance and, most of all, its function and the function of particular rooms and chambers, such as the dining room or the kitchen, as well as the figures and roles of the main family members: the mother, the father, the daughter or the son.

*Dos shtetl* opens with the chapter *Di shtub*, in which the description of the title room is eclipsed by the hospitality of the hosts: Reb Yekheskiel Gombiner works hard to provide for his guests and Malkele, his wife, takes care of them. The door is open to everyone, even at night. One can always come in to get warm, to talk over a cup of tea or borsch or a sip of water. And when a housewife does not feel like starting a stove fire, she can always take the pan with her and put it on Malkele's stove. The food at Reb Yekheskiel Gombiner's is not kept under lock—anyone can come and taste it.<sup>433</sup> When the meal time comes, everyone present is invited to join in. With much humor, Asch describes the scene in which one of the vendors cooperating with Reb Yekheskiel Gombiner does not know whether he should sit down with others and eat or not—it is the delicious smell that tips the scale. Yet, just in case,

he sat in such a way that depending on your wish you could think that he sat or that he did not sit. Yet the servant [...] put the plate in front of him too. So he moved closer to the table and started eating, but in such a way that depending on your wish you could think he was eating or that he was just tasting.<sup>434</sup>

The Jewish kitchen is the kingdom of women and often becomes the true center of home. In *Dos shtetl* it is an opulent room, ruled by Malkele, the lady of the house. It is a warm and safe place, which acquires a symbolic meaning of the affluent domestic idyll, like, for instance, in the scene when a meal is prepared on

433 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., p. 11.

434 Ibid., p. 17; *er iz gezesn af aza shteyger, az men vil hot men gekent meynen, az er zitst bam tish, un az men vil, ken men meynen, az er zitst nisht bam tish. Nor di dinst [...] hot far em oykh anidergeshtelt a teler. Er [...] hot [...] tsugerukt zikh tsum tish, esndik oykh af aza shteyger, az men vil ken men meynen, az er est bam tish, un az men vil ken men meynen, az er farzukunft nor.*

ער איז געזעסן אויף אַזאַ שטייגער, אַז מען וויל האָט מען געקענט מיינען, אַז ער זיצט ביים טיש, און אַז מען וויל, קען מען מיינען, אַז ער זיצט נישט ביים טיש. נאָר די דינסט [...] האָט פֿאַר אים אויך אַנדערגעשטעלט אַ טעלער. ער [...] האָט [...] צוגערוקט זיך צום טיש, עסנדיק אויך אויף אַזאַ שטייגער, אַז מען וויל קען מען מיינען, אַז ער עסט ביים טיש, און אַז מען וויל קען מען מיינען, אַז ער פֿאַרוכט נאָר.

the day of the annual balance. Pots and pans hang on the walls, the stove is hot, goose lard melts in a pot and an old relative tells the children fairy tales and jokes with them.<sup>435</sup>

The American Jews also take care of their homes. Often their homes are poor, rented apartments with old furniture, but there are occasional descriptions of wealthy homes as well. In *Gots gefangene*, Emilye moves outside the town after giving birth to a child. She likes her new home very much and arranges it according to her fancy, buying, among other things, old Colonial pieces of furniture. This is how the narrator describes the interior: “The burning red and amber, golden-yellow of fall leaves in the copper pots and brass pans. [...] You would eat at an uncovered table, laid only with small colorful napkins, one for each seat, and by the candlelight coming from the candles set in the old Jewish Sabbath candlesticks.”<sup>436</sup>

In Central and Eastern Europe the ideal woman would be quiet, attentive to the household needs, and following all religious commandments. Many women would also pick up additional jobs to support their family so that their husbands could lead more intense religious life and study the Torah and the Talmud. The Jewish mother is an important figure in Jewish literature but she is rarely a leading character.<sup>437</sup> Asch tries to change that and he often introduces strong women, who make it a point to influence the family fate. Probably in order to bring about such a shift, he calls one of his novels *Di muter*, and devotes another one to Mary, the mother of Jesus, the most important mother in the Christian world. The first Jewish mother, whose tomb would draw pilgrimages, is Rachel, the

435 See *ibid.*, pp. 47–49.

436 Sholem Ash, *Gots gefangene*, op. cit., p. 50; *Flakerdike roytkeyt un burshтинene, goldene gelkeyt fun harbst-bleter in kuperne tep un meshene rondles*. [...] *Gegegn hot men af dem naketn tish, badekt nor mit kleyne, kolirte servetlekh, far yedn zits bazunder, un ba likht, ongetsundn in alte yidische shabes-laykhter*.

פלאַקערדיקע רויטקייט און פורשטיגענע, גאלדענע געלקייט פון האַרבסט־בלעטער אין קופערנע טעפ און מעשענע ראַנדלעס. [...] געגעסן האָט מען אויף דעם נאַקעטן טיש, באַדעקט נאָר מיט קליינע, קאָלירטע סערוועטלעך, פאַר יעדן זיץ באַזונדער, און ביי ליכט, אָנגעצונדן אין אַלטע יידישע שבת־לייכטער.

437 Sometimes, however, it is the mother who is the leading character, just like in the well-known melodrama *Mirele Efros* (1898), written by יעקב גאָרדין (Yankev Gordin, 1853–1909). Mirele Efros is a widow who after her husband’s death expands her family business; the plot focuses on her problems with a demanding daughter-in-law and the novel has a happy ending. Another Yiddish writer who should be mentioned here is Dovid Pinski, the author of, among other plays, *Di muter* (1901), in which the widow Rokhel brings her children up alone. When her son and daughter grow up, she decides to remarry, which makes her children turn back on her. In the 1905 Warsaw premiere, the role of Rokhel was played by the outstanding actress Ester Rachel Kamińska (1870–1925), who also appeared in the silent Yiddish movie of 1912 based on Gordin’s play *Mirele Efros*.



wife of Jacob and the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. In the novel *Mary*, it is her that Miriam imagines as standing by the road and reaching out with her hands to her suffering people. Rachel cries over the fate of the Jewish people, whereas Miriam is sad because of the fate of the whole world, the whole humankind.<sup>438</sup> This symbolic scene contains Asch's logic: the beginning of the road is the Jewish nation, which Miriam emerged from, but the end of the road is humanity.

In European shtetls and in the families of poor immigrants in the United States the mother's basic task is to feed the family and often to earn the living. In Asch's novels mothers do just that, but there are episodes which show that sometimes they transcend the material needs. One such episode is included in *Dos shtetl*: wandering booksellers come to town and the narrator comments that every mother would scrimp and save to buy a book or a prayer book for her son.<sup>439</sup> The religious spirit of her family and her husband's learnedness are to the Jewish mother a great source of pride and happiness. In *Di muter* there is a scene in which Sore-Rivke stands by the kitchen stove listening to her husband's reading the Bible and her heart fills up with joy.<sup>440</sup> In the novel, this type of the Jewish mother who makes sacrifices for her family is represented by Bukholts' planned sculpture; by looking at Dvoyre he imagines his finished work: "My 'mother'—he talks to himself—will stand like that, crooked, as if she had legs of twisted wire, as if she were a newly born calf that cannot stand."<sup>441</sup> This is not a very appealing image but definitely it expresses the most important features of the mothers Asch describes: their constant fatigue and vulnerability to the threats posed by the world.

In Asch's novels, Jewish mothers dedicate their whole life to their children—the author emphasizes this strong emotional bond by showing that the mother takes care of her son after her death. In *Di muter* Moyshe gets lost in a snowstorm and, exhausted, calls the dead Sore-Rivke for help. In the snowflakes, he sees his mother's face, which raises his hope for salvation; miraculously, he finds his way in the forest and comes across a farmhouse, where he is given shelter.<sup>442</sup> Jewish mothers are not just poor and hardworking. There are also rich ones, who know very well what they want from life but who, just like the poor

438 See Sholem Asch, *Mary*, op. cit., p. 98.

439 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., p. 112.

440 See Sholem Ash, *Di muter*, op. cit., p. 12.

441 Ibid., p. 309; *Azoy vet zi shteyn—zogt er tsu zikh—mayn "muter," farkrumt, azoy vi zi volt gehat gedreyte drotene fis vi a kalb. Vos iz ersht geboyrn gevorn un halt zikh koyrn. אָזוי וועט זי שטעהן - זאָגט ער צו זיך - מײן „מוטער“, פערקרומט, אָזוי ווי זי וואָלט געהאַט געדערעהטע דראַטענע פֿיס ווי אַ קאַלב. וואָס איז ערשט געבוירען געוואָרען און האַלט זיך קוים.*

442 See *ibid.*, pp. 320–329.

ones, first take care of their children. Such is the mother of Meri's would-be fiancé, who became a widow early in her life and decided against remarrying so that she could take full care of her only child.<sup>443</sup>

Rokhel Leye Hurvits from *Farn mabl* is a Jewish atheist. She and her husband give up religion and embrace faith in progress, education and just future. She believes that the role of a woman is to assist her husband in building a new world.<sup>444</sup> She proves the seriousness of her beliefs by bringing up their children as patriots and social activists. Jaś, her older son, is a Polish patriot who is deported by the Russians to Siberia, from where he returns thanks to the revolution, whereas Dovid, her younger son, is sentenced to death for shooting a Russian officer during the First of May demonstration. This thread brings to mind a dramatic epic poem written by Leyvik Halpern *הירש לעקערט* (*Hirsh Lekert*, 1927), published a few years earlier than Asch's trilogy. The poem focuses on the execution in 1902 of Hirsh Lekert,<sup>445</sup> a Jewish shoemaker, for his attempt to kill General von Wahl, a Vilnius governor.

In *Farn mabl*, Helenka, Hurvits' older daughter and the future wife of Zakhari Mirkin, helps her father to manage a school for the Jewish poor, and her younger sister Zośka becomes a Communist agitator serving the Bolsheviks. Hurvits' wife, Rokhel Leye, not only takes care of her family but offers help to all young Jews who come to Warsaw to study and to work. Also, she organizes neighborly help in the winter. Rokhele Leye sets off for Saint Petersburg, trying to help the imprisoned Jaś. In the city, she ends up at the office of the counselor Halpern and at the apartment of Madame Kvasnietsova. What is significant is her response to the prayers said in the apartment and to the blind faith that the Rebbe's orison will help to solve all the problems. She is of the opinion that it is not the prayer which is needed but the goodwill of the young ladies living at the other end of the hall, who, thanks to their guests, can fix any problem. She also believes that the psalms said in Kvasnietsova's apartment do not go to God but to the other part of the apartment.<sup>446</sup> As a matter of fact her beliefs are identical to those of Borekh Khomski, another character in the novel, who is also critical of Madame's work and hypocrisy. Likewise, Rokhel Leye does not beat about the bush when talking about Zakhari's work in Saint Petersburg—she believes that it is not a battle and that everyone laughs at the lawyers who just help the authorities create an illusion of dispensing justice. She also believes that the real battle is to blow up the foundations, so that the whole world may hear the sound

443 See Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, op. cit., p. 59.

444 See Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, op. cit., p. 59.

445 See Hirsz Abramowicz, *Profiles of a Lost World. Memoirs of East European Jewish Life before World War II*, New York: YIVO 1999, pp. 132–142.

446 See Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, op. cit., p. 181.

of the explosion.<sup>447</sup> Apart from religious faith, Rokhel Leye possesses all the attributes of a real Jewish mother, but also she is the woman who wants to influence the fate of her family and thus she speaks up openly not only at home but also outside. She symbolizes the social changes taking place in the world, which started to concern also the Jewish community.

As if by virtue of contrast, the German mothers portrayed by Asch in his novels are brought up in apparently Christian families and therefore are totally different. In *Bam opgrunt* Hans' mother ousts him from home when he brings Lotte with him, but Lotte's mother is even worse as she locks the door so that Lotte cannot come back home and many days later she reveals to her degenerate son, the murderer Wolfgang, that his sister lives with a Jew and they both decide to teach Lotte a lesson. They lure her home, Wolfgang beats her and cuts her hair off and then they lock her up. She flees only when her brother leaves home.<sup>448</sup>

An interesting narrative strategy in *Dos gezang fun tol* is moving the Jewish mother to Palestine, where Sore mothers the whole colony and in a way symbolizes a new Israeli mother and the idea of community in the kibbutz.<sup>449</sup> Sore visits every settlement, she appears everywhere where she is needed, she cleans, cooks, tends to the garden, plants young trees and takes care of children. When during the war young people are imprisoned in Damascus, she can be suddenly seen in the courtyard with a pot of food, which she offers to everyone and raises their spirits.<sup>450</sup> This omnipresence of the caring Jewish mothers brings to mind some immanent benevolent force present in the Israeli land, but at the same time it seems to be a feminine equivalent of Lamed Vav Tzadikim, who in Asch's other novels appear from nowhere, provide counsel and help, and then disappear.

In the Eastern European Jewish family presented in Asch's novels, the father plays a very important role. In *Di muter*, when the father is home, everyone should be absolutely quiet. Everyone is especially careful when the head of the family reads, studies or naps.<sup>451</sup> And they do not seem to care that the father is a loafer who cannot support his family. On the other hand, by introducing the

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447 See *ibid.*, p. 368.

448 See Sholem Ash, *Bam opgrunt*, *op. cit.*, pp. 469–475.

449 Degania, the first Israeli kibbutz, was set up in 1909 and could have been used by Asch as a model. Ten men and two women established a new farming settlement close to an Arab village, on the southern bank of the Sea of Galilee. They worked hard, draining the bog and building new life—in 1914 there were already about fifty people living in the kibbutz, <http://www.degania.org.il> (1 February 2012).

450 See Sholem Ash, *Dos gezang fun tol*, *op. cit.*, pp. 39–53.

451 See Sholem Ash, *Di muter*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

Hurvitses, a married couple from Warsaw, in his novel *Farn mabl*, Asch pays homage to the family of his wife, Matylda Szpiro, which he was likely to use as a model. What is more, the author apparently identifies with the figure of the father, the teacher Hurvits, just like he does with the character Borekh Khomski.

The patriarchal figure of the father can be found in many novels by Asch. What is interesting is not only how the head of the family is presented in the European context but also what his status and image are among the immigrants, where the roles seem to be reversed—the young generation often seek advice from and understanding of their mothers, who are faster to adapt to the new environment than the fathers, who gradually lose their status.<sup>452</sup> This reversal is seen in *Ist river*, when Moyshe Volf Davidovski gives up his own ambitions to take care of his paralyzed son. He instinctively knows when Nosn needs him and when it happens, he momentarily leaves his customers in the shop and runs up to his apartment. At the same time he is jealous of his son and does not want anyone else to help him.<sup>453</sup>

In *Amerika*, Asch's early novel, most of the threads related the fate of the Jewish family in exile, elaborated upon in his later novels, are already present. Mayer, the father and melamed in a small Russian shtetl, feels responsible for his family, which he is not able to support and sets off for the United States. The decision is exceptionally difficult because he considers himself something more than a simple craftsman<sup>454</sup>—while in the States he will have to work as a laborer—and because he is not sure whether he will be able to reconcile the new life with the demands of Jewish tradition. In the United States he feels lost, but he knows why he is there and cheers himself up that this is just a different country where physical work is not disgraceful and he soon falls into the humdrum of his everyday life. In the mornings he goes out to work, at the factory focuses on what he does, and in the corner of the rented apartment he tries to create an illusion of a Jewish home by saying his prayers and observing feasts. He does not keep company with other Jews, finds them too Americanized, and keeps missing his family which he left behind in the shtetl.<sup>455</sup> The father figure that Asch created stands for many Jewish fathers for whom immigration seemed to be the only solution and who, upon coming to the United States, discover that they have swapped financial poverty for spiritual one. Although they do their best to combat material poverty in their old homeland, when exposed to spiritual

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452 See Cheryl Amy Alexander, *Major Themes in Selected American Novels by Sholem Asch*, op. cit., pp. 39–40.

453 See Sholem Ash, *Ist river*, op. cit., pp. 56–57.

454 Although melameds are at the bottom of the social hierarchy in professions requiring intellect, in Asch's shtetls they are respected.

455 See Sholem Ash, *Amerika*, op. cit., pp. 19–25.

poverty, they turn indifferent and put up with the new situation they find themselves in. Additionally, many fathers lose their status of the head of the family and their moral authority—in *Amerika* this is illustrated by the scene in which Meyer's ten-year-old, Americanized sons ask him in English to "mind his own business" when he admonishes them.<sup>456</sup>

Such a family is described in, among other novels, *Onkel Mozes*. Berl, the father, tries to maintain old traditions but at the same time he is already used to the fact that many things are beyond him. His son eats with his head uncovered and without washing his hands first, his wife, who used to read the *Tsenerene*<sup>457</sup> only, now goes to the theater, reads newspapers in Yiddish, and defends her children by saying that in the United States there is no time for prayers and that it is enough that the father prays for everyone.<sup>458</sup> Also in *Di muter*, soon upon coming to the States, the oldest son explains to his father that it is different now than back home and that he also has to start earning his living, that in the States work is not disgraceful and that even while reading the Torah the bal-koyre may sew shirts. After some time the father becomes proud of his work, of his being a laborer—he says his work is really needed by people.<sup>459</sup> A similar situation takes place at Moyshe Volf Davidovski's home, when Irving is late for the Sabbath dinner, but he is happy that he has just earned plenty of money, so he sits at the table and starts eating. His father reproaches his son that he failed to say the prayer and he does not want to accept Irving's money earned on the Sabbath. Irving responds by saying that he pays for the board and lodging but he is ready to move out because he has the right to make his own decisions. His mother joins the exchange and explains it to her husband that he should forget the old homeland and old traditions—in the United States children have the same rights as their parents, especially when they bring money home.<sup>460</sup> Many Yiddish writers discuss in their works the alienation of immigrants in the United States and the assimilation of the young generation at the cost of their giving up time-honored tradition, including the already mentioned Kadye Molodovski in her collection of short stories *אָ שטוב מיט זיבן פענצטער* (*A shtub mit zibn fenster*), published in 1957, and Dovid Pinski in the novel *דאס הויז פון נח עדאן* (*Dos hoyz fun Noyekh Edon*, 1938).

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456 See *ibid*, pp. 92–94.

457 *Tsenerene*, צאנז וראנה, a very popular simplified version of the Bible for women, was written by Yankev ben Yitskhok Ashkenazi (1550–1628) of Janów Lubelski; the first edition was published in 1622.

458 See Sholem Ash, *Onkel Mozes*, *op. cit.*, pp. 22–27.

459 See Sholem Ash, *Di muter*, *op. cit.*, pp. 119–122 and 164.

460 See Sholem Ash, *Ist river*, *op. cit.*, pp. 87–89.

In Asch's novels, the Jewish daughter is usually a pretty girl who is obedient to her parents but who knows how to act as an adult in emergencies. In the novel *Amerika*, Rokhele, as a ten-year-old girl, is often sent to her stingy relatives to borrow money,<sup>461</sup> but a year later, when her parents are at a loss, she decides on their behalf: the mother should stay with the older boys and the father, while she alone should accompany Yosele from the United States to the family shtetl.<sup>462</sup> In *Motke Ganev*, Motke's older sister, who is eight years old, is often forced to assume some of the duties of her mother which she is not able to perform. Every year, her mother offers her services as a wet nurse, leaving her own newborn baby to her daughter, whose job it is to somehow feed the infant. That is why two siblings live, fed with a few drops of sugar water, which they suck from a piece of cloth, and with diluted cow milk, whereas two other siblings die.<sup>463</sup> The narrator relates all this as a matter of course and adds *en passant* that no one living in the neighborhood is surprised that Zlatke's children cry, hungry, because everyone knows that the mother is not home. This narrative strategy emphasizes the tragic aspect of the presented scenes and the exceptional indifference of the poor people to injustice.

Jewish daughters also make decisions of a different kind. Dvoyre leaves home to move to the place of her friend, the sculptor. Her mother cannot understand this and spends sleepless nights because her daughter lives with a stranger without a Jewish marriage ceremony under the chuppah and without the blessing. Sore-Rivke also does not understand why Dvoyre still works, even though she is married. On the one hand, the mother does not understand American realities and definitely tries to preserve the traditions of the old homeland, but on the other hand, Asch criticizes her obstinacy, which does not let her adjust to the world she lives in.<sup>464</sup> Dvoyre uses her American freedom also in a different way. As she believes that she should take care of her husband and in a sense be for him more of a mother than a wife, she decides to abort her pregnancy. Asch presents the episode in a very laconic way—he writes that Dvoyre spends a few days in a clinic set up by a radical activist “to help working women diminish the overproduction of humankind on the commercial market by offering them counsel and active support.”<sup>465</sup> Initially, this cynical and ironic remark offered by the

461 See Sholem Ash, *Amerika*, op. cit., p. 6.

462 See *ibid.*, pp. 79–80.

463 See Sholem Ash, *Motke Ganev*, op. cit., pp. 23–24.

464 See Sholem Ash, *Di muter*, op. cit., pp. 273–276.

465 *Ibid.*, p. 305; *Tsu helfn arbeter-froyen mit eytses un mit tatn tsu farmindern di iberproduksyon fun dem mentshn-min afn handels-mark.*

צו העלפען אַרבייטער־פֿרויען מיט עצות און מיט טהאַטען צו פֿערמינדערן די איבערפֿראַדקציאָן פֿון דעם מענשען־מין אויפֿן האַנדעלס־מאַרק.

narrator is difficult to understand in the context of Asch's other novels, in which he expresses his deep respect for human life and motherhood. However, it is evident the words he used are not random—later, the author comes back to the thread when Dvoyre watches her husband working and she is glad she aborted the pregnancy because now she has more time for her beloved, she enjoys her happiness.<sup>466</sup> It is possible that Asch tries to hold his judgment here and makes the narrator use objective language first to show the search of the young people who, when removed to a different world, do not find support in their bewildered parents and must make choices, sometimes very difficult ones, entirely on their own and, second to let the readers judge for themselves. The thread of abortion appeared in Yiddish literature before Asch, in, for instance, the first modernist novel written in Yiddish, that is *נאָך אַלעמען* (*Nokh alemen*, 1913) by Dovid Bergelson,<sup>467</sup> in which a young girl wants to escape a conventional small-town marriage, has an abortion and then tries to find happiness in a big city.

In Asch's novel, Dvoyre's sacrifice for her beloved goes beyond abortion. The girl understands that it will be better for Bukhholts if in his trip to Europe on the scholarship he is accompanied by a different, more worldly woman and that is why she lets him leave with Isabel Forster and resolves to go back to her family home and assume the role of her dead mother. In this way the daughter takes the place of the Jewish mother who does not have the life of her own but is totally devoted to her family. Asch emphasizes this transformation of the Jewish daughter into the Jewish mother by giving the title *Di muter*<sup>468</sup> to the last chapter of the novel, in which he recounts the events mentioned above.

The thread of abortion appears also in *Der veg tsu zikh*. Meri, who has never loved Jaś, wants to dispose of everything which reminds her of him, in the first place of the child. While living in Paris and thinking about her plans, she comes to the conclusion that she must get rid of "it" and that she wants to be free. Also here there is no emotional relation between the woman and her child; Jaś begs her to change her mind but his arguments are selfish—what he wants is a trace of him in this world when he is gone.<sup>469</sup> The story, however, has a different ending. Meri goes back to her parents' home in Russia. A new chapter and another scene show the sudden transformation: Meri is proud of her state, she wants to learn how to be a good mother, she is no longer at a loss, and she smiles. All this flies in the face of the whole town, which buzzes with rumors about "shame." It is only Meri's old friend Misha who is happy for her and believes that the baby

466 See *ibid.*, p. 313.

467 דוד בערגעלסאָן Dovid Bergelson (1884–1952, shot dead along with other Yiddish writers during Stalinist purges) was one of the best stylists in Yiddish literature.

468 See Sholem Ash, *Di muter*, op. cit., pp. 392–407.

469 See Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, op. cit., pp. 205–212.

that is to be born is a great joy.<sup>470</sup> In this way the author wants to emphasize the difference between the old homeland, which honors tradition and in which people gossip but no one, at least in the world presented in the novel, would suggest the idea of abortion as contrasted with Western Europe, where, according to Asch, the social reality was totally different.

An interesting element of the plot of *Amerika* is the introduction of Yosele —as a matter of fact, the novel's abbreviated version for children is titled *Yosele*. Just like for his father, also for the boy, religion, education, Jewish customs and traditions stand for what is most important in life, without which nothing would really matter. However, Yosele is more radical and does not consider giving up any of his ideals or their part. In the United States everyone tries to help him, but they do not understand that their acculturation solutions are unacceptable to the boy. Finding himself in a blind alley, he chooses to shut himself off from the world, stops eating and does not take medication when he falls ill.<sup>471</sup> The death of Yosele becomes a symbol of a desperate clinging to old values and it forces the reader to reconsider his own principles due to a contrast with what the adults do, in particular Yosele's father, who instilled these values in him. A similar figure of an alienated Jewish boy, who is the great hope of his parents while still living in the shtetl because he is an eager and brilliant pupil, appears in *Di muter*.<sup>472</sup> After coming to the United States, Yoyne-Gedalye does not share the fate of Yosele. However, contrary to his siblings, he does not work but attends an evening school to learn English, as in future he wants to be a rabbi.

Besides education, another option described by Asch that a Jewish son may choose is work and help offered to his family. Out of necessity in Eastern European shtetls and in the United States alike, the work of minors is treated as natural. Shloyme-Khaim leaves for the United States and in his first letter sent back home includes his photograph and twenty-five rubles. Next he sends tickets and money for the whole family.<sup>473</sup> The son's obvious responsibility for his parents can be also seen in other novels. Nosn Ganev appearing in *Motke Ganev* is a thief, but the town respects him as he takes care of his mother, with whom he lives. He sends his wife back home because she cannot find common ground with her mother-in-law; he brings his mother best meat and best fish for the Sabbath, pays for a good seat behind the mechitza, and on Saturdays he dresses her up and goes for a walk with her. That is why the town women believe that despite his profession he deserves salvation.<sup>474</sup> As if to emphasize Nosn's life pri-

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470 See *ibid.*, pp. 246–251.

471 See Sholem Ash, *Amerika*, *op. cit.*, pp. 92–94.

472 See Sholem Ash, *Di muter*, *op. cit.*, pp. 94–96.

473 See *ibid.*, pp. 41 and 88.

474 See Sholem Ash, *Motke Ganev*, *op. cit.*, p. 80.



orities, the novel does not explain how he parted ways with his wife or what fate befell her after the divorce.

When in the United States, most Jewish sons gradually give up traditions and customs of their fathers. However, they retain a dose of respect for their parents and their faith. That is why when in *Onkel Mozes* Berl Melnik, who is about to embark a ship taking him back home, asks his son to say Kaddish for him when he dies, the son understands that it is his duty. The scene moves other Jews who are gathered there and who once lived in the town of Kuzmin—they realize that their children are not better because they would not find it natural to say Kaddish for the dead.<sup>475</sup>

Misha, Halpern's son from *Farn mabl*, is an equivocal character. He wants to become a pilot, but as the Jews are not admitted to a state school, he is ready to be baptized. However, his resolution is not strong enough and at the same time he is afraid that his father will disinherit him. Because of Misha, the czarist police arrest and torture a lawyer's servant who is in love with Misha, who lent him some money, and who is wrongly accused of theft.<sup>476</sup> The narrator shows the young man in a totally different light when Misha, who has already become an officer, tries to flee abroad along with his father. Here he is a resolute man, a thoroughly positive character. In vain, he tries to defend his father from the Cossacks.<sup>477</sup>

Just like in the majority of literary works in Yiddish, in Asch's novels the Jewish family is shown in a positive light. As a rule, fathers are deeply religious and mothers totally devoted to their children, who consider it their duty to help their parents and take care of their younger siblings. The Jewish home is open to visitors, and the family members are there for each other. The positive aspects of the family image are even more telling when contrasted with a degenerated family Motke was born in, as presented in *Motke Ganev*. In later novels, which show different times and places, often related to exile, the image is disturbed: parents are not always able to gather their wits in the new circumstances, traditions lose their significance in the world dominated by money, and the young can count only on themselves in their search for the right path in life. Nevertheless, many characters notice at some point that their life is empty, that they cannot look up to old values and traditions as their guidelines, and they try to regain what they have lost. That is why one can conclude that the most fundamental figures of memory related to the family are still Reb Yekheskiel Gombiner's guest room in *Dos shtetl*, Shloyme Noged's faith and trust in God's benevolence in *Reb Shloyme Noged*, and Miriam's industriousness, piety and love for chil-

475 See Sholem Ash, *Onkel Mozes*, op. cit., p. 75.

476 See Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, op. cit., pp. 252–261 and 435–442.

477 See Sholem Ash, *Moskve*, op. cit., pp. 408–409.

dren in *Mary*, though one cannot forget Rokhel Leye, who mothers not only her own children in *Farn mabl*. The younger generation is represented by Meri, who searches for her place in the world in *Meri* and *Der veg tsu zikh*, by Dvoyre in *Di muter*, as well as Irving and Nosn Davidovski in *Ist river* and Robert in *Grosman un zun*. The latter is an exceptionally important character, because his parents, the Jewish father and the Protestant mother, wish he should choose his religion himself when he grows up. Already at the age of thirteen, Robert decides to adopt his father's religion. Here again Asch expresses his own conviction that Judaism is the religion one is not only born into but also the religion one can consciously adopt.

### 4.3.4 Religion, denomination, beliefs

A characteristic feature of Asch's works is their immersion in Jewish tradition but also their respect for the younger religion, that is for Christianity. The writer tries to find and emphasize positive sides of both religions and criticizes everything he finds reproachful. Most of the threads are topical, but there are also figures of memory which are difficult to forget and which appear in the novels set in earlier times.

An important issue in his writings is contacts between Judaism and Christianity, including the image of Christianity, mixed marriages, conversions, hiding one's religion from public knowledge, collaboration and conflicts between representatives of both religions. An important element is Kidush hashem, the sacrifice of one's life for faith. In Asch's novels, one can also find figures of memory related to religious and spiritual authorities, such as a Rebbe, a rabbi, a Catholic and an Orthodox priest, even a pope; or to one's faith and religiousness, such as simple, trusting faith, conscience, religious fanaticism, and atheism. There are passages on prayers and religious feasts, too. Faith entails various beliefs, superstitions even, there are Messianic hopes, homes are visited by the prophet Elijah and Lamed Vav Tzadikim, a devil appears. What is important, apart from purely Jewish figures of speech, is the Jewish perspective on Christianity.

In *The Apostle* the first Christians free their slaves before baptism, because there is only one God; they sell their houses and give away the money to the poor, in that way reducing their property to their own soul, which they received from God.<sup>478</sup> The image of a good, poor Christian who is not concerned with earthly values and relies on God only, derives from the Gospel according to St Matthew (Matt 6,25–34). On the other hand, a negative image of Christian inhabitants of 16th-century Rome is presented in *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen*

478 See Sholem Asch, *The Apostle*, op. cit., pp. 61–63.

—there are horrifying scenes in which Christians are shown as enjoying the sight of the flooding of the ghetto. All of them, the wealthy and the poor, also the priests, climb up the ghetto wall to watch the spectacle in which the Jews are dying. No one helps the victims—on the contrary, those who climb up the wall are pushed back to the flooding water.<sup>479</sup> It seems that pagan Rome and its bloody pageants are moved in time but now the victims are not the first Christians but the Jews, while the Christians assume the role of the oppressors.

At the same time Asch is most interested in finding common rather than dividing traits. In his novels, specific common traits are sometimes expressed straightforwardly, for instance, in the trilogy *Farn mabl*, whose opening chapter is titled *Yidn un kristn*,<sup>480</sup> the title can be treated as a key to understanding the world of the novel. Also in other novels Asch often emphasizes the existence of one, common God. Characteristically, Asch's beliefs in that respect were constant—there are no differences between his early and later novels.

In *Gots gefangene*, upon hearing Emilye's family story, the American Frank says that as a matter of fact their great-grandfathers were very much alike:

In fact they are both the children of the same God from the Old Testament, God who does not know what mercy is, God of judgment only. The both chased away happiness from their worlds and introduced solemnity and melancholy. [...] We will have to remove those limitations. [...] Emilye, we both have to get rid of them.<sup>481</sup>

In the passage, Asch is clearly critical of too solemn faith, faith devoid of happiness and love.

In *Der man fun Natseres*, early Christianity is shown as a religious faction of Judaism; in *The Apostle* the narrator relates that all non-Jews who would like to follow Christ not only have to obtain baptism but also have to convert to Judaism, in the case of men also by means of circumcision. Obviously this hinders possible conversion and that is why Paul tries to convince the apostles that they should accept all those who are ready to conform to the basic principles of their faith, without asking them to meet other requirements. This opens the door to

479 See Sholem Ash, *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen*, op. cit., pp. 35–47.

480 See Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, op. cit., p. 5.

481 Sholem Ash, *Gots gefangene*, op. cit., p. 159; *Aygentlekh, zenen zey beyde kinder fun eyn Got fun altn testament, fun dem Got, vos ken nisht ka rakhmones, nor bloyz din. Beyde hobn zey fartribn di freyd fun der velt un arufgetsoygn dem ernst un di moreskhoyre. [...] Mir veln darfn tsershtern didozike tsoymen. [...] Emilye, mir darfn zikh beyde fun zey bafrayen.*

איינגטלעך, זענען זיי ביידע קינדער פון איין גאט פון אַלטן טעסטאַמענט, פון דעם גאָט, וואָס קען נישט קיין רחמנות, נאָר בלויז דין. ביידע האָבן זיי פאַרטריבן די פרייד פון דער וועלט און אַרויפגעצויגן דעם ערנסט און די מרה-שחורה. [...] מיר וועלן דאַרפן צעשטערן די דאָזיקע צוימען. [...] עמיליע, מיר דאַרפן זיך ביידע פון זיי באַפרייען.

new believers.<sup>482</sup> Paul gradually loses some of the favor offered by the Jews, not because he preaches the new faith among aliens but because he teaches the Jews that they do not have to observe the law of Moses and may abstain from circumcising their sons. Paul believes that everyone belongs to the same family and is a child of God in faith rather than in laws and commandments.<sup>483</sup> In these two novels Asch clearly shows the common roots of the two religions and makes it manifest that the differences between them are not very serious: they are often accidental or related to interpretation.

The tendency of looking for, and coming back to the roots is exemplified in Asch's novels by Christians who converted to Judaism. This can be seen in, for example, *Dos shtetl*, when new Jews come to the shtetl in the fall. Among them, there are Jews having gentile faces or gentiles with Jewish prayer books who tell stories about their fathers who are counts and generals and about their deep faith that made them convert to Judaism. The shtetl Jews are slightly suspicious of them.<sup>484</sup> Here the author evidently strays from the historical truth—although there were cases like that, many historians are of the opinion that they are nothing but legends, such as the story about the Polish nobleman Walenty Potocki, who, while in Amsterdam, apparently converted to Judaism and after coming back to Vilnius was burnt at the stake in the main market.<sup>485</sup> A more probable story is that of Ruth, once called Liesl, Max Bodenheimer's wife, appearing in the novel *Bam opgrunt* set in the interwar years. She converts to Judaism in the name of love for her husband but also because she hopes this will make her future, fanatically religious father-in-law accept the relationship.<sup>486</sup> Ruth Bodenheimer embraces another faith to marry Max. She loves her family just like she loves her husband. But even after twenty years of marriage she is different from Bodenheimer—she is calmer and enjoys life more. Often she feels compassion for her Jewish family, who are unable to enjoy anything and always worry; even if there is nothing to worry about, they invent a cause.<sup>487</sup> Hans, the son of Ruth and Max, is baptized by his parents, but this is not sufficient for the von Sticker family, who do not want their daughter Lotte to marry the young man. Hans realizes that even though his mother is not a Jew and he was baptized, for the Ger-

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482 See Sholem Asch, *The Apostle*, op. cit., pp. 349–365. The issue is reported in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 15,1–35) and in St Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (Gal 2,1–10 and 5,1–12).

483 See Sholem Asch, *The Apostle*, op. cit., p. 570.

484 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit. pp. 111–112.

485 See Jacek Moskwa, *Legenda sprawiedliwie nawróconego*, <http://www.zwoje-scrolls.com/zwoje31/text03p.htm> (1 February 2012).

486 See Sholem Ash, *Bam opgrunt*, op. cit., pp. 87–88.

487 See *ibid*, pp. 91–92.

mans he will always be a Jew. It is only Lotte who protests: "C'mon, Hans, you're dumb! Some people carry 'crosses' and some 'the mark of Cain,' but you, you carry nothing. It's just an idea in your head. To me you are just Hans."<sup>488</sup>

The relations between the Jews and the representatives of other nations and religions are a popular motif in Jewish literature. A widely admired, beautiful Jewish woman who becomes the wife of the ruler of the country in which she lives, appears already in the Bible, in the Book of Ruth.<sup>489</sup> In the case of Yiddish and Polish literature, the legend of Esterka, a Jewish mistress of Kazimierz the Great (1310–1370), the king of Poland, is quite significant: its traces can be found in many literary works. There are no contemporary historical sources on the relationship between the king and the beautiful Jewish woman—for the first time it was mentioned by Jan Długosz (1415–1480), a Polish historian, in his chronicle written a century later.<sup>490</sup> According to Chone Shmeruk, the legend was often quoted in Polish anti-Semitic literature and the motif of the beautiful Jewess would also appear in the works of second-rate Polish writers, with the exception of the novel *Król chłopów* (The Peasants' King) written by the Polish writer Józef Ignacy Kraszewski (1812–1887) and published in 1881, where, according to Shmeruk, thanks to exquisite psychological portraits, the reader is offered the most complex interpretation of the relationship between the Jewess and the Polish king.<sup>491</sup>

Also Jewish sources on Esterka are much later—as an example, Shmeruk mentions a popular chronicle written by Dovid Gans at the end of the 16th century. Just like in Polish literature, in Yiddish literature the motif of Esterka appears in works of uneven literary quality. Among well-known writers it was Sholem Asch who used the motif in the already mentioned play *Meshiyekhs*

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488 Ibid., p. 306; *Akh, Hans, du bist narish! Eyner trogt dem "kreysts," der tsveyter—a "Kayins-tseykhn," du trogst gornisht. Du redst dir ayn! Far mir biste Hans.*

אַך, האַנס, דו ביסט נאַריש! איינער טראַגט דעם „קרייץ“, דער צווייטער - אַ „קײַנס־טײַכן“, דו טראַגסט גאַרנישט. דו רעדסט דיר אין! פאַר מיר ביסטו האַנס.

489 In Yiddish literature the Book of Esther became the source of many works and most importantly it inspired the authors of first theater plays, staged on the occasion of Purim and based on events mentioned in the Book of Esther. Among the most remarkable 20th-century interpretations of the Book of Esther there is *מגילה לידער* (*Megile lider*, 1936), written by איציק מאַנגער Itzik Manger (1901–1969), otherwise known for, among other works, his poetic tale *Di vunderlekhe lebensbashraybung fun Shmuel Abe Averno* (*dos bukh fun gan-eydn*)

די ווונדערלעכע לעבנסבאשרייבונג פון שמואל אבא אבערווא (דאס בוך פון גר'עדן).

490 See Jerzy Wyrozumski, *Kazimierz Wielki*, Wrocław / Warszawa / Kraków / Gdańsk / Łódź: Ossolineum 1986, pp. 212–213.

491 See Chone Shmeruk, *Legenda o Esterce w literaturze jidysz i polskiej*, op. cit., pp. 8–36.

*tsaytn* published in 1906, in which Esterka is personified by Justyna. In the novel אַליין (*Aleyn*), published in 1919 and written by Yosef Opatoshu, the protagonist Sorke reads *Król chłopów* and is fascinated by the beautiful and proud Esterka. The motif of love between a Jewess and a gentile appears also in the novels by Sholem Aleykhem, the already mentioned classic of Yiddish literature, such as מאַשקעלע גנג (*Moshkele ganev*, 1903), *Der mabl* and דער בלוטיגער שפּאַט (*Der blutiger shpas*, 1912). However, what is worth pointing out is that in Sholem Aleykhem's works this love is never fulfilled—ultimately, the girl always gives her heart to a Jew. In 1912 Zusman Segalovitsh<sup>492</sup> published the poem אין קאַזמערזש (*In Kazmerzh*), in which, according to Shmeruk, the figure of Wanda, a Hasidic daughter who gives up a Jewish lover for a gentile, epitomizes Esterka. On the other hand, in his ballad אַסטרקע (*Esterke*, 1911), Shmuel-Yankev Imber<sup>493</sup> concentrates on the love between two people and, unlike other writers, is not concerned with the Polish-Jewish issues. According to Shmeruk, the story of Esterka and King Kazimierz received the most precise and comprehensive treatment in אַסטרקע (*Esterke*), a play by Arn Tseytlin, published in 1932. In comparison with *Król chłopów*, Tseytlin introduces many secondary characters and pairs of ghosts, for instance, of Yitskhok Leyb Perets and Adam Mickiewicz, as well as of Jesus and a young Jewish boy murdered during the anti-Jewish riots. According to Shmeruk, because of this the love of Kazimierz and Esterka and their ultimate parting, under the pressure of their different origins and traditions, are shown in the play in the context of complex Jewish–Polish relations.<sup>494</sup>

In Asch's works, mixed marriages appear quite often and usually, though not always, they spell troubles. Helena Blum from *Der veg tsu zikh* marries a painter of peasant origin and, following her wish, the wedding takes place in the bridegroom's village near Cracow. The wedding is attended by the Jews and the Christians; intelligentsia, Socialists and peasants mingle, and richly adorned horse-carts go to a small village church.<sup>495</sup> What matters here is not only the de-

492 זוסמאַן סעגאַלױטש (1884–1949) was a poet, fiction writer and a journalist, who managed to escape to Palestine during the war. He attained early fame after the publication of the poem *In Kazmerzh*. He wrote poems, ballads and plays. Today he is known mostly thanks to *13 שלאָמאַצקע (Tlomatske 13)*, his volume of memoirs, quoted above, related to the literary life in Warsaw before World War II.

493 שמואל-יאַנקעב אימבער (1889–1942, murdered by the Ukrainians) was a neo-Romantic poet writing mostly in Yiddish. He would sign his early poems as Jan Niemira—according to legend this was the name of one of the sons of King Kazimierz and Esterka.

494 See Chone Shmeruk, *Legenda o Esterce w literaturze jidysz i polskiej*, op. cit., pp. 37–94 and 113–124.

495 See Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, op. cit., pp. 108–110.

piction of relations transcending national and religious borders but also Asch's fascination with folk culture, simple peasants, their lives and customs, especially obvious in the Zakopane-related part of the novel, the fascination he shared with other artists of the Young Poland period. It is rather certain that he did not attend the famous wedding of Lucjan Rydel (1870–1918), a Polish poet and playwright, which took place in Cracow and in the village of Bronowice in 1900—at that time he came to Warsaw as a young man. However, he must have known the play *Wesele* (The Wedding), written by Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907, a Polish playwright, poet and painter), which was published in 1901 and which is a literary rendition of Rydel's wedding. He was also likely to take part in other similar feasts and celebrations, the echoes of which are present in the novel, though the roles are reversed: it is the woman who comes from intelligentsia and the man from peasantry.

In *Ist river*, Harry Grinshtok and Klara Kranz represent a kind of mixed marriage. She moves to Harry's house after his wife's death to take care of his children. They would like to marry but it is complicated because Klara is a Christian and the Jewish community looks askance at Harry's plan and even blackmails him by announcing that he will encounter serious problems when he wants to marry his daughter off. Harry does not know what to do—he needs a mother for his children but at the same time something inside him urges him to maintain traditions which the Jews paid a high price for in the course of history. He seeks advice with his Irish friend, who understands him very well. They both go to see the local boss of Tammany Hall, who is a Jew and a lawyer. In the meantime, Klara Kranz comes to the conclusion that the relationship generates too many problems for Harry and she moves out to her own apartment.<sup>496</sup>

Another story related in *Ist river* concerns Irving Davidovski, who is engaged to Rokhel, Harry Grinshtok's daughter. However, Irving loves Mary, who is Irish. When the girl becomes pregnant, Irving still cannot make up his mind and marry her, because he does not want to disgrace his father, but his older brother Nosn convinces him that it would be a real disgrace for the child not to have a father. Irving and Mary enter into a civil marriage and none of their neighbors, whether Jews or Christians, approves of it. Irving's parents behave as if he were dead and they take care of Rokhel and her younger, orphaned siblings.<sup>497</sup>

In *Grosman un zun*, another American novel by Asch, Lazar Grosman, Ayzik's son, marries Katharine Evans, who is a Protestant. Lazar talks to the rabbi, who gives his consent to the marriage and that is why Lazar remains a member of the community. Lazar and Katharine decide that when they have

496 See Sholem Ash, *Ist river*, op. cit., pp. 203–211.

497 See *ibid.*, pp. 248–256.

children they themselves will decide which religion they will belong to. The situation terrifies Ayzik Grosman, who says: “Well, God is the same for all of us but people are different.”<sup>498</sup> To his surprise, Katharine wants to follow the Jewish ritual and have her son circumcised. She does not do this because of her father-in-law’s beliefs, but simply because she does not mind—she considers it a matter of hygiene rather than anything else, a procedure more and more non-Jewish boys undergo as well.<sup>499</sup> Robert and Louise, Ayzik Grosman’s grandchildren grow up religionless and at some point Robert starts asking questions whether he is a Christian or a Jew. Because of his insistence, his parents take him to a synagogue and a church and start observing Jewish and Christian religious feasts at home.<sup>500</sup>

Asch clearly understands the problems created by mixed marriages; they are mostly related to the attitudes of others: the family, friends, and neighbors of the wedded couple. The negative attitude of the Christians is present in *Ist river* and in *Bam opgrunt*, it is mostly exemplified by McCarthy’s and von Stickers’ sense of superiority and contempt shown to the Jews. Dilemmas that Jewish families face are present in each case discussed here and the choices made by the young couples are difficult to accept because of relatively small things, such as observing kosher laws in the household, but also because of fundamental issues, such as the religion of future grandchildren. The author offers various solutions, none of which works in the novels. Although in *Bam opgrunt* Hans becomes baptized, neither does he consider himself a Christian nor do the Germans consider him as such. In *Ist river*, Irving and Mary agree that their son Nat should choose his religion himself, but Mary, feeling pangs of conscience, baptizes her son and although it prompts Irving to leave her, Moyshe Volf, his father, understands it, because he believes a child cannot grow up religionless. The situation presented in *Grosman un zun* is initially similar—Lazar and Katharine leave the choice to their son, who, however, soon decides he wants to be a Jew. Being sensitive to human tragedies, Asch finds the problems related to mixed marriages an additional reason why it is necessary to find out what both religions have in common and to bring their followers as close together as possible.

In Asch’s novels, religious themes are not tantamount to practical issues or questions of faith—they also concern theological problems. However, they are not important for the analysis of a specific order of the past and the present

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498 Sholem Ash, *Grosman un zun*, op. cit., p. 97; *Yo, Got iz derzelber far undz alemen, ober di mentshn zenen farsheydn.*

יא, גאט איז דערזעלבער פאָר אונדז אַלעמען, אָבער די מענטשן זענען פארשיידן.

499 See *ibid.*, p. 109.

500 See *ibid.*, pp. 112–114.



world which the author tries to get across to his readers by means of necessarily simplified figures of memory.

Other religion-related elements of the fictitious world which Asch creates are characters who pass faith on and in a sense represent it, as well as attitudes, beliefs and prejudices of the characters under description. In his novels rabbis are usually positive characters who understand the problems of their communities and try to help their members make right decisions. Such is the image of the rabbi in *Dos shtetl*. He is pious, accepts a Rebbe who moves to the town, offers him the office of a mohel, that is a person responsible for circumcisions and even goes to the town's gate to welcome him—in short, he does his best to prevent any rifts in the community.<sup>501</sup> The rabbi is employed by the community and sometimes he is granted exclusive rights to sell kerosene or candles. That is why in *Kidush hashem* Mendel of Złoczów is able to buy off the rabbi of Łachowiec by offering him weekly wages of 12 groszy more and granting his wife exclusive rights to sell candles.<sup>502</sup> The author presents this with a pinch of humor—the shrewd innkeeper succeeds in ensuring the services of a respected rabbi.

In the same novel, the rabbi of Niemirów, while advising the Jews how to go about the lease of the Orthodox church forced upon them by the Poles, says that they do not owe their lives to Polish landlords but to God. And God commands them to live peacefully with their neighbors, especially those whose religion is debased. The Jews should help them and serve God in their own way because they know best what it means to be persecuted for faith.<sup>503</sup> On the other hand, upon hearing the grim news about the approaching army of the Cossacks and the Tatars, the rabbi of Złoczów reminds the Jews who are gathered in the synagogue about the commandment to save one's own life, which is contained in the Torah. Because of this they should hitch up their carts and run for their lives,<sup>504</sup> despite the holiday. What Asch emphasizes while creating the characters of the rabbis is their moral authority, their fairness and wisdom in giving counsel and helping make right decisions.

Dr Zimmerman from *Grosman un zun* very much resembles the above characters, though he lives in totally different times. He serves as a rabbi in the US army during World War II. There, he meets Robert, Ayzik Grosman's grandson. Robert turns to him, seeking help when he learns from his grandfather that he is kept, against his will, in a mental institution. The rabbi is able to understand the essence of the problem and he explains it to Ayzik that God is merciful and He

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501 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., pp. 52–58.

502 See Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit., p. 32.

503 See *ibid.*, pp. 68–69.

504 See *ibid.*, p. 106.

will definitely forgive Ayzik stealing money when he was young. What is more, Dr Zimmerman also helps find the grave of the wronged Pole.<sup>505</sup>

In Asch's novels, Rebbes are shown in a favorable light, which is not very common in Yiddish literature; for instance, in the novel *יאָשע קאַלב* (*Yoshe Kalb*) by Israel Joshua Singer, published in 1932, the Rebbe's court is shown in a negative light. As early as the 18th century, that is at the time of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, the belief in the healing power of Rebbes was first criticized and eradicated with the help of a medical compendium written by Moyshe Markuze of Slonim (Poryck, 1790). Among other Yiddish writers it was Yosef Perl of Tarnopol (1772–1839), an author of anti-Hasidic works in Hebrew and Yiddish, who turned against Hasidism and related superstitions. On the other hand, there is a short story by Perets titled *אויב נישט נאָך העכער* (*Oyb nisht nokh hekher*) and published in 1900, in which the Rebbe gets up before dawn and, disguised as a peasant, fetches wood from the forest for a poor Jewess; he tells her that even in difficult times she should trust in God's help. Also in Perets' play *די גאָלדענע קייט* (*Di goldene keyt*), which he worked on in 1904–1907, Hasidism is presented as a possible choice for those searching for spiritual support after they become disillusioned with other ideologies. We should also mention here the tales of Nachman of Bratslav,<sup>506</sup> a classic work of Hasidic literature, compiled and published in 1815 as *סיפורי מעשיות* (*Sipure mayses*), as well as symbolist short stories by Der Nister,<sup>507</sup> who found inspiration in, among other sources, Hasidic traditions.

In Asch's *Dos shtetl*, the Rebbe appreciates the fact that the local rabbi goes out to meet him and he invites the rabbi to his table.<sup>508</sup> Reb Shloyme Noked comes to see the Rebbe from Gostynin, who is deeply religious and moves among simple people: craftsmen, fishermen and tradesmen. Peasants come to ask for his advice and he helps everyone.<sup>509</sup> In *Der tilim yid*, Yekhiel is also a positive character, and what is striking in his case is his attitude towards peasants. Even as a young boy he is attracted to them—when he notices a peasant taking his wife to a quack, he follows the cart and cries, so that his neighbors start laughing and Cheder boys call him a gentile Rebbe.<sup>510</sup> Years later, when Yekhiel becomes a holy Rebbe of the town, whose counsel and help are will-

505 See Sholem Ash, *Grosman un zun*, op. cit., pp. 321–382.

506 נחמן בראַסלעווער נאָמן נאָכמן (1772–1810).

507 דער ניסטער (real name: פּינקעס קאַהאַנאָוויטש Pinkhes Kahanovitch, 1884–1950, died in a Stalinist prison hospital) was one of the most outstanding symbolists in Yiddish literature. He published poetry, short stories, essays and translations.

508 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., p. 61.

509 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noked*, op. cit., p. 152.

510 See Sholem Ash, *Der tilim yid*, op. cit., p. 83.

ingly sought after by the Jews, it turns out Christian peasants also visit him and ask him, for instance, to cure a sick wife. Yekhiel treats them just like he treats everyone else, takes a request written by his assistant, prays and puts the request among Jewish requests.<sup>511</sup>

In Asch's novels, Christian clergy tend to be presented positively, but not as a rule. Negative examples appear above all in historical novels. In *Kidush hashem* the local Orthodox priest comes to a Jewish inn for a drink, listens to the innkeeper and his son, who are busy learning, and when he hears the name Moyshe, he cries out happily:

We know him, heard about him. I read about him in sacred books. He saw God, talked to God, climbed Mount Sinai, yes, we know him. He was a good shepherd to his herd, not like you, Stepan Kvatkov, he scolds himself, because a devil entered your fat belly and gives you trouble.<sup>512</sup>

Being a drunkard is the priest's only fault; otherwise, he maintains friendly relations with the Jewish innkeeper. In *Kidush hashem*, Asch introduces Father Kozłowski, a Jesuit and a downright negative character, who wants the Cossacks to convert to Catholicism and thus tries to discourage them from observing their own faith by, among other things, forcing the Jewish innkeeper to lease not only the inn but also the Orthodox church. That is why the Cossacks need to see him and ask for the keys before mass, which is humiliating to them.<sup>513</sup>

In *Der tilim yid*, beside Yekhiel, there is another important character, that of Father Wiśniecki. He does his best to help the Jews in the town, by sheltering them from the bouts of hatred, often fostering among their Christian neighbors, or by sending them food, firewood, money and drugs. However, he loves simple people but turns his wrath against their spiritual leaders, who do not let them achieve redemption. Moreover, he is visibly envious, seeing how serious the

511 See *ibid.*, pp. 381–382. Such situations would take place in reality: sometimes famous Rebbes were sought after not only by Polish peasants but also by burghers or noblemen, see Jolanta Żyndul, *Żydzi w Polsce przed 1939 r.*, in: Feliks Tych (ed.), *Pamięć. Historia Żydów Polskich przed, w czasie, i po Zagładzie*, Warszawa: Fundacja Shalom 2008, pp. 27–76, here p. 40.

512 Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit., p. 11; *Mir kenen em, mir veysn fun em. In di heylike bikher gelezn vegn em. Got hot er gezen, mit Got hot er geredt, afn barg Sinay iz er ufgeshtign, mir veysn fun em. A sheferl iz er geven tsu zayn stade a guter, nishi azoy vi du, Stepan Kvatkov—zidelt er zikh aleykn. Vos a sotn hot zikh bazetst in dayn fetn boykh un dokutshet dikh.*

מיר קענען איהם, מיר ווייסען פון איהם. אין די הייליגע ביכער געלעזען וועגען איהם. גאָט האָט ער געזעהן, מיט גאָט האָט ער גערעדט, אויפ'ן באַרג סיני איז ער אויפגעשטיגען, מיר ווייסען פון איהם. אַ שעפעריל איז ער געווען צו זיין סטאָדע אַ גוטער, נישט אַזוי ווי דו, סטעפאַן קוואַטקאָוו, - זידעלט ער זיך אַליין. וואָס אַ שטן האָט זיך באַזעצט אין דיין פעטען בויך און דאָקוטשעט דיך.

513 See *ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

Jews are observing their faith and religious holidays, especially in comparison with his own parishioners. That is why his secret dream is to convert to Christianity at least one Jewish soul. Initially, when Reyzele announces she would like to receive baptism, he treats her suspiciously, fearing a trick by Satan; yet, after talking to the girl he comes to believe that God chose her to learn the true faith.<sup>514</sup>

A similar figure is Brother McKee from *Ist river*. He comes from a poor family and the Church authorities ensure he has everything: food, happy home, education. That is why he tries to repay the debt by serving faithfully and never questioning anything. He believes that everyone, no matter whether a Jew or a Christian, who does not want to submit himself to the holy Catholic Church is eternally doomed. Thus he persuades Mary to baptize her child and is naïve enough to hope he will be able to convert Irving as well. When Irving wants to divorce her because she baptized Nat without his consent, she seeks Brother McKee's help to find a lawyer. While talking with her, the priest learns that Mary married Irving when he was still betrothed to Rokhel and that Rokhel was an orphan. Mary also tells him about Sarah, who lost her life while rescuing Rokhel during the fire at the company. Brother McKee asks her whether she did anything for Sarah and for all employees at their company. When it turns out that she never helped anyone, the priest comments ironically that clearly she is quite experienced in taking care of various matters, so she can find the lawyer on her own, because God called him to take care of the affairs of the other world, rather than this one.<sup>515</sup>

On the other hand, Father Mahoney is a totally different Catholic priest. Mary and Irving come to request his assistance with finding her younger sister. The priest does not ask questions about their mixed marriage, first and foremost he tries to be of some help. Later, when Irving finds his father-in-law, it is Father Mahoney who manages to persuade the girls' father that Sylwia must live with her sister Mary and that he himself should accept financial help from his despised son-in-law and start his treatment.<sup>516</sup> The character of Father Mahoney finds its counterpart in the characters of the priests in *Grosman un zun*, who help Grosman find Kowalski's grave and cheer him up by telling him that Kowalski forgave him a long time ago. When Ayzik wants to thank them, they thank him for showing them what true repentance and fear of God really mean.<sup>517</sup>

On the other hand, Pope Paul IV is often presented in *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen* as a blood-thirsty fanatic, for instance, in the chapter in which he

514 See Sholem Ash, *Der tilim yid*, op. cit., pp. 415–428.

515 See Sholem Ash, *Ist river*, op. cit., pp. 347–351.

516 See *ibid.*, pp. 471–476.

517 See Sholem Ash, *Grosman un zun*, op. cit., pp. 374–382.

gives an order to set fire to the Roman ghetto; this order he has to rescind under pressure from Cardinal Farnese.<sup>518</sup> Farnese entreats him not to harm the Church as the Jews exert influence at many courts in the world. Paul IV concurs but secretly plans to destroy the embankment of the Tiber so that the river floods the ghetto.<sup>519</sup> A particularly repulsive image of the pope is shown in the chapter in which he ponders over why a Jewish girl has the face of Virgin Mary. He believes that the Jews caught Jesus and Virgin Mary, keep them imprisoned to draw blood from them and they release them only when they need help. His considerations lead him to a blasphemy: "It seemed to him that it was he, Paul IV, [...] who was God. [...] He felt an urge to go down on his knees in front of himself and to pray to himself. He wanted to praise himself and serve himself because he had no other God ..."<sup>520</sup>

The old Yankev, thrown along with his granddaughter and many other Jews to the Inquisition dungeon, notices this lack of true faith and cries to the pope: "Whom do you serve?! A God you can put a spell on? [...] Open your eyes and see the only true God."<sup>521</sup>

In Asch's novels there is a clear change in the literary presentation of the representatives of the Catholic religion, from the 16th-century blood-thirsty pope, through a 17th-century Jesuit to the characters closer to the author's times, who are shown in a more positive light. Father Wiśniecki and Brother McKee are basically good people who want to help others, but what is mostly wrong with them is their conviction that their faith is infallible and their wish to convert others, notwithstanding the consequences. On the other hand, Father Mahoney in *Ist river* and the priests in *Grosman un zun* are free of all prejudices and they can respect Jewish faith. Ultimately the character of the priest as a figure of memory is almost as positive as the image of Jewish religious authorities.

518 It is probably Cardinal Alessandro Farnese (1520–1589, the grandson of Alessandro Farnese, 1468–1549, from 1534 Pope Paul III), see Heinrich Graetz, *Historja Żydów*, op. cit., Vol. 7, p. 269.

519 See Sholem Ash, *Di kishesf-makherin fun Kastilyen*, op. cit., p. 29–34.

520 Ibid., pp. 101–102; *Es hot zikh em gedakht, az er, Paul der ferner, [...] er iz got. [...] Er hot gehat dos gefil tsu faln far zikh aleyh af di kni, tsu betn tsu zikh aleyh, zikh aleyh tsu prayzn, tsu zikh aleyh dinen, vayl ka ander got hot er nit gehat ...*

עס האָט זיך איהם געדוכט, אז ער, פּאָול דער פּערטער, [...] ער איז גאָט. [...] ער האָט געהאַט דאָס געפּיהל צו פּאַלען פּאַר זיך אליין אויף די קניע, צו בעטען צו זיך אליין, זיך אליין צו פּרייען, צו זיך אליין דיענען, ווייל קיין אַנדער גאָט האָט ער נישט געהאַט. ...

521 Ibid., p. 121; *Tsu vemen dint ir?! Tsu a got, vos men ken em farkishesfn? [...] Efent uf ayere oygn un zet dem eyntsikn Got.*

צו וועמען דיענט איהר?! צו אַ גאָט, וואָס מען קען איהם פּער'כשוף'ען? [...] עפענט אויף אייערע אויגען און זעהט דעם איינציגען גאָט.

Religion also means learning it under teachers' supervision and studying it independently. Asch shows how religion is taught and the custom of checking boys' religious knowledge on Saturday afternoons. In *Amerika*, Khane-Leye takes Yosele to a dayan,<sup>522</sup> a rabbi's helper, in view of the absence of Mayer, who would do it himself before he left for the United States, whereas Reb Shloyme Noked brings teachers home to quiz his sons, though earlier he used to do it himself.<sup>523</sup> Gostynin, the Rebbe's residence described in *Reb Shloyme Noked*, is famous for piety. Apart from taking care of their sons' education, every Jew in Gostynin and its vicinity tries to give his daughter away in marriage to a learned man,<sup>524</sup> who he later supports. The whole family works whereas the son-in-law remains at home and studies. When the father goes to town, he always brings his son-in-law books. In every Jewish house there is a bookshelf and, according to the narrator, the same is true about Christians living there. There is a famous church with holy paintings which work miracles and the people are pious.<sup>525</sup> *Reb Shloyme Noked* ends with a scene of the engagement between the tradesman's learned son and the Rebbe's granddaughter. The engagement ceremony is preceded by a learned debate, in which the future fiancé proves his knowledge and Reb Shloyme Noked sits in the corner, listens in and nothing seems to be important to him save the fact that "again God lights up His sacred light of learning in his family."<sup>526</sup> The father of Emilye's husband from the novel *Gots gefangene*, a simple immigrant, is known for his religious learning. However, he rejects the offer to become a rabbi, because he does not want to profit from his knowledge which he shares with everyone for free, earning his living as a tailor.<sup>527</sup>

Early in their lives, young boys are sent to the Cheder and sometimes their poor parents scrape the last penny to pay for their sons' education. Zlatke, the mother of Motke the Thief, promises the teacher to pay as much as is needed so that he could teach her son to read and to pray.<sup>528</sup> In Asch's novels the Cheder seems to stand outside of time: in *Mary* the school in Nazareth which Yeshua starts to attend when he turns six is organized exactly in the same way as the

522 See Sholem Ash, *Amerika*, op. cit., p. 33.

523 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noked*, op. cit., p. 168.

524 Learning in religious schools has always played an important role in traditional Jewish culture, hence the respect granted to those seeking knowledge and to scholars and hence the parents' efforts to find such a husband for their daughter who would study the Talmud.

525 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noked*, op. cit., pp. 200–201.

526 Ibid., p. 217; גאט צינדט ווידער אן זיין הייליק ליכט אין זיין משפחה; *Got tsindt vider on zayn heylik likht in zayn mishpokhe*.

527 See Sholem Ash, *Gots gefangene*, op. cit., p. 29–30.

528 See Sholem Ash, *Motke Ganev*, op. cit., p. 39.

Cheder in an Eastern European shtetl. Pupils learn by repeating biblical verses after the teacher and if they are not zealous enough they are helped by the teacher's assistant standing at the back of the room and holding a birch.<sup>529</sup> On the other hand, many centuries later in Europe, older boys, usually from affluent families, are sent to yeshiva for advanced studies. In *Kidush hashem*, Shloyme of Złoczów goes to Lublin for further studies.<sup>530</sup> According to the narrator, Polish yeshivas are world-famous and young Jews from all over Europe come to study there.<sup>531</sup>

In Asch's works, religious schooling of German Jews is replaced by university studies. In *Bam opgrunt*, Max throws Hans out from home because of the latter's relationship with Lotte, but soon he visits him and announces that he is ready to pay him monthly remuneration if he returns to university, because the Bodenheimers have always graduated from a university for three generations. Besides, the father is not interested in what his son does or who he lives with as long as he studies.<sup>532</sup> It is not different in the United States. In *Ist river*, Moyshe Volf Davidovski hopes his son will fulfill his youthful dreams. Nosn is not only a very good student but also he is exceptionally eager to learn. When other children play, Nosn reads books borrowed from a public library.<sup>533</sup>

Here Asch describes an important element of Jewish religiousness, which requires learning and study. That is why in his novels for every Eastern European male Jew the most memorable experience of his childhood is attending a Cheder, whereas older men always try to find time not only for prayer but also for reading and studying, which they treat as a religious duty. Later the habit transforms into lay studies, which to them and their families are treated as seriously as religion was before.

In Asch's novels, deep religiousness and faith of Jews and their trust in God's assistance is often the only help in hard times. The writer often describes unconditional, simple faith. Reb Shloyme Noged has not been always rich. Shortly after his wedding, he trades in grain with his partner but he fails to make any money. Then he addresses God and says that he takes Him for a partner, so that he will invest his work and God will take care of everything else. He goes

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529 See Sholem Asch, *Mary*, op. cit., pp. 177–180.

530 See Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit., pp. 46–47.

531 See *ibid.*, pp. 77–78. Talmudic studies, apart from being a scholarly and religious movement, constituted an important part of culture. Polish Talmudic schools were famous all over the world. In Lublin there was a yeshiva set up by Shalom Shakhna (ca. 1510–1558) in the 16th century, see Heinrich Graetz, *Historja Żydów*, op. cit., Vol. 8, pp. 317–321.

532 See Sholem Ash, *Bam opgrunt*, op. cit., pp. 453–454.

533 See Sholem Ash, *Ist river*, op. cit., p. 50.

out, buys what he sees, sells what he buys, and then returns home with money. He shares the profits with God evenly—he puts aside some money for himself and gives away to the poor what is left.<sup>534</sup> Faith and trust concern not only this world, but also the other. Arn in *Onkel Mozes* cannot understand for long why his brother Berl is happy and full of hope despite poverty, tedious work (not likely to change), and the fact that the family is becoming more and more American. Suddenly Arn understands: his brother deeply believes in what will come and the older he is and the closer he is to the other world, the happier he becomes and the brighter his eyes shine.<sup>535</sup> Ester Hodel's son has such faith that can move even the czar. Forcefully drafted into the Russian army, he is ready to bear all insults because of his faith. But when his superior tries to feed him some pork, he defends himself and tears the officer's shirt. Those who torment him are drunk, no character in *Farn mabl* believes that they would have done it had they been sober. The young boy is sentenced to twenty years of hard labor, but his mother, Ester Hodel, believes God will help to release him.<sup>536</sup>

Asch describes Christianity with much partiality. The reader sees that Maria Ivanovna, a simple Russian woman and Zakhari's nursemaid, is deeply religious. Her faith and respect for other religions makes her tell the truth to a twelve-year-old boy that Christmas is not his holiday, because he belongs to a different nation which observes different holidays. Maria Ivanovna explains it to her "honey pie" that his parents, grandparents, his beloved mother, all confess a different religion and observe different holidays. She even promises to learn what kind of holidays they observe so that he could observe them too, following his faith.<sup>537</sup> In *Der tilim yid*, the Chojnacki sisters, who at their place arrange evening meetings of the cream of local Polish society, including the parish priest and the mayor, are deeply religious Christians. They all talk not only about religious affairs but also about the fight against the foreign powers which captured and partitioned Poland, they gossip and, to pass their time, they play dominoes or cards. At some point the meetings are attended by Reyzele, who, without her parents' knowledge, meets Stefan there. It is also there that they resolve she will run to him on the night before the wedding. They plan she should stay with the Chojnacki sisters for a couple of days and then should move to the cloister in

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534 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noked*, op. cit., pp. 148–150. Alms as the main expression of charity is one of the major everyday duties of the followers of Judaism. What is more, it is their duty to help everyone who is in need, notwithstanding his faith or origins.

535 See Sholem Ash, *Onkel Mozes*, op. cit., p. 29.

536 See Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, op. cit., pp. 157–160.

537 See *ibid.*, p. 95.



Grochów to prepare for baptism.<sup>538</sup> Also cloister nuns who take care of the girl after the elopement are shown in a positive light. They are nice to her and appreciate her progress in learning the catechism.<sup>539</sup> However, neither the Chojnacki sisters, nor the nuns, nor Stefan Dąbrowski, nor the parish priest do understand to what extent they wrong Reyzele. Stefan simply enjoys the prospect of marrying the beloved girl, whereas the others have only one aim, which is to secure another Christian soul.

As a figure of memory, deep faith in Asch's novels has one basic feature: it is not important what kind of faith it is, what really matters is that it should be genuine and deep. In many of his novels this belief is expressed not only implicitly but often explicitly, by the narrator or one of the protagonists. In Asch's novels, genuine faith also means understanding one's imperfection, penitence and an effort to make restitution for the wrong in the case of committing mistakes. In *Reb Shloyme Noged* Asch presents a situation which echoes the New Testament, where in the Gospel according to St John Jesus saves an adulteress, who, as required by the law, should be stoned. Jesus rebukes the crowd and challenges those sinless to throw a stone first. The crowd disperses and Jesus tells the woman to go and to sin no more (Jn 8,1–11). On Friday evening in *Reb Shloyme Noged's* town the local dayan is caught with a shikse. Everyone condemns him and when full of repentance he comes to the synagogue on Saturday, asking those present to beat him up, they instantly comply and start kicking him, battering him and spitting at him. When *Reb Shloyme Noged* comes out after the prayer, he asks them to stop and questions them whether they themselves are free of sin. The merchant's farmhands walk the dayan safely home and in the evening, when the Sabbath is over, *Reb Shloyme Noged* summons him and explains that everyone sins and thus everyone should ask God for forgiveness. Besides, in view of the fact that the dayan is bound to lose his job in town, he offers him and his wife lodgings and a salary in return for teaching his son.<sup>540</sup>

The story has a few interesting aspects. The first one is the link to the New Testament. The link confirms what Asch acknowledged many years later that the figure of Jesus Christ had fascinated him throughout his life. The second aspect is less obvious and the Jewish reader is likely to take it for granted. The dayan is caught in riverside bushes not with a Jewess but with a shikse, a Christian girl. In Asch's novels both cases occur—in *Dos shtetl*, on a Saturday afternoon the townspeople catch Note, *Reb Yekheskiel Gombiner's* coachman, with Yente, the merchant's wife's Jewish servant, but in this case the transgression is less serious, because they have had a crush on each other for some time, they are

538 See Sholem Ash, *Der tilim yid*, op. cit., pp. 393–395.

539 See *ibid.*, pp. 406–414.

540 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noged*, op. cit., pp. 159–170.

free and may marry soon, and the whole story is shown rather in a comic light.<sup>541</sup> The dayan is married, so it is likely that not wanting to corrupt the idyll of the town, Asch makes him sin with a non-Jew, who otherwise does not feature in the narrative. Additionally, what is striking is the story's happy ending, so happy in fact that it is highly unlikely, which emphasizes its fairy-tale-like character.

A frequent presence in Jewish life depicted in Asch's novels is a petty thief. It is poverty that drives young boys to stealing—usually they steal some food, which they often share with their families. This is how Motke the Thief begins his “career”—the author does not really condemn these beginnings. It is only in *Grosman un zun*, one of his later novels, that Asch deals with the moral aspect of stealing. The plot of the novel revolves around the search for the man whom the protagonist robbed many years earlier and now, before he dies, he would like to redress the wrong. The conversation which the wealthy Grosman, as a young boy, had with his father when he again brought home something he had stolen, is the seed which shapes his later life. The father explains to him that when he is thirteen, he will answer before God for his deeds, but he will be forgiven for whatever wrong he has done so far. Subsequent sins committed against God are forgiven at Yom Kippur, but sins committed against people should be definitely redressed. If the theft is not redressed during one's lifetime and the wronged person does not forgive the thief, the latter will have to repay the debt after death.<sup>542</sup>

The title of one of the chapters in *Reb Shloyme Noked—Di milkhome tsvishn di geter*—reflects another issue which appears in Asch's novels, that is various, more or less serious conflicts between the Christians and the Jews. The chapter tells a story about a lawsuit following a fair during which a Christian swindler dies; the Church tries to pronounce him a martyr murdered by the Jews. Before the lawsuit, the Jews go to Gostynin to ask the Rebbe for advice, whereas the Christians go to Dąbrowa to the church fete announced by the local bishop, so that it is not only the Jews who visit Gostynin. The peasants give the Jews a ride in carts and vice versa. What is unusual in Asch's novels is that the narrator comments on this behavior, claiming that the peasants give the Jews a ride only to distract them and prevent from saying prayers, and they join the Jews in carts to lead them astray. On the other hand, the narrator claims that the church fete, with its bells, processions, prayers and songs interferes with the Jewish Sabbath, which is precisely the intention of the bishop.<sup>543</sup> It is clear that the caesura between the poor and the rich, the good and the bad which appears in Asch's novels is also present in the ranks of Christian clergy. Those who hold lower offices are usually goodhearted and tolerant, whereas those at the top are bad.

541 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., pp. 108–109.

542 See Sholem Ash, *Grosman un zun*, op. cit., pp. 39–40.

543 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noked*, op. cit., pp. 199–203.

The battle for the soul of Motke, who is taken care of by a Catholic laborer, is described with a high dose of humor. As the only Jew, Motke lives among the gentiles, who all hope to save him from the hellfire. However, he does not want to say Christian prayers and when once Anton's wife blesses him, he runs up to a well to wash himself. Motke never mentions this to the only Jews living in the town, but he takes advantage of the situation and when he visits the shop they own, for a handful of candies he promises that he will never kiss the cross. The Jewish blessing, on the other hand, costs a bun and a half. Whatever he wins he shares with a crippled daughter of his guardian.<sup>544</sup>

In *Der tilim yid*, a peculiar fight for Reyzele's soul takes place between Jewish and Christian townspeople. The fight is described in the chapter *Getergerangl*, the title of which, just like it was in *Reb Shloyme Noged*, suggests a clash between the two religions. Also in this case the fight has a human aspect.<sup>545</sup> The real battle, however, takes place at night before the girl's planned baptism and is fought by Yekhiel and the priest, who both pray for the final victory. Reyzele is unable to bear the pressure and jumps out from the convent's window, dreaming that they all are one: the Jews, the Christians, the rabbi, the priest, her parents and her beloved Stefan.<sup>546</sup>

On the other hand, *Ist river* shows a fight for the soul of the young Nat. When marrying, Mary and Irving resolve that each of them will stick to his or her own religion, whereas Nat will decide the issue when he grows up. However, they both feel uneasy about it—they wonder what will happen when the boy goes to school and does not know who to belong to. An additional worry is Nat's mild illness; his loving parents blow it out of proportion and are afraid that he will die without either baptism or circumcision. Mary cannot bear pangs of conscience so she goes to confession, but the young priest is concerned only with the child's soul, which, he believes, suffers a great danger, so he orders Mary to baptize Nat, hiding the fact from Irving. Terrified, Mary complies, though when the priest takes the boy by the hand and leads him to church, she feels listless, "like a cow following its calf, which is led before it."<sup>547</sup> Here one can see clearly which side Asch is on—although he can afford a humorous treatment of the subject, just like in *Motke Ganev*, he realizes very well that a forced conversion of Jews brings about more wrong than good in real life.

Sometimes, however, the Jewish faith wins the skirmishes. In *Di kishefmakherin fun Kastilyen*, the glory enjoyed once by former enemies of the Jews

544 See Sholem Ash, *Motke Ganev*, op. cit., p. 135.

545 See Sholem Ash, *Der tilim yid*, op. cit., pp. 429–435.

546 See *ibid.*, pp. 436–446.

547 Sholem Ash, *Ist river*, op. cit., p. 334; וואָס גייט נאָכן קאַלב, וואָס מען פֿירט פֿאַר איר vi אַ קו, ווי אַ קו, וואָס גייט נאָכן קאַלב, וואָס מען פֿירט פֿאַר איר. *ku, vos geyt nokhn kalb, vos men firt far ir.*

beyond the walls of the Roman ghetto crumbles away. Temples of Venus and Apollo are half-ruined, triumphal arches, built to commemorate past victories, fall into oblivion.<sup>548</sup> Here the author emphasizes the vitality of the Jews; other nations come and go, but the Jews stay. The war between religions can be waged in many different ways. As reported in the novel, on every Saturday the Jews living in Rome are obliged to listen to sermons delivered by a Christian preacher. To meet the obligation, for long they have paid off full-time loafers to go to church in their place. It does not do much wrong, as most of the loafers are old and deaf, and to make sure nothing gets through to them they plug their ears. However, when “Haman the Pope,”<sup>549</sup> as the Jews used to call Paul IV, makes Yosef Moro,<sup>550</sup> a converted Jew, their preacher, difficult times come. Not only all adult Jews must attend masses, but also papal soldiers force them to take their children along, while in the past they were left at home so that the preacher would not by any chance make them embrace the Christian faith. Church interior decorations resemble those in a synagogue and every Jew who converts immediately becomes a Roman citizen, obtaining a house and assets confiscated from the Jews living outside the ghetto.<sup>551</sup>

Elements of certain rivalry between the two religions appear in different novels. In *Meri* the protagonist listens to the singing coming from the wooden church in the village and reflects “why there are so few beautiful Jewish ceremonies; why the Jewish synagogue is so poor.”<sup>552</sup> In *Dos shtetl*, there is a telling scene which has been often quoted:

The church bell chimes as if for itself and it summons to church with a pious prayer. Sabbath candles glimmer in a tiny, small synagogue and it seems that the bell and the Sabbath candles wage a war. [...] “Lekha dodi”<sup>553</sup> sung by the cantor reverberates in the street and as the church bell joins in, their sounds blend, creating one silent prayer to the same God ...<sup>554</sup>

548 See Sholem Ash, *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen*, op. cit., p. IV.

549 Haman, a character from the Book of Esther, is the king’s prime minister who wanted to kill all the Jews in Persia. Esther pleaded with King Ahasuerus on their behalf. Thanks to her intercession, the Jews were saved and Haman was hanged, see Esth 3,7–13 and 7,1–10.

550 Yosef Moro is a historical figure, also this information was taken by Asch from Graetz’s history book, see Heinrich Graetz, *Historja Żydów*, op. cit., Vol. 7, p. 279.

551 See Sholem Ash, *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen*, op. cit., pp. 12–15.

552 Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., p. 7; *vi veynik sheyne religyeze tseremonyes es zenen do ba yidn; vi orem di yidishe shul iz.*

ווי וועניג שעהנע רעליגיעזע צערעמאניעס עס זיינען דא ביי יידן: ווי אַרײַם די אידישע שוהל איז.

553 A hymn sung on Friday at dusk to welcome the Sabbath.

554 Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., pp. 93–94; *Vi aley n far zikh klingt der kirkhn-glok, ruft mit a frum gebet in kirkh arayn. Fun dem kleynem beyshamidrashl finklen zikh oys di*

Thanks to this image it is not just negative examples that the reader remembers but also the scene which expresses some hope for the future.

Apart from the rivalry between the religions, which often has destructive consequences, Asch presents other negative features of religion, including fanaticism, which appears not only among Christians. In Hurvits' Warsaw apartment the reader comes to know, among other visitors, Mordekhay Khaim Vaynberg, a Socialist activist, whom everyone calls Zhakhliner. He vividly explains to Zakhari Mirkin, who is fascinated with the Jewish faith, what this faith may sometimes become:

The faith you praise so much, he was almost shouting, is not just a romantic past, which like an innocent babushka wrapped in a shawl sits in the Sabbath evening and innocently reads the Tsenerene, but it is a living, bad woman, who fights and does harm to us at every step.<sup>555</sup>

Zhakhliner shows his crippled hand and says it is due to the Jewish faith. His fanatical father caught him when he was perusing lay Hebrew books. He beat him up so much that now he is disabled. Jewish children and young people spend many hours a day pondering such "important" matters as divorce and marriage, or what happens to an egg lain on a holiday. That is why Zhakhliner hates this alphabet, which robbed him of his youth. His father would wake him up at six in the morning, when it was still dark outside and when one had to break the ice to wash, so that he would start learning. When listening to these memories, Hurvits the teacher recalls the first twenty years of his life. He thinks about thousands and hundreds of thousands of young people who have been carrying the same burden Zhakhliner talks about.<sup>556</sup> This conversation at the teacher's home brings to mind Asch's own memories of his youth. As he writes, for Christian children summer was the happiest season of the year, whereas for him it was the saddest

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*shabes-likhtlekh un es dakht zikh, az zey haltn milkhome, der kirkhn-glok mit di shabes-likhtlekh [...] un dem khazns "lekho-doydi" zingt in gesl un der kirkhn-glok klingt mit, di koyles mishn zikh oys un es vert eyn shtile tfile tsu eyn Got ...*

ווי אלײן פֿאַר זיך קלינגט דער קירכנגלאַק, רופֿט מיט אַ פֿרום געבעט אין קירך אַרײן. פֿון דעם קלײנעם בית־המדרש פֿינגלען זיך אַרויס די שבת־ליכטלעך און עס דאַכט זיך, אַז זײ האַלטן מלחמה, דער קירכנגלאַק מיט די שבת־ליכטלעך [...] און דעם חנוּם „לכה־דודי“ זינגט אין געסל און דער קירכנגלאַק קלינגט מיט, די קולות מישן זיך אויס און עס ווערט אײן שטילע תפילה צו אײן גאָט...

555 Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, op. cit., pp. 76–77; *Di emune, vos ir rimt, iz nisht ka romantische fargangenhayt, vos zitst vi an umshuldike bobe, bahongn mit ir shterntikhl, shabes nokhmitog, un leyent zikh umshuldik di Tsenerene, — hot er kimat geshrin, — zi iz a lebedike, beyze froy, vos kemft un shtert undz af shrut un trit.*

די אמונה, וואָס איר רימט, איז נישט קײן ראָמאַנטישע פֿאַרגאַנגענהײט, וואָס זיצט ווי אַן אומשולדיגע באַבע, באַהאַנגען מיט איר שטערניכל, שבת נאַכמיטאַג, און לײענט זיך אומשולדיג די צאינה וראינה, - האָט ער פֿעמעט געשריגן, - זי איז אַ לעבעדיגע, בײזע פֿרױ, וואָס קעמפט און שטערט אונדז אויף שרײט און טרײט.

556 See *ibid.*, pp. 77–80.

time, which he had to spend in a dark classroom. He also mentions that they would get up at four in the morning and go outside to bring in washing water, which, in fact, was not water but ice.<sup>557</sup>

This harsh criticism of blind faith, which leads to poverty, backwardness, maladjustment of Jewish masses to life in modern society, waste of talents, and also to many personal tragedies can also be met in other passages of *Farn mabl*. At some point, upon hearing the sounds of music coming from behind the lit windows, Zakhari asks his guide in Łódź what it is and receives a brief yet meaningful answer: "It is a Hasidic house of prayer, they are celebrating. There is nothing to see there. They are uncivilized, fanatical 'dervishes.' A sore on the Jewish body."<sup>558</sup> Note Leyb, a young writer from the provinces, who had to flee home to study and develop his talent in Warsaw, also had some "Hasidic" experiences.<sup>559</sup> In *Peterburg*, the reader meets Ester Hodel, a Jewess, who, as the narrator comments, mumbles her psalms as a duty rather than as a sign of piety. The latter can be illustrated by the fact that, for instance, Ester Hodel does not want to eat dishes prepared by Mrs Hurvits, as she does not trust they are kosher. When Mirkin lets her know about a positive settlement of her case, Ester Hodel raises her hands to the sky and cries that it was the Rebbe who worked this miracle.<sup>560</sup>

Living in a hostile environment, the Jews sometimes feel so much oppressed that they hide their own faith. There is much irony, as well as sadness in an episode taking place in Saint Petersburg which Asch describes. In *Meri*, one of the journalists working for a progressive newspaper is so much scared by the pogroms in the provinces that whenever he hears a doorbell in his apartment, he removes a towel covering the icon, hides the tallith in a wardrobe and then is ready to receive his guest.<sup>561</sup> Often the Jews hide their religion unconsciously: Zakhari Mirkin does not realize for long that he is a Jew. As a small boy he makes the sign of the cross in front of an icon and enjoys the Christmas tree and Easter eggs. However, when he learns from his Russian nursemaid who he really is, he resolves to learn his newly found religion. He is not ashamed of his other-

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557 See Ben Siegel, *The Controversial Sholem Asch*, op. cit., p. 11.

558 Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, op. cit., p. 302; *A khasidish shtibl, freyen zikh. Nishto vos tsu zen. Vilde fanatishne "dervishn."* *A geshvir afn yidishn kerper.*

א חסידיש שטיבל, פרייען זיך. נישטא וואס צו זען. ווילדע פאנאטישע, דערווישן. א געשוויר איפן יידישן קערפער.

559 See *ibid.*, pp. 16–20.

560 See Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, op. cit., pp. 362–364.

561 See Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., pp. 225–227.

ness but treats it as a hidden “treasury.”<sup>562</sup> Again, this proves Asch's positive attitude to his own faith.

What is worth showing is the manner in which the author treats the problem of a Jew receiving baptism. In Yiddish this is called זיך שמאַדן (*zikh shmadrn*), the Hebrew root of this verb is שׁ+מ+שׁ *shin+mem+daled*, common with, among other verbs, the Hebrew verb “be destroyed, annihilated” נִשְׁמַד (nishmad). The language itself shows how the decision was perceived in the Jewish community and how desperate one would be to make it. Yet in *Farn mabl*, Madame Kvasnietsova and her husband, Gabriel Mirkin and Misha Halpern do not treat the reception of baptism as a final decision which produces uprooting and the destruction of one's identity, but rather as a trifle on the way to a more comfortable life. Out of the four of them it is only Madame Kvasnietsova, a tragicomic character, and her husband who change their religion; the others ultimately do not receive baptism. Madame Kvasnietsova is an interesting, though controversial character. Her true name is Dvoyre Leye Braunshtayn and she comes from the region of Odessa. Along with her Russian friend Vasil Aleksandrovitsh, she runs the so called “institute” that is a semi-official brothel. At the one end of the hall there are rooms of the “boarders” and at the other Madame's private apartment, where she puts up the Jews who come to Saint Petersburg. She received baptism together with her late husband so as to live and work peacefully in the capital. She observes almost all Orthodox feasts, attends the Orthodox church and on every occasion lights a candle for the eternal peace of her deceased husband. The narrator presents her as a character who thinks along practical lines: “the double is more powerful.”<sup>563</sup> That is why she practices both faiths at the same time. Thus at Easter the Orthodox priest must bless not only a roasted pig's head but also matzah, and at Christmas there is a lit Hanukkah candlestick, whereas in the bedroom, beside the icon, there is a collection box from Palestine,<sup>564</sup> where Madame inserts money whenever she refuels the olive lamp burning in front of the icon. When the Jews come and stay in her apartment, the only thing she demands is that they pray inside the house. When she listens to them, she goes to sleep peacefully.<sup>565</sup> On the one hand, Asch presents Kvasnietsova in a positive

562 Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, op. cit., p. 97, רייכטום *raykhtum*.

563 Sholem Ash, *ibid.*, pp. 167–168, צווייען אין שטאַרקער, *tsveyen iz shtarker*.

564 In 1901 the Zionist Congress in Basel established the Jewish National Fund (Keren Kayemet LeYisrael) to collect money and buy land in Palestine for Jewish settlers. The funds were collected around the world as voluntary contributions and donations. That is why in many Jewish houses there were special collection boxes, usually emptied once a year, when emissaries would come to collect money. In 1946 the Fund owned more than 50% of the Jewish land in Palestine.

565 See Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, op. cit., pp. 165–175.

light—it is only thanks to her disinterested care that many Jews, who often come from afar, are confused and have no right to stay in the capital, find shelter and help. On the other hand, however, she can afford taking care of them and can enjoy good relations with the authorities only because she runs “the institute.” An additional problem is her reception of baptism and a very utilitarian attitude towards faith. Kvasnietsova is deeply engaged in her religion, or, to put it more precisely, in her religions, but in the novel she is not convincing; rather, she is tragicomic in her attempts to reconcile the old and the new faith.

Hans Bodenheimer from *Bam opgrunt* is baptized by his parents. The family rejoice that this only male family descendant is a Christian and thus will not have so many problems in his life as they have. They present him with Christian gifts, Virgin Mary statuettes, crèches and small ivory crosses. Hans is not much interested in all this, but his family are proud that he is not a follower of Judaism. They are all the more terrified when suddenly Hans is drawn to Judaism, when he is beaten up at the university because of defending a Jewish girl and when he announces that he is a Jew himself.<sup>566</sup> Hans reproaches his parents for not providing him with Christian faith but with a false passport, which is supposed to “smuggle” him through life.<sup>567</sup>

The problems of the Jews who try to assimilate themselves in Germany are also discussed by Israel Joshua Singer in his novel *די משפחה קארנאָווסקי* (*Di mishpokhe Karnovski*) published in 1943, which shows three generations of a Jewish family. Dovid, a representative of the oldest generation, emigrates from Poland to Germany and tries to fit in. To his son Georg, the Jewish tradition loses its meaning—he marries a German woman and their son Jegor supports Nazi ideology.

By showing individual cases of baptized Jews, Asch clearly suggests that their choices are not optimal, either religion-wise or pragmatically, because after baptism one not only loses his sense of group identity and ability to identify himself but he does not receive anything instead, maybe apart from gaining an elusive sense of security. This is well understood by Heinrich Bodenheimer, Hans’ uncle from *Bam opgrunt*, who does not want to get baptized, although he hates the Jews and believes that “since the birth of Jesus Christ the Jews have become obsolete.”<sup>568</sup>

In Asch’s novels, superficial faith that does not mean much can be seen not only in the lives of converted Jews but also in the lives of those who have not converted. Vasil Aleksandrovitsh, who manages the “institute,” is in a sense

566 See Sholem Ash, *Bam opgrunt*, op. cit., pp. 323–328.

567 See *ibid.*, p. 374.

568 *Ibid.*, p. 105, *זינט קריסטוס געבורט זענען די יידן איבעריג געוואָרן, זינט זינט קריסטוס געבורט זענען די יידן איבעריג געוואָרן, זינט זינט קריסטוס געבורט זענען די יידן איבעריג געוואָרן, זינט זינט קריסטוס געבורט זענען די יידן איבעריג געוואָרן.*



similar to Madame—he is positive on the one hand, but negative on the other, due to what he does. He looks more like a vendor of devotional articles than a human trafficker. He is religious and takes care not only of good manners and personal hygiene, but also of religiousness of the “institute members.” The narrator relates that in Saint Petersburg the popular saying was that someone was as pious as a lady from Kvasnietsova’s institute and the saying was not ironic at all. Vasil is so much moved by the story of Ester Hodel’s son that he decides to use the clout that Madame’s influential guests have—after all, someone who retains his faith cannot be wronged in Russia. Both he and Madame are extremely proud that they could offer shelter to someone as pious as Ester Hodel and they give her all possible assistance.<sup>569</sup> It is likely that by creating the two characters and by presenting the “institute members” the author tries to ridicule superficial faith.

Asch cannot find any justification for Christian hypocrisy and the way of living which contradicts the precepts of one’s religion. Vasil Andrieyevitch, a Russian landowner who values horses more than peasants working in his estate, is an example of a negative Christian character. Although his wife does not want to have children, he does not plan to leave her because of the forest and the village which are part of her dowry. Instead, in his Moscow apartment, he spends long months with his concubine, with whom he has two children. The narrator stresses that they lead a “pious and quiet life.”<sup>570</sup> On every Saturday evening and Sunday morning they go to the Orthodox church to light a candle in front of a holy painting. Vasil believes that his life with Natasha is the real one, whereas his marriage is nonsense and sin. He even plans to go to another city so that a local priest, who does not know his situation, blesses his relationship with the concubine.<sup>571</sup> When during the revolution Vasil Andrieyevitch tries to find shelter with one of his peasants, he makes an unctuous promise: “Jesus will pay you back.”<sup>572</sup> In this short but expressive scene Asch exposes hypocrisy and superficial faith.

Such faith, though presented less drastically, is also exemplified by Asch’s Jewish characters. There are various reasons for this: poverty, the necessity to earn one’s daily bread and the resulting lack of time, or a slow but steady process of assimilation of the more moneyed classes, taking place not only in tsarist Russia, where many Jews do not receive baptism but they nevertheless start attending the Orthodox church and observing Christian feasts, first of all

569 See Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, op. cit., pp. 172–175.

570 Sholem Ash, *Moskve*, op. cit., p. 15, פירן זיי ביידע אַ גאַטספּאַרנטיק פּרידלעך לעבן, *firn zey beyde a gotsforkhtik fridlekh lebn*.

571 See *ibid.*, pp. 12–15.

572 *Ibid.*, p. 320, זאָל דיר דערפאַר באַצאָלן, *Kristus zol dir derfar batsoln*.

Christmas, but also in the United States, where often they do the same. Emily from *Gots gefangene* says that she was brought up religionless and Godless, although her family observed Christian and Jewish feasts and she attended a synagogue on the Jewish New Year and on Yom Kippur, and on Christmas her home was decorated with mistletoe and a Christmas tree.<sup>573</sup> On the other hand, Gabriel Mirkin from *Farn mabl* is deeply disgusted with his native town and the Jews who live there; he does not want to have anything in common with them and until his son is born, he thinks seriously about converting to Christianity, which he practices anyway. Then, however, he obstinately protests against the anti-Jewish tsarist policy, but at the same time brings up Zakhari as a Christian.<sup>574</sup> It is only when the boy starts asking questions about the religion of his forefathers that Gabriel tells him that he will learn the truth when he becomes older. At the same time he quotes his own, denominationless and, in a way, lay definition of religion or rather ethics, and explains that for the time being he does not need to know anything but he should be concerned with education only, he should be brave, love all people, not harm anyone, but follow a straight path and do his best to be useful to others, no matter if they are Jews or Christians.<sup>575</sup>

Another characteristic types in the fictional reality created by Asch are adamant atheists. They include, for instance, the teacher Hurvits, doctor Khanovitsh or Khaim Lederer, for whom atheism is the only “faith” he does not want to lose, also after he goes to the United States. His family are trying to persuade him that he should attend a synagogue, his son insists that this is not Russia, where a revolution was needed to fight against the czar and God, and that there is no czar in the United States. However, Khaim does not change. That is why, as if in defiance, his son becomes very religious, finds a Jewish family with whom he celebrates all Jewish feasts, follows old customs and ultimately moves out from home.<sup>576</sup>

Everyday prayer is an important element in the liturgy of Judaism and that is why it occupies an important place in the image of the Jewish society presented by Asch. Reb Yekheskiel Gombiner from *Dos shtetl* does not interrupt his prayer when he receives the news his timber may be carried away by the river; he keeps praying and relying on God.<sup>577</sup> Prayer plays a significant role in the whole novel, as illustrated by a moving description of the Jews, gathered in the Tzadik’s home, who become united, praying together.<sup>578</sup> Likewise, when the

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573 See Sholem Ash, *Gots gefangene*, op. cit., p. 154.

574 See Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, op. cit., pp. 76–83.

575 See *ibid.*, p. 102.

576 See Sholem Ash, *Khaim Lederers tsurikkumen*, op. cit., pp. 42–44.

577 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., pp. 30–31.

578 See *ibid.*, pp. 98–102.

Tzadik arrives in town, everyone prays in the wayside woods, “creating one prayer, one heart, one soul. And there, down in the woods, the Shekhina, God’s divine presence, emerges from among the trees and prays together with everyone.”<sup>579</sup> With genuine warmth Asch presents the simple faith of weavers from Łódź, when in *Farn mabl* he describes a small prayer house in the yard, in which the poor God lives. It seems to Zakhari that “the Jewish God, who lives there, is one of them. He is a poor Jew, just like they are. He left His glory in heaven and moved along with the Jews to their poverty in the filthy, stinky yard.”<sup>580</sup> This brings to mind the text of the Polish Christmas carol *Oj maluški* (Oh Little One), in which Jesus is asked the question why He came down to this poor world instead of leading a comfortable life in heaven.

In Asch’s novels, Christians also pray—in *Ist river* Mary talks with God and pleads with Him, she also attends the church. Mary tells Nosn that she does not like to pray when ordered, she prays when she wants to. She also believes one should not pray so that people see it, one should pray in one’s heart for as long it takes God to grant the prayer. If He does not, then it means one was not committed enough to the prayer.<sup>581</sup> In another scene related to praying, Asch employs light humor again. The innkeeper tries to persuade a drunk Orthodox priest that rather than drink, he should go to church to pray. He gives him the keys and says that “the Jew likes watching the gentiles praying.”<sup>582</sup>

Asch describes many Jewish feasts, including Yom Kippur. In *Reb Shloyme Noged* the significance of the latter is emphasized by the fact that in the annual cycle of the Jewish shtetl life, Yom Kippur comes as the last one, being as if the climax of the novel and something one is looking forward to throughout the year. The reader learns a detailed description of the feast led by the Tzadik of Gostynin. The atmosphere in the synagogue and the behavior of the Jews gathered there are described in particularly vivid terms: there is crying, contrition

579 Ibid., p. 62, *un es iz gevorn eyn tfile, eyn harts, eyn neshome. Un dort, tif in vald, iz di Shkhine tsvishn di beymer oysgetsoygn un davnt mit.*

און עס איז געוואָרן איין תפילה, איין האַרץ, איין נשמה. און דאָרט, טיף אין וואַלד, איז די שכינה צווישן די ביימער אויסגעצויגן און דאָונט מיט.

580 Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, op. cit., p. 315, *Der yidisher Got, vos voynt do, iz eyner fun zey. An orimer yid punkt azoy vi zey. Er hot ibergelozt zayn glorye in himl un hot zikh arayngetsoygn mit didozike yidn in zeyer orimkeyt af dem shmutsikn, shtinkendikn hoyf. Dער יידישער גאָט, וואָס וואוינט דאָ, איז איינער פון זיי. אַן אַרימער ייד פונקט אזוי ווי זיי. ער האָט איבערגעלאָזט זיין גלאַריע אין הימל און האָט זיך אַריינגעצויגן מיט די דאָזיגע יידן אין זייער אַרימקייט אויף דעם שמוציגן, שטינקענדיגן הויף.*

581 See Sholem Ash, *Ist river*, op. cit., p. 73.

582 Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit. p. 15, *a yid hot lib tsu zen, vi “goyim” “modlen” zikh.*

אַ איד האָט ליעב צו זעהן, ווי „גוים“, „מאָדלען“ זיך.

and attrition, as well as joy because of the coming new year.<sup>583</sup> When he graduates, Zakhari decides to leave the wealthy Saint Petersburg and move to Warsaw. He goes there via Vilnius, where he becomes fascinated by Judaism in the form he has not yet met with. An especially precious moment to him is the visit to the synagogue during Yom Kippur. He believes that “faith is the only thing that has buoyed up the Jews so far and it will buoy them up in the future. Faith is the only thing the Jews have. This is their true Jewish homeland.”<sup>584</sup>

Zakhari does not understand why some give up their faith. He begins to understand what the history of his nation means, the nation which generation after generation has kept customs, traditions and the holy Hebrew language. At the same time he is tempted by the image of his own homeland, which would be the Jewish state in Palestine.<sup>585</sup>

The ninth day of the month Av is the day of sorrow and repentance, on this day the Jews remember the destruction of the First and the Second Temple. In Jerusalem, they gather in front of the Wailing Wall. This is recounted in *Der veg tsu zikh*, where Sephardi Jews come along in their Turkish turbans, Polish Jews in satin coats and shtreimels, and Jews of Bukhara in colorful smocks. They are joined by newly arrived Jews from Yemen, who walked to Jerusalem from the port of Jaffa with their wives and children, expecting the coming of the Messiah.<sup>586</sup> The faith in the coming of the Messiah is especially manifest in *Kidush hashem*, where Jews speculate what is going to happen to all synagogues and Jewish settlements which they have built in Poland when the Messiah comes. They conclude it is obvious: “God is sure to move Poland to the Land of Israel.”<sup>587</sup> The Messianic belief that all Jews will miraculously reach Jerusalem was quite widespread and it can be found also in other Yiddish literary works, for instance, in the novel *Meshiyekh geviter* (1961) by Yekhiel-Yeshaye Trunk.

Before the Messiah is born, the prophet Elijah is to come back to Earth. That is why the figure of Elijah appears in Asch’s Christological novels, also in *Mary*. After the death of Zechariah and Elisabeth, Miriam and Joseph want to

583 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noged*, op. cit., p. 209.

584 Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, op. cit., p. 74, *di emune iz dos eyntsike, vos hot yidn derhaltn biz ist, un vet zey ufhaltn in der tsukunft. Di emune iz dos eyntsike, vos yidn farmogn. Dos iz dos emese yidische foterland.*

די אמונה איז דאָס איינציגע, וואָס האָט יידן דערהאַלטן ביז איצט, און וועט זיי אויפהאַלטן אין דער צוקונפט. די אמונה איז דאָס איינציגע, וואָס יידן פאַרמאָגן. דאָס איז דאָס אמתע יידישע פאַטערלאַנד.

585 See *ibid.*, pp. 73–76.

586 See Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, op. cit., pp. 137–139. According to Jewish belief, it is Tishe Bov which is the day of the birth of the Messiah.

587 Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit., p. 60, *vet avade Got iberfirn Poyln [...] kin Eretz-Yisroel.*

take care of the orphaned John. However, one day a beggar comes to their house and wants to talk to Yeshua. He asks the boy to tell his parents that they do not need to help John as he has already been taken care of by those who are to be his guardians. Upon hearing the news, Miriam cries that it must have been the prophet Elijah who brought it.<sup>588</sup> In this way for the first time the figure of the prophet appears in the novel under his own name, to make sure the reader recognizes it. Later the name will become redundant. Having left school, Yeshua starts working in his father's workshop. He learns fast, and soon Joseph takes to the market the first yoke made by his son. Suddenly an old man appears, who chooses Yeshua's yoke from among many different items, asks who has made it, and requests Joseph to tell Yeshua that he made a good job and that if he is able to carve a yoke for an animal with so much love, he will be able to put the heavenly yoke on men. The old man pays and walks away, taking with him the fruit of Yeshua's work.<sup>589</sup> When many years later Yeshua comes back from the market with his mother, he meets an old man carrying a yoke on his shoulders. He explains to Yeshua that the yoke Yeshua made as a boy symbolizes God's yoke he will put on mankind as an adult. He adds that the time has almost come and that John has already started baptizing men in the Jordan.<sup>590</sup>

Yeshua's mother, Miriam, is a Jewess and the protagonist of Asch's novel. At the same time her attributes can be detected in the female characters in the writer's other novels. In *Kidush hashem*, Dvoyre, being convinced of Shloyme's death, wants to die herself, she stares at the sky and her eyes glisten. The Cossack who is in love with her suddenly goes down on his knees in front of her and says he knows who she really is because he has seen her in a holy picture. The girl succeeds in persuading him to shoot her—she claims nothing will happen to her.<sup>591</sup> Another Jewess who bears resemblance to the Virgin Mary is described in *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen*. Cesare Pastila, an Italian painter, strolls in the Roman ghetto and suddenly sees an old Jew whose face looks like the ones he saw in Byzantine paintings of saints.<sup>592</sup> He is even more enamored with a girl who lives in the old Jew's house; to him she looks like St Mary, he feels an urge to kneel before her and to pray to her like he would pray to the Mother of God. He decides to paint her as the Virgin Mary, though for a while he finds it strange to have a Jewess as a model, but soon he finds an answer:

Was it not that God Himself found as His chosen one the daughter of this nation?  
Was it not that she herself, the eternal chastity, the Mother of God, belonged to this

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588 See Sholem Asch, *Mary*, op. cit., p. 193.

589 See *ibid.*, p. 269.

590 See *ibid.*, pp. 325–326.

591 See Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit., pp. 186–192.

592 See Sholem Ash, *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen*, op. cit., p. 2.

nation? This is truly incomprehensible, sublime and mystical what this nation possesses that God decided to make it home for the world's savior.<sup>593</sup>

When the waters of the Tiber flood the Roman ghetto, suddenly the crowd of onlookers gathered on the walls see a girl floating on a plank of wood. Beautiful and sad, she does not call for help. It seems as if the merciful Virgin Mary came to the ghetto, so the onlookers start shouting that the Jews should be rescued by opening the ghetto gate and letting the water out. Pointing at the pope, who was responsible for the situation, they cry: "Antichrist! Satan sits on Christ's throne."<sup>594</sup> Cesare Pastila paints his dream. Yefte as the Mother of God is not shown in a traditional way, either with the Child or crying at the cross. In Pastila's painting she is the Mother of God ascending Heaven and looking down at the Earth with sorrow.<sup>595</sup>

Yefte, accused of having stolen the image of the Virgin Mary is burnt at the stake at the behest of the pope. The stake is built of holy Jewish books.<sup>596</sup> The girl stands defiant with her eyes closed, so as not to look at the bad people. They all hear it when just before dying she cries "Shma Yisroel."<sup>597</sup> In 16th-century Ancona, on Saturdays, the Inquisition takes all men, women and children who are present at synagogues and puts them in prisons, where they are tortured until they accept baptism. Next they are shackled and transported away to Malta. Twenty-six Jews who do not renounce their faith are burnt at the stake.<sup>598</sup>

Giving up one's life for faith, *Kidush hashem*, is the title of another novel by Asch, in which it is not just individual Jews who are killed—there are whole towns which are put to death. The Jews who fall in the hands of the Cossacks in the town of Tulczyn face death singing psalms. Not for a minute do they consider bowing in front of the cross to save their lives. Most of them are killed af-

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593 Ibid., p. 19, *Hot den Got aley nix oysgeklitn far zayn oysvelte a tokhter fun dem folk? Hot zi aley nix, di eybike reynkeyt, di muter fun Got, nit balant tsu dem folk? Dos iz dos umfershtendlekhe, dos hoykhe un dos mistishe, vos ligt in dem folk, vos Got hot dafke em oysgeklitn, az fun em zol aroyskumen di derleyzung fun der velt.*

הָאֵשׁ דַּעַן גָּאָט אַלײַן נײַט אױסגעקלײַבען פֿאַר זײַן אױסערוועהלטע אַ טאַכטער פֿון דעם פֿאַלק? הָאָט זײַ אַלײַן, די אײַביגע רײַנקײַט, די מוטער פֿום גאָט, נײַט בעלאַנגט צו דעם פֿאַלק? דאָס אײַז דאָס אױנפֿערשטענדליכע, דאָס הױכע אױן דאָס מײַסטישע, וואָס לײַגט אײַן דעם פֿאַלק, וואָס גאָט הָאָט דוקא אײַהם אױסגעקלײַבען, אַז פֿון אײַהם זאָל אַרױסקומען די ערלײַונג פֿון דער וועלט.

594 Ibid., p. 50, *Anti-krist! Der tayvl zitst af Kristuses tron.*

595 See *ibid.*, pp. 62–65.

596 Burning Jewish books by the Inquisition is described by Graetz, see Heinrich Graetz, *Historja Żydów*, op. cit., Vol. 7, pp. 267 and 280–281; this is probably Asch's source of information.

597 See Sholem Ash, *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen*, op. cit., pp. 140–143.

598 See *ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

ter the Orthodox priest tells the Cossacks to “do God’s will.” Few Jews are sold to the Tatars.<sup>599</sup> These terrifying scenes that sink deep in the reader’s mind emphasize that also in different, better times it is a moral duty to stick to one’s faith, the faith of one’s forefathers, paid dearly for with martyrs’ blood. *Kidush hashem* is an ever-present motif in Yiddish literature, writers use it recurrently in various periods and in all literary genres. For instance in 1879 Perets published the song *קידוש השם* (*Kidush hashem*) in Hebrew, which presents a tragic story of a Jewish girl who preferred to commit suicide than to fall into the hands of Khmelnytsky’s Cossacks. Many years later, in 1900–1904, Perets wrote *פֿאָלקסטִמלעכע געשיכטן* (*Folkstimlekhe geshikhtn*) in Yiddish and one of the short stories in the collection contains a similar motif.

In Asch’s novels, it is not only martyrs for faith who possess attributes of holiness. The author often introduces Lamed Vav Tzadikim, the hidden saints, thanks to whom the world may still exist. Usually they are wanderers, traveling teachers, preachers, tailors or vendors who come as if from nowhere. Sometimes they are the locals nobody pays attention to. Among the latter there is the tailor from *Dos shtetl*—as the narrator says nobody knows where he comes from or goes to. In this way Asch signals that this pious man should be counted in the group of the thirty-six hidden righteous ones. After many years the tailor’s wife gives birth to their son Dovid, who later becomes the shtetl rabbi.<sup>600</sup> The reader may wonder momentarily whether the painter Kowalski from *Meri* should be counted among Lamed Vav Tzadikim. Apparently he is a Polish Jew who came to the village to paint the Dnieper River landscapes, but Meri does not believe it. Besides, it is difficult to tell his age: sometimes he looks like an old man and sometimes almost like a child, and when Meri asks him how old he is, he answers that this is his greatest secret. The girl believes that Kowalski belongs to the nation that will be born some time in future or that has long been lost.<sup>601</sup> However, the reader soon learns that the author wanted to emphasize Kowalski’s “otherness” as an artist, so just like Lamed Vav Tzadikim, he is shown as existing beyond time and society. One could ask whether Asch implies here that artists are as important for the existence of the world as Lamed Vav Tzadikim. On the basis of his novels it is hard to provide a univocal answer—it is only in *Meri* that such an association exists.

On the whole the narrator lets the reader himself identify Lamed Vav Tzadikim, though sometimes he directly alludes to the hidden righteous ones, e.g. in *Reb Shloyme Noged*, in the story told by the Sabbath guest and in the meditations of the boy who listens in. The guest tells the story of Lamed Vav

599 See Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit., pp. 175–181.

600 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., pp. 52–53.

601 See Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., pp. 31–33 and 36–37.

Tzadikim, who come from nowhere, change their appearance and visit Jewish shtetls to help people.<sup>602</sup>

In *Kidush hashem*, one of Lamed Vav Tzadikim appears many times and in comparison with other works, where he appears only sporadically, is most thoroughly described. First he saves the family of the innkeeper from trouble, when he comes to visit them as a tailor-melamed and helps establish the day of the week.<sup>603</sup> Later he teaches Shloyme, he also comes before the boy leaves for yeshiva in Lublin, and sews clothes for him. The townsfolk talk about the tailor, who is one of the thirty-six hidden righteous ones. The narrator says that he makes his sudden appearances and then disappears for many weeks in forests, helps the innkeeper observe the Sabbath, attends a lonely mother by her bedside, so that the female demon Lilith, Adam's first wife, who lies in wait for human children, would not kill the newborn baby. Reputedly, the learned ones visit him in the forest to study the Torah.<sup>604</sup> Mendel takes his son to a yeshiva in Lublin and suddenly he notices the former teacher of Shloyme standing in the doorway to a small shop and calling customers in. The innkeeper enters the shop and sees that it is empty, so he asks what could be bought there. The tailor-melamed tells him that he sells "penance, prayer and charity."<sup>605</sup> Six years later, before coming back home from the yeshiva, Shloyme goes to the market to buy something for Dvoyre. Suddenly he hears a merchant's voice: "Warsaw golden shoes for sale."<sup>606</sup> Then he remembers that before leaving home he promised Dvoyre to buy such shoes. He looks at the seller and realizes that it is his former teacher. On his way back to Złoczów, Mendel and Shloyme learn about the outbreak of Khmelnytsky's uprising. The Jews rejoice, believing the Messiah is about to come, until a young Cabalist offers his own interpretation, according to which the year 1648 shall see the realization of Haman's decision to destroy the Jews. Upon hearing this, an old Jew rises and replies that no one should ruin those rare moments of happiness that Jews enjoy and besides, according to the Torah, now it is the year in which salvation will come. The boy recognizes that the old Jew is his former teacher.<sup>607</sup> When not much later the rabbi orders the Złoczów inhabitants to run from the approaching Cossack soldiers, Mendel does not want to obey him, he decides to stay in the town and to defend the synagogue. Then suddenly the tailor appears and persuades the inhabitants to run away by setting

602 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noked*, op. cit., pp. 167–168.

603 See Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit., pp. 21–22.

604 See *ibid.*, pp. 47–48.

605 *Ibid.*, p. 81, תפילה וצדקה, תשובה, *tshuve*, *tfile vetsdoke*.

606 *Ibid.*, p. 86, פארקויפען, צו שכלעך גאלדענע שיכלעך *varshever goldene shikhlekh tsu farkoyfn*.

607 See *ibid.*, pp. 93–94.



fire to the synagogue and explaining that they should not defend stones and timber.<sup>608</sup> In Niemirów, the tailor, disguised as a Ukrainian, comes to warn that the hideout in the cemetery is no longer safe and that the inhabitants should flee to the other side of the river.<sup>609</sup> Soon afterwards he rescues Shloyme from death when, disguised as an old Ukrainian lyrist, he explains to the Cossacks that they can get a good price for the boy with the Tatars, so it does not make any sense to kill him, despite the fact that he does not want to kiss the cross.<sup>610</sup> In Tulczyn, when the Jews realize that the Poles betrayed them and thus they want to take their revenge, the old tailor reappears and convinces them that they are responsible for other Jews, so that when they kill the Poles from Tulczyn, other Poles will take revenge on Jews living in other towns. He tells them that they should put down their arms and seek God's mercy; next, along with rabbis, he leads the Jews who leave the town and surrender to the Cossacks.<sup>611</sup> Having been bailed out from captivity by the Turkish Jews, Shloyme goes back to Lublin and learns about the death of his parents; although he knows nothing about Dvoyre, he believes she waits for him in heaven. However, while seeing the miseries around him, he gradually sinks into resignation. And then he notices a small, empty shop and a shopkeeper who seems to be quite familiar—when asked what he sells, the shopkeeper answers “trust and faith in God.”<sup>612</sup> In this final scene of *Kidush hashem*, the author shares with the reader his faith and conviction that despite so many disasters and tragedies befalling the Jews one should never lose hope, but always trust God. These words, uttered by one of Lamed Vav Tzadikim, acquire an additional strength.

*Farn mabl* features Reb Borekh Khomski, also Lamed Vav Tzadik, but more human-like. The key to understanding the hidden significance of this character is Zakhari's remarkable response to the confessions of the old Jew. He asks him who he is, where he came from so suddenly, and where he himself, Zakhari, is now. Khomski answers that it is not important who he is, one should not speak about him as he is just an old Jew who soon will be no more.<sup>613</sup> The figure of the pious old Jew is shown with exceptional warmth and in a very positive light; it seems some of his beliefs are the author's. His faith is deep and full of wisdom, but not blind. At some point the old man tells Zakhari Mirkin that once he supported the Jewish Enlightenment and he was a learned maskil.<sup>614</sup> Reb

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608 See *ibid.*, p. 109.

609 See *ibid.*, pp. 127–128.

610 See *ibid.*, pp. 137–140.

611 See *ibid.*, pp. 173–175.

612 *Ibid.*, p. 195, בטחון *bitokhn*.

613 See Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, op. cit., p. 354.

614 See Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, op. cit., p. 373.

Borekh Khomski goes to Saint Petersburg to find justice in tzarist courts on behalf of the members of his community who are threatened with eviction. For two weeks he wanders around town, without a permit to stay, facing arrest and expulsion, and all this only because he does not want to accept the invitation of Madame Kvasnietsova. However, as the matter is of concern to the whole community rather than to himself only, he finally decides to move in with Madame and to stay in town. He confesses to Zakhari Mirkin, that he has not prayed for a month because it is impossible to pray in such a place. The only prayer he says is the one in front of the Winter Palace: “Cast Your fear on the gentiles who do not know You and on the peoples who blaspheme against You. Disperse this house and leave no stone unturned, just like You did with Assyria and Babylon!”<sup>615</sup>

Invoking Jewish sages,<sup>616</sup> Reb Khomski claims that the world is a living being and people are just threads in the world fabric. Thanks to his thoughts, man unites in himself the whole world, including God. What really counts is eternal justice rather than the minor, human one.<sup>617</sup>

Reb Khomski explains it to Zakhari that praying and learning is a great joy to Jews. The joy coming from the perusal of one page in the Talmud is comparable to or greater than the joy of spending an evening in the theater—one goes to the synagogue to forget one’s everyday worries. The Jews do not have their own country but by studying customs and laws from the times when they lived in Israel, they feel as if they were back there. It is interesting what Khomski has to say about Socialists: after all, his children have chosen this path. At first he did not approve of their choice, but now he supports them because: “the most important thing [...] is to do what you do with faith. God does not mind how you believe in Him as long as you believe that there is a benevolent force which guides our world.”<sup>618</sup>

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615 Ibid., p. 190, *Varf dayn angst af di goyim, vos kenen dikh nisht un af di felker, vos lestern dayn nomen. Tsefir dos hoyz un loz nisht iber a shteyn af a shteyn—azoy vi du host tsu Ashur un tsu Bavl geton!*

וואָרף דייַן אַנגסט אויף די גוים, וואָס קענען דיר נישט און אויף די פעלקער, וואָס לעסטען דיין נאָמען. צופיר דאָס הויז און לאָז נישט איבער אַ שטיין אויף אַ שטיין - אַזוי ווי די האָסט צו אשור און צו בבל געטון!

616 Borekh Khomski, and specifically his life philosophy, is a reference to, among others, Dov Ber of Międzyrzec (ca. 1710–1772), another figure present in Jewish tradition, the student and follower of Bal Shem Tov. Just like in the case of Borekh Khomski, in the teachings of Dov Ber of Międzyrzec there was a strong emphasis on pantheism.

617 See Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, op. cit., pp. 374–377.

618 Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, op. cit., p. 353, *der iker [...] iz, az dos, vos m'tut, tut men mit emune. Got iz nisht ka khilek af vos fara oyfn du gloybst in em. Abi nor du gloybst, az es iz do a guter koyekh, vos firt undzer velt.*

The belief that God is one and it is not important how one believes in Him can be found in many novels by Asch, just like trust in God's actions. Zakhari tries to learn how to understand the world through talks with people who fascinate him. In *Peterburg*, Reb Borekh Khomski tells him he is sure that

from above, God rules the world with justice, though we think otherwise. Yet eventually justice will descend and triumph. We are not sure if we will see this ourselves, so then our children will. Man is precisely like a small dot present in the Torah. The dot appears momentarily when you open a fragment of the Pentateuch and soon disappears when you are finished reading. Yet the Torah is alive and the dot is firmly set in the Pentateuch.<sup>619</sup>

Mirkin also meets Reb Borekh Khomski in a small prayer house in Łódź, and another interesting conversation takes place there. This time the old Jew tells Zakhari how to find consolation in prayer, which gives forgetfulness and detachment from the worries of everyday life. Then he expresses a philosophical, if not a downright pantheistic idea, which shows the author's deep faith and his efforts to find common ground for both religions. Borekh Khomski says that thanks to good deeds

you become part of "the six days of creation," of cosmos, and thanks to this you relate to eternity, to the day after your death. You become part of Nature. [...] They do not know that God's greatest miracle is Nature itself. Not the almonds which grow on the staff held by Moses but those that grow on trees, they are truly miraculous, as miraculous as the fact that the sun comes back in the ordained time. You must admit it that Nature itself is faith. We should believe that every day food is prepared for us.<sup>620</sup>

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דער עיקר [...] איז, אז דאָס, וואָס מ'טוט, טוט מען מיט אמונה. נאָט איז נישט קיין חילוק אויף וואָס פאַר אַ אופן דו גלויבסט אין אים. אבי נאָר דו גלויבסט, אז עס איז דאָ אַ גוטער פּוּח, וואָס פירט אונדזער וועלט.

619 Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, op. cit., p. 372, *Got firt zayn velt mit yoysher, khotsh undz dakht zikh oys andersh fun oybn-uf. Ober sof-kol-sof kumt di gerekhtikeyt un zigt. Mir aleyv veln es efsher nisht zen, veln es undzere kinder derlebn. Der mentsh iz punkt vi a pintele ongeshribn af a seyfer-toyre. Dos pintele dersheynt nor af a vayl, ven men misht uf di sedre; bald vet es farshvindn, ven men hot opgeleyent di sedre. Ober di seyfer-toyre lebt, un dos pintele shteyt fest farshribn in der sedre.*

נאָט פירט זיין וועלט מיט יושר, כאַטש אונדז דאָכט זיך אויס אַנדערש פון אייביג אויף. אָבער סוף־כל־סוף קומט די גערעכטיקייט און זיגט. מיר אַליין וועלן עס אפשר נישט זען, וועלן עס אונדזערע קינדער דערלעבן. דער מענטש איז פונקט ווי אַ פינטעלע אָנגעשריבן אויף אַ ספר־תורה. דאָס פינטעלע דערשיינט נאָר אויף וויילע, ווען מען מיסט אויף די סדרה; באַלד ווערט עס פאַרשווינדן, ווען מען האָט אָפגעלייענט די סדרה. אָבער די ספר־תורה לעבט, און דאָס פינטעלע שטייט פעסט פאַרשריבן אין דער סדרה.

620 Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, op. cit., p. 353, *verst du a teyl fun "sheyshes-yemey-breyshes" fun der yetzire und durkh dem bindst du dikh on in der eybikeyt, in dem tsumorgns nokh dayn toyt.—du verst a teyl fun der teve. [...] Zey veyesn nisht, az der grester Gots nes iz take di teve aleyv. Nisht di mandlen, vos waksn afn shtekn in Moyshe rabejnis hant, nor di mandlen, vos waksn afn boym. Dos iz Gots nes; dos, vos di zun kumt tsurik tsu ir oys-*

The figures of Lamed Vav Tzadikim often appear in Yiddish literature, which usually abounds in references to beliefs and legends. The novel which combines philosophical, legendary, and realistic elements is, for example *משיח בן אפרים* (*Meshiyekh ben Efroim*, 1924) by Moyshe Kulbak, in which, apart from Lamed Vav Tzadikim, there appears Lilith.

The opposite of Lamed Vav Tzadikim is Satan. What is interesting, in Asch's novels they share exterior similarities. When in *Toyt urteyl* Stone meets the old Vintsler, he finds him familiar, as if he has already seen the face and the hand.<sup>621</sup> This is exactly how Asch usually describes the impressions of those who meet Lamed Vav Tzadikim. In the novel Satan does not appear alone but is helped by his lover Lilith,<sup>622</sup> in the novel named Leonora, who seduces the banker. Stone finds it hard to resist a young woman—he is infatuated with the smell of her perfumes, her secret touches, telling looks, and ultimately with her plea to save her from the hands of Vintsler. Vintsler, pretending to be her father but in fact being her lover, turns a blind eye to what Leonora does and he even leaves the couple alone, persuades them to dance together and tries to make Stone dislike him by irritating him with small things and gestures. At night Leonora visits Stone in his room and soon afterwards Vintsler comes too. Because of his dislike for Vintsler and his attraction to the girl waiting for him in bed, Stone loses his temper and starts strangling the old man in the ensuing struggle. Thus he accidentally kills him.<sup>623</sup> Later, during the trial, Leonora gives evidence against Stone.<sup>624</sup>

In *Bam oprunt*, Yudkevitch falls in love with Ester, the wife of Rabinovitch, a poor broker. The broker's sister, Mirl, is ugly and humpbacked but she always takes care of her sister-in-law and of her elegant clothes. Here the

*gezetster tsayt. Zet ir dokh shoyrn ayn, az teve iz emune. Der mentsh muz gloybn, az yedn tog, vos er lebt, iz ongegret far em zayn khayune.*

ווערט דו א טייל פון „ששת ימי בראשית“ פון דער יצירה און דורך דעם בינדסט דו דורך אן אין דער אייביגקייט, אין דעם צומארגנס נאך דיין טויט. - דו ווערט א טייל פון דער טבע. [...] זיי ווייסן נישט, אז דער גרעסטער גאטס נס איז טאקע די טבע אליין. נישט די מאנדלען, וואָס וואָקסן אויפן שטעקן אין משה רבנוס חאָנד, נאָר די מאַנדלען, וואָס וואָקסן אויפן בוים. דאָס איז גאָטס נס; דאָס, וואָס די זון קומט צוריק צו איר אויסגעזעצטער צייט. זעט איר דאָך שוין איין, אַז טבע איז אמונה. דער מענטש מוז גלויבן, אַז יעדן טאָג, וואָס ער לעבט, איז אָנגעגרייט פאַר אים זיין חיונה.

621 See Sholem Ash, *Toyt urteyl*, Varshe: Kultur-lige 1930, pp. 27–28

שלום אש, טויט אורטייל, ווארשע: קולטור-ליגע 1930, ז. 27–28.

622 As a seductress, Lilith appears in Perets' poem *מאניש* (*Monish*, 1888), in which, disguised as a daughter of the German merchant, she seduces Monish, a learned Jew. Though unable to resist her, he reassures Marie of his love and utters the name of God, which dooms him to hell.

623 See Sholem Ash, *Toyt urteyl*, Varshe: Kultur-lige 1930, pp. 21–55.

624 See *ibid.*, p. 76.

appearance symbolizes evil, which uses an innocent woman to lead others astray. Who is really hidden behind Mirl is revealed in the scene in which a woman looking “like a black poodle”<sup>625</sup> sneaks in on the house veranda, following Ester. There, brimming with happiness and in secret from the husband of her sister-in-law, she tells her that when Yudkevitch kisses the child he thinks about his mother, about Ester. Most likely Asch uses intertextuality here, as the poodle clearly symbolizes the devil: in Goethe’s *Faust* Mephistopheles also appears as a poodle. When in the evening Ester goes out with Yudkevitch and says that they can lock the door for the night, Mirl bursts into hysterical laughter and the brother cries: “Why are you laughing, you devil woman?”<sup>626</sup> Moreover, the moment when Rabinovitch persuades his wife to sign a blank promissory note<sup>627</sup> resembles the one when Faust signs the pact with Satan. Faust sells his soul, whereas Rabinovitch sells his wife, who realizes this and shouts that by means of the note her husband sells her to Yudkevitch.<sup>628</sup>

Prejudices do not appear often in Asch’s novels; sometimes he describes a variety of superstitions. Borekh Lensker from *Reb Shloyme Noged* is sick but he does not call the doctor as he believes nothing will help because a peasant woman cast a spell on him by throwing a horseshoe under his feet, which he rashly lifted.<sup>629</sup>

Asch’s protagonists usually establish their identity on the basis of their religion and tradition. Even though in Europe many ways of living are self-explanatory and thus hardly noticeable, in the United States only their most important aspects come to the fore and thus serve as the basis for the Jewish self. This is especially striking in the case of clashes, so often brought forward by the author, between the old and the new generation, which sheds family traditions and seeks full assimilation. Misha in *Meri* cannot find an aim in his life and although he feels he is a Jew, he is not entirely sure what it means to him. A certain breakthrough comes when he assumes responsibility for the sister of his arrested friend; she lives alone and soon becomes the embodiment of a Jewish girl. He also calls on a small praying house in the poor quarters of the town and envies

625 Sholem Ash, *Bam opgrunt*, op. cit., p. 51, שוואַרצער פּודעל, *vi a shvartser pudel*.

626 Ibid., p. 82, וואָס לאַכסט, טאַיַל, *Tayvl, vos lakhste*.

627 See *ibid.*, p. 74.

628 See *ibid.*, p. 75.

629 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noged*, op. cit., p. 187. This is a very strange story because in Polish tradition a horseshoe always brings good luck. Thus it seems rather unlikely that a Polish peasant woman would use a horseshoe to cast a spell. A horseshoe appears not only in Polish tradition: as early as the Middle Ages people believed that a horseshoe which was found on the road and put on the house’s door would protect it from black magic and bring happiness to its occupants, see Władysław Kopaliński, *Słownik mitów i tradycji kultury*, Warszawa: Rytm 2006, p. 991.

the faith that the Jews who gather there have. At the end of his quest he decides that he is going to marry Rokhel, who is in love with him and who suffered during a pogrom, and that the marriage must be religious and celebrated by a rabbi.<sup>630</sup> It is clear that in the novel faith is seen as an important element of self-identity—although Misha does not become a believer in a flash, he feels that religion and tradition are the foundations on which he should build his new life.

Sometimes, however, self-identification boils down to such fundamental and material things as a passport. Thus Motke from *Motke Ganev* suddenly realizes that he is nobody because he has no passport, so nobody knows who his father is, where he comes from and what his name is. It seems to him that without a passport he is not a human being. After killing Arn Leyb Kanarik, he steals his passport and then he can live and work in Warsaw. However, before getting married he feels he should regain his own identity and tells his fiancée about everything.<sup>631</sup>

Figures of memory in one way or another related to religion and beliefs are the most numerous among all figures that can be identified in Asch's novels. It is clear that they lie at the foundation of the image the author wanted to create in his fiction. They are set in the time in which the plot takes place and are simple, such as that of a rabbi or a priest, though some mythical characters are introduced, who stand beyond the time frame and are rooted in the other world, e.g. the prophet Elijah or Lamed Vav Tzadikim. The author describes joyful feasts and the deep simple faith as well as tragic events, such as death at the stake or from the hands of the Cossacks. He introduces new dilemmas, such as mixed marriages or conversions. At the same time he is in constant quest of the essence of faith. What he describes is clearly different categories or centers, around which memory becomes crystallized. In many different passages and on many different occasions it transpires that faith is the foundation that human life should be built upon, but it is not significant what particular faith man confesses as God is one.

### 4.3.5 Characters

In Asch's novels, there is a whole gallery of Jewish and non-Jewish characters. What is striking is his partiality to people as such, regardless of their religion or origin. Thus just like in the previous section devoted to faith, also here the division into the Jewish and non-Jewish world is not justified. The characters in Asch's novels are among the most often recurring figures of memory and they tend to be stereotypes prevalent in a given community or society—apart from

630 See Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., p. 244.

631 See Sholem Ash, *Motke Ganev*, op. cit., pp. 191–192 and 315–324.

their names the author usually provides a more detailed, evaluative presentation. That is why, for instance, in common memory of nations there are such notions like the drunken Russian, the patriotic Pole, Gypsy the thief, Arab the terrorist, the beautiful Jewess, German the Nazi, the stupid peasant and many more, which usually have very little to do with the majority of those belonging to a given group. Once instilled, such stereotypes are very difficult to uproot, they live their own life and remain valid even when the society or community they function in has no longer any contact with the people whom they characterize; thus, it is impossible to verify their truthfulness. That is why the role of literature in combating such social or national stereotypes and instilling positive images and connotations in common memory is so important.<sup>632</sup>

Asch's novels, among the most clear-cut figures of memory that refer to human characters, present a Jewish ferryman, a peasant of a positive attitude towards Jews, usually a simple Christian woman helping Jews, a Jewish and a Christian laborer or craftsman, a Jewish and a Christian thief, a Jewish prostitute, a Polish and a German nobleman, a rich Jew, a Russian and an American policeman, a Jewish and a Polish doctor, a Jewish lawyer, a Jewish teacher, an artist and a beautiful Jewess. It is easy to notice that the figures of memory standing for Jewish characters are more variegated and numerous than Christian characters, who, however, as a rule are positive. It is also worth emphasizing that when particular human characters are ambiguous, the author usually tries to make his case relative, explaining via the narrator the reasons for specific behavior and quoting examples to the contrary.

As a rule, simple Jews and Christians are positive characters in Asch's novels—usually they are pious, try to follow the precepts of their faith, help others, and show respect to their tradition and beliefs. A ferryman is an indispensable element of the Eastern European Jewish landscape. In *Dos shtetl* it is Khaim, an old and hardworking ferryman, who lives in a small house and not only ferries people across the Vistula, but also helps all travelers by either feeding them or putting them up for the night.<sup>633</sup> The author titled the novel's whole chapter *A heyzl ba der Veysl* and already at the beginning he explains that the small house is the most important one, because it symbolizes all ferrymen who have ever lived there and who will live there.<sup>634</sup>

In Asch's novels an important role is assigned to the image of Polish peasants, which contradicts the stereotype of a country fool figure. Peasants appear

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632 On stereotypes see e.g. Leszek Kołakowski, *National Stereotypes*, in: *Polin*, Vol. 4, 1989, pp. 3–5.

633 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., pp. 22–34.

634 See *ibid.*, pp. 22–23.

in all Eastern European novels by Asch, including those in which there are only few Christians.

At the beginning of *Der tilim yid* there are fewer references to the outside reality or to non-Jewish neighbors than, for instance, in *Dos shtetl*. This is due to a limited narrative frame—the world seen through the eyes of a small boy is necessarily limited and incomplete. However, even in this world there are single, usually nameless characters, for example, a peasant who on late Friday evening gets across the river to let desperate Jewish mothers know that their sons did not drown but are alive and will spend the Sabbath with a Jewish family at the other side of the Vistula.<sup>635</sup> The peasant is not a typical Shabbes goy, he helps the Jews on Friday evenings without expecting any payment. In *Dos shtetl* the peasants summoned to save timber do not ask for payment either, though they risk their own lives to help the Jewish merchant. Reb Gombiner acts in an honest way—when the night comes and he realizes that the struggle with the elements becomes too dangerous, he orders his men to stop and falls back on prayer.<sup>636</sup> Also the peasants in *Reb Shloyme Noked* are honest: at the trial of the murdered horse-thief they testify the truth, the peasant woman who bought a sick cow admits she bought it from the gentile who was later murdered, the old peasant explains that according to tradition “if you catch a thief at the fair, he belongs to the fair,”<sup>637</sup> which means that those who buy and sell at the fair have the right to decide what his punishment is going to be. Therefore, he and Shloyme Noked allowed for lynching the swindlers. This makes the subsequent court sentence mild and finally everyone goes for a drink, while the peasants conclude that the Gods are reconciled now.

Once again the story demonstrates the author’s affection for simple people. The novel shows that conflicts between the peasants and the Jews are instigated mostly by priests and that Polish noblemen do not want to support the Jews in their right cause, so it is only the peasants who are honest. They also help Yekhiel from *Der tilim yid*. During his mother’s sickness, when Yekhiel has to vend goods and in winter carry them to nearby villages, it turns out he delivers them mostly to the peasants he knows, who in turn know and like Rivke, who they buy products from and pay her with food or even with money.<sup>638</sup> Usually Yekhiel comes back home late at night, except for those days on which he meets

635 See Sholem Ash, *Der tilim yid*, op. cit., p. 19.

636 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., pp. 28–31.

637 Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noked*, op. cit., p. 208, *az men khapt a ganev afn yarid, gehert er tsum yarid*.

אז מען כאפט א גנב אויפן יריד, געהערט ער צום יריד.

638 See Sholem Ash, *Der tilim yid*, op. cit., p. 92.



a merciful peasant, who gives him and his load a lift.<sup>639</sup> When after many years Yekhiel comes to town with his wife Reyzele, it is she who the peasants buy products from because some remember her as the innkeeper's daughter and some, in that way, pay respect to Rivke, Yekhiel's late mother.<sup>640</sup>

An interesting character is a peasant from the village where Shloyme Volf's inn is situated. Called "poor Tadeusz," he is pushed around and humiliated by everyone, but he befriends Yekhiel, who alone treats him as a human being, his equal. Tadeusz works hard and tends not to complain about his life, though sometimes, when he drinks too much, he starts cursing those whom he holds responsible for his fate, mostly Pan Widowski and God, so the terrified Jewish innkeeper tries to hush him, fearing that he may be punished too.<sup>641</sup> Also when sober, Tadeusz can talk about his worries. Among other things, he wanders where justice is in the world, why his field is sandy, whereas others till fertile soil in the valley etc. He is of the opinion that if God really cared about the fate of all people, He would never let that happen.<sup>642</sup> Unable to bear such a world, Tadeusz decides to take revenge and plans to murder the innkeeper's wife. Fortunately, Yekhiel sees through his plans and at the crucial moment dissuades her from going out to the yard, and then he finds Tadeusz lying in ambush. Tadeusz drops the knife he was holding when he sees Yekhiel. Since then Tadeusz tells everyone that Yekhiel is a holy man, who prevented him from committing a mortal sin.<sup>643</sup> Later the poor peasant repays Yekhiel when during the attack on the inn he helps Reyzele escape through the window and rings the bell to call for help. Also this event is presented as a miracle—Tadeusz believes that it was Yekhiel's strong faith that forced him to visit the inn at the critical moment.<sup>644</sup> He also helps Yekhiel to bury a Jewish pitch burner and follower of Sabbatai Zevi who froze to death in the forest.<sup>645</sup> In Asch's novels, it is difficult to find a comprehensive presentation of a typical Jewish schlemiel,<sup>646</sup> an awkward and unlucky person ill-treated by others, who nevertheless tries to retain his dignity. In *Der tilim yid* it is Tadeusz who possesses some of these features, which is an additional proof that the author does not draw a line between simple people, Jews and Christians.

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639 See *ibid.*, p. 93.

640 See *ibid.*, p. 301.

641 See *ibid.*, pp. 170–175.

642 See *ibid.*, pp. 180–182.

643 See *ibid.*, pp. 223–226.

644 See *ibid.*, pp. 266–268.

645 See *ibid.*, pp. 287–288.

646 See Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Odcienie tożsamości. Literatura żydowska jako zjawisko wielojęzyczne*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS 2004, pp. 21–22.

He also provides examples of upper-class Christians who help the Jews, albeit not disinterestedly. Senator Akimov takes keen interest in the fate of Ester Hodel's son<sup>647</sup> and presents his case to the czar, who pardons him.<sup>648</sup> Although Akimov takes this step out of gratitude for the old Mirkin, who gave the senator a large sum of money so the latter could pay back what he had embezzled and Akimov himself regains the czar's favor thanks to moving the ruler with the story of somebody else, only some of the characters in *Farn mabl* see the irony of the situation whereas the others appreciate the act itself, as they do not care about the motives behind it.

Another form of help offered to Jews, though not disinterestedly either, is the institution of *Shabbes goy*. In *Gots gefangene*, Emilye's husband remembers the times when the family lived in Russia and, among other people, he recalls a *Shabbes goy*, who came to put out the Sabbath candles, as the mother was so pious that she did not even want to go near the flames. For this, she had to pay the Russian in white bread; he took advantage of the situation and periodically went on strike to demand higher payment. This came to an end when the son arrived at the conclusion that he himself could put the candles off, in that way ensuring more bread for the family.<sup>649</sup>

In almost all novels by Asch there are simple Christian women who help the Jews and are always shown in a positive light. In *Kidush hashem*, Marusia, an old Cossack woman, works in Mendel's inn. She is the only one who can afford treating the Orthodox priest in a harsh way by pouring the swill on his head to make him sober.<sup>650</sup> She also takes care of the innkeeper's son's religious education, for instance, she does not want to give him a cookie unless he says the blessing.<sup>651</sup> Marusia tries to help rescue Dvoyre from the hands of the Cossacks. She flees along with the Jews, though no one threatens her. She says that if she is to die, she would like to die among those with whom she shared bread. She puts a Cossack dress on Dvoyre to pretend she is her daughter.<sup>652</sup>

From among many other Christian women presented in his novels, Asch shows his liking for simple peasant women, whose faith can be seen in the way they live, in their help offered to others and in their respect for other religions. There is a moving scene taking place at the railway station during the war, when a Russian peasant woman feeds Austrian soldiers and tells everybody that as

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647 See Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, op. cit., pp. 238–239.

648 See *ibid.*, p. 379.

649 See Sholem Ash, *Gots gefangene*, op. cit., p. 30.

650 See Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit., p. 17.

651 See *ibid.*, p. 42.

652 See *ibid.*, pp. 129–130.

long as she gives them food, their mothers will feed Russian soldiers.<sup>653</sup> After the victory of the revolution another peasant woman saves illegal Jewish immigrants from being killed at the border and she curses the Bolsheviks: "You are Christians—Tatars, Gypsies, damn Turks, crazy beasts. Human life does not mean a thing to you. Why do you want to damn your souls? They also have their own God and He will stand up for them."<sup>654</sup>

Another simple woman from the masses is Maria Ivanovna, Zakhari Mirkin's nanny. Although she visits the Orthodox church only twice a year on the occasion of important church feasts, she believes that everyone has the right to his own faith and she reveals to Zakhari his Jewish origins as well as takes him to the synagogue.<sup>655</sup>

Klara Kranz, the hotel owner in *Ist river*, comes to the United States from Europe, but nobody knows exactly where she is from: Vienna, Hungary or Slovakia. She is not destined to marry Harry after his wife's death as the community is against mixed marriages. Thus she agrees to play the second fiddle but she is always ready to help and takes care of Harry's orphaned children. Although she is a Christian, she does remind the children of their Jewish faith—on Sabbaths she sends the girls to the house of Moyshe Davidovski and on Saturdays she dresses them up and takes them to the synagogue.<sup>656</sup> Another Christian woman presented in the novel is Mary, Irving's wife. Her husband leaves her when she baptizes their son without first asking for his approval. Because she is married to a Jew, her Irish family rejects her, and as a result she remains alone. Her husband holds it against Mary that she decided to baptize the small Nat, but his father, who upon his son's marriage to a Christian woman severed all contacts with him, understands Mary. He thinks it is only right that Nat's mother takes care of his religion as his father is not ready to provide the boy with his. Along with Nat, Mary starts living in the house of Moyshe Volf, her father-in-law, and tries to cook kosher meals. For Sabbath dinner she buys a more expensive, certified chicken and learns how to prepare it. Moyshe Volf is torn

653 See Sholem Ash, *Moskve*, op. cit., pp. 125–126.

654 Ibid., p. 445; *Kristn zent ir—Totern, Tsigayner, Terkn farsholtene. Meshuge-gevorene bestyes. Mentshn-lebn iz ba aykh prukhne gevorn. Vos hot ir zikh tsu farzindikn di neshome? Zey hobn dokh oykh a Got, un yener vet zikh onnemen far zey.*

קריסטן זענט איר - טאָטערן, ציגיינער, טערקן פאַרשאַלטענע, משוגע־געוואָרענע בעסטעס. מענטשן־לעבן איז ביי אײך פֿרוכנע געוואָרן. וואָס האָט איר זיך צו פֿאַרזינדיקן די נשמה? זײ האָבן דאָך אויך אַ גאָט, און יענער וועט זיך אָנגעמען פֿאַר זײ.

655 See Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, op. cit., pp. 91–98 and 131.

656 See Sholem Ash, *Ist river*, op. cit., p. 256.

by doubts because he is not entirely sure the chicken is kosher indeed, but he does not want to hurt Mary.<sup>657</sup>

Asch also created an Arabic equivalent of the Christian servant in the shape of Mahatma in *Dos gezang fun tol*. Mahatma works in Jewish settlements; she saves money, waiting for the return of her husband from the war. However, he buys himself a young wife and forces Mahatma to keep working. The settlers do not need her help but out of pity they feed her. Mahatma takes part in all important occasions: she cries over Yosele who died of malaria and shares her joy with others when grain sprouts in the fields. Most importantly, it is she who lets the settlers know that the Bedouins drove their herds in their fields, and later warns the kibbutz of an imminent Arab attack.<sup>658</sup> Here the author shows how simple people can value goodness wherever they meet with it, and how obliged they feel to repay in kind.

In his early novels Asch sees and presents poverty in the streets of small towns. Gradually, however, this image is supplemented with urban capitalism.<sup>659</sup> The writer also pays some attention to laborers, living in villages and working in local factories. A peasant working in a glass factory finds Motke, a young boy, crying in the middle of the road. He gives him some food and takes him along to his factory where other laborers let him spend the night and share their food with him. They know they invite trouble because Motke does not have a passport, but in spite of that they help him, and when they talk about his being a Jew they add: “ours, theirs, what the devil does it matter.”<sup>660</sup> On the one hand, this illustrates human goodness and compassion, but on the other, it emphasizes the heartlessness of those living in the town where Motke comes from. Poverty and hardship brutalize their lives—father no longer loves his son but just beats him, mother loves him but when he is little she endangers his life by weaning him so as to earn money as a wet nurse in a wealthy house. For many years nobody takes care of the boy, whose only friend is the dog, which lets him share its doghouse. As a result, it is either the animals which treat Motke humanely, such as the dogs which obey and follow him; or the cows, which let him drink their milk; or non-Jews. The only Jew who helps him a little is Nosn Ganev, a thief. The image of the friendship between Motke, the dog, and the cows is most likely based on *The Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), published in 1894.

Other laborers presented in the novels are self-employed craftsmen, petty shop owners and innkeepers, either Jews or Christians. In *Motke Ganev*, there

657 See *ibid.*, pp. 413–417.

658 See Sholem Ash, *Dos gezang fun tol*, *op. cit.*, pp. 159–166.

659 See Khaim-Shloyme Kazdan, *Sholem Ash*, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

660 Sholem Ash, *Motke Ganev*, *op. cit.*, p. 125, איין שיינעל, “זייערע”, אונדזערע, “undzere,” “zeyere”—*eyn tayvel*.

appears a Polish cobbler who is nice to everyone and gives candies to children. One Sunday he gets drunk, goes out in the street and starts singing the Polish anthem "Poland has not yet perished [...] Polish army ..."661 The town people are scared that the cobbler will bring misfortune on all of them. However, when a Russian policeman comes, he takes the cobbler into custody, so that he can get sober.

Good relations with Christian neighbors are often mentioned *en passant*. For instance, when Yekhiel visits a Jewish barber the reader learns that he is a master whose services are sought even by local noblemen.662 As the innkeeper, Mendel is the leaseholder of the Orthodox church and he should charge for providing the keys. In one of the scenes he is begged to do that by crying peasants who explain that they are poor but their child is sick and should be baptized as soon as possible so that Satan does not snatch its soul should it die. Mendel is afraid of the Catholic priest who once ordered that he should be flogged for providing the keys free of charge on the occasion of a wedding, but eventually he surrenders and asks his son to open the church. However, the Orthodox priest remains in the inn and does not want to go with the peasants. Mendel chases him away, but the priest says that the innkeeper should do another Christian deed, because at the church the souls of the dead have drunk the wine up, and wine is needed for baptism. Mendel pours him a bottle of alcohol but stresses that he is not helping anyone, that he himself does not need the keys so he can give them out and, after all, the purpose of the inn is to supply others with wine.663 In *Kidush hashem*, the Jews clearly maintain much better relations with the Ukrainians than with the ruling Poles. They understand peasants and the Orthodox priest but are definitely scared of the landlord and the Catholic priest.

Asch describes various aspects of the cooperation between the Jews and the Christians, including those hardly positive. The burglar Ayzik and the horse rustler Staś visit the town fair. They bring along a sick cow, which Ayzik pretends to buy and Staś pretends that he wants to sell it to the Jew. They manage to sell it to a poor village woman, who spends her last savings on the cow. This leads to a general scuffle at the fair, but eventually the Jews and the gentiles become reconciled, get the money back to the village woman and together beat up the swindlers, who end up in a hospital.664

The thread of the disintegration of the traditional society and the birth of a criminal world appears in many Yiddish novels; in this respect the proto-express-

661 Ibid., p. 99, אַקסלען אַקסלען [...] ניע סגנעלע יעשטשע פּאָלשאַ פּאָלשאַ *Yeshtshe Polska nie sginela* [...] *Polska wojska*.

662 See Sholem Ash, *Der tilim yid*, op. cit., p. 45.

663 See Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit., p. 44.

664 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noked*, op. cit., pp. 177–185.

sionist novel *שמוגלערס* (*Shmuglers*, 1920) by Oyzer Varshavski<sup>665</sup> is quite interesting—just like in Asch’s *Motke Ganev*, in Varshavski’s novel there is a thread of love between a young criminal man and a prostitute.

In Asch’s novels, Jewish prostitutes are nice girls—as they do not have much to do during the day they visit their neighbors, help a sick Jewess clean the house, take care of her children or even sew clothes, thanks to which she earns her living. According to the narrator, the neighbors treat them just like anyone else, because they believe everyone must work for money in one way or another.<sup>666</sup> Prostitutes working in Warsaw are bored with monotonous life, so they become happy when foreign merchants come, as they all dream of being sold to Argentine and of working in Buenos Aires. Each of these dyed blondes dreams of a prince who can be met in an exotic country and who will marry her.<sup>667</sup> Although Asch clearly censures those whose actions harm other people, e.g. swindlers and thieves, he has plenty of understanding and sympathy for the representatives of the oldest profession. Especially poignant are the scenes in which the girls dream about leaving Poland but hardly realize that the fate which awaits them beyond the ocean is very different from their expectations.<sup>668</sup>

Asch also shows his liking for the poor. Usually he differentiates Jewish society on the basis of wealth. Although in his early novels, for instance in *Dos shtetl* or in *Reb Shloyme Noked*, everything is idealized, in his later works he introduces particular social classes.<sup>669</sup> As already mentioned above, the poor are seen in a positive light, contrary to the rich, though there are exceptions.

The Polish gentry receives an ambiguous treatment: there is a whole gallery of characters who are either just mentioned or presented in detail. On the one hand, they conform to the negative stereotype one can find in Yiddish literature of the time, but on the other hand, there are surprising positive exceptions. Reb

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665 עוזר ווארשאװסקי Oyzer Varshavski (1898–1944, murdered by the Nazis in Auschwitz) wrote *Shmuglers*, which is his best-known work. Early in his life, he emigrated to Paris, where he took up painting and literary criticism. What is characteristic, some of his later works take place in a non-Jewish setting.

666 See Sholem Ash, *Motke Ganev*, op. cit., pp. 245–246.

667 See *ibid.*, p. 304.

668 The Jewish community tried to combat prostitution. Apart from mentions of this embarrassing issue in daily papers, in 1905 there was the so-called pimp pogrom carried out by Jewish laborers, who attacked brothels in Warsaw, Lublin and Łódź, see Rafał Żebrowski, Zofia Borzymińska, *PO-LIN. Kultura Żydów polskich w XX wieku*, Warszawa: Amaran 1993, p. 29. Detailed information and source data on Jewish prostitution in Poland and elsewhere can be found in the article *Piranie czekają na kadisz* by Małgorzata Kozerańska and Joanna Podolska in: *Wysokie Obcasy, Gazeta Wyborcza*, 20 January 2007, <http://wyborcza.pl/1,81388,3859153.html> (3 February 2012).

669 See Khaim-Shloyme Kazdan, *Sholem Ash*, op. cit., pp. 30–31.

Shloyme Noged does business with landowners, who treat him as their equal. When the young landowner comes and, not knowing Reb Shloyme Noged, orders him to stand and patronizingly addresses him in the second person singular, the proud Jew turns round and goes away, giving up the prospect of earning decent money. To complete this fairy-tale-like story, Asch makes the landowner meet divine retribution when he loses his fortune in revelries and drunken bouts.<sup>670</sup> Before the trial faced by the Jews who are wrongly charged with killing the Polish horse rustler, Reb Shloyme Noged visits gentry manor houses and all his business contractors, then explains what really happened and asks for help, which, however, he never receives.<sup>671</sup> In *Reb Shloyme Noged*, in the eyes of simple Jews, Polish landlords are sometimes demonized—apparently one of them is Satan's envoy and transforms into a black cat, which kills Jewish children before they are circumcised, and it is the old Tzadik of Gostynin who is able to defeat it.<sup>672</sup> On the other hand, in *Kidush hashem*, Count Koniecpolski does not want to have a synagogue and a Jewish cemetery in the town of Złoczów. When he visits the area while hunting and organizes a ball for his guests, Mendel hands out gloves to dancing men, which, when sweaty, they drop on the floor and put on a clean pair for every new dancing partner, shouting at the Jew at will. Count Koniecpolski, a tall and exceptionally strong man, orders Mendel to sing for his guests and promises him that if he sings well, he will be rewarded. Mendel puts all his heart into the singing, soon forgets where he is, and the laughs in the room die away. The innkeeper sings for the Sabbath Queen. Happy with his performance, the count asks what Mendel wants for his singing. The Jew asks for the permission to have a synagogue and a cemetery. For a moment the Pole hesitates as the Jewish community in Złoczów could bring him much profit but he is not sure what the Jesuit, Father Kozłowski, will say. Finally, he makes a decision: to have his request granted, Mendel must say in Polish "Let the Blessed Virgin Mary of Częstochowa be praised forever. Amen."<sup>673</sup> The Jew is terrified but refuses to say the blessing so he has to pretend he is a bear and to dance dressed in a fur coat, while the count's servants beat him. Ultimately Mendel is granted permission to build a synagogue, but not a cemetery—he is not worthy of it yet. The above quotation, just like other passages in the novel, proves that Asch knew Polish quite well but sometimes would twist certain words or phrases, sometimes, it seems, intentionally—in the text, instead of us-

670 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noged*, op. cit., p. 150.

671 See *ibid.*, p. 203.

672 See *ibid.*, p. 214.

673 Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit., p. 29; *Maria, Matka Boska shventokhovska, niekh bendzhe pokhvalona na vieki vieki, amen.*

מאריא, מאטקא באסקא שווענטאכאויסקא, ניעך בענדזשע פאכוואלאנא נא וויעקי וויעקי, אמען.

ing the adjective “częstochowska,” which derives from the name of the town Częstochowa, he uses a similar word “świętochowska.”

As a rule in *Kidush hashem*, the relations between the Polish gentry and the Jews in old Poland are shown in a negative light. It is not that the Jews have to ask the landowner for his permission to have a synagogue or a cemetery or that they have to serve him whenever he comes to town, but that the innkeeper is humiliated on the slightest occasion and his faith is insulted. Characteristically for Asch's novels, he provides a more positive image of the relations between the Jews and the society they live in in his contemporary times than in a more remote past.

It seems that Pan Widowski from *Der tilim yid* is a cliché character. A Polish nobleman and a patriot, who nevertheless despises all his neighbors, he tolerates the Jews but takes advantage of the peasants and treats them like cattle. He does not tend his land, wastes his estate, and his only friend is a dog. When the dog becomes old and sick, Pan Widowski kills it, locks himself in the manor house, and sets it on fire, as he cannot bear the thought that it could be seized by his family from Warsaw, who spend their time enjoying themselves and pleasing the Russians who partitioned Poland.<sup>674</sup> However, if we look closely at the character of the Polish nobleman, we could see some positive traits. His estate is wasted not because he squanders it but because he has bouts of depression and is unable to take care of anything at the time. As a former Napoleon's officer, he despairs the loss of Polish independence and he neither wants to adjust to the new situation nor is able to. He becomes bitter, loses his faith and all his friends. Although he often sets his dog on the Jewish innkeeper, who fears for his life whenever he visits the manor house, at the same time he treats him as the only person who he can share his worries and cares with and whom he can ask for advice about running the estate. He is fair in charging the lease, does not inflate or raise it, and sometimes he gets carried away and remits the payment altogether. He wears old trousers and is so unconcerned about his looks that the innkeeper Shloyme Volf, who loves him anyway, orders new clothes for him and even pays for them.<sup>675</sup> In the context of the image of the Jews in the non-Jewish society, what is also important is Pan Widowski's conviction that his peasants are right when they believe that if the Jews participate in anything, it makes it definitely worthwhile.<sup>676</sup> Pan Widowski takes part in one of the “miracles” which happen around Yekhiel. When two drunk noblemen from a neighboring estate assault Shloyme Volf's inn, Pan Widowski brings relief, orders to flog them and sends them back home in the morning, apologizing and explaining that

674 See Sholem Ash, *Der tilim yid*, op. cit., pp. 289–298.

675 See *ibid.*, pp. 132–137 and 147–165.

676 See *ibid.*, p. 156.



he did not see who the assaulters were because it was dark.<sup>677</sup> The life revolving around the manor house is also presented in other Yiddish novels, most notably in *דער הויף* (*Der hoyf*, 1953–1955) by Isaac Bashevis Singer.<sup>678</sup>

Another Polish nobleman who appears in *Der tilim yid* is Stefan Dąbrowski, but the reader does not learn much about him apart from the fact that he falls in love with Reyzele and thus indirectly becomes the perpetrator of her death. Although he is a tragic character, he possesses positive traits—he does not kidnap the girl and wants to marry her as soon as possible, but he leaves the decision up to her.

Apart from these examples, in *Der tilim yid* there are a few negative characters shown in a very sketchy way: the already mentioned two drunk noblemen from Sokolno, who assault Shloyme Volf's inn, and a young relative of Pan Widowski, who takes over the estate. As he needs money to lead sumptuous life in Warsaw, he exploits peasants and almost ruins the Jewish innkeeper.<sup>679</sup> In *Farn mabl*, the Polish princess Maria Nikolayevna Sapielha, a longstanding friend of Olga Mikhailovna, the counselor Halpern's wife, who one evening comes to dinner at the counselor's house, is an interesting character. The visit makes the narrator notice that in the world of rich Jewish upper classes one can usually meet well-born Christians of limited financial means. This is the case of Maria Nikolayevna. She is poor and Olga gives her money which the princess treats as a loan to be paid back in future. Maria Nikolayevna is interested in all things Jewish and explains that she learned much in Volhynia, where Jews lived on her husband's land.<sup>680</sup>

At different times and in a different place, Asch introduces German nobility. Following his custom of devoting an entire chapter of a novel to one center of memory formation, he does the same in the case of the von Sticker family in *Bam opgrunt*. This is the only image of German nobility ever presented in his novels. Some members of the family pursue science, others serve in the army as officers. In the times of crisis, Robert von Sticker tries to maintain his dignity as the head of the family and he believes his most important job is to provide for his wife and children. He takes care of his paralyzed wife out of a sense of obligation rather than love. He devotes entire days to his family and it is only in the evenings that in his study he can forget his worries and apply single-mindedly to reading and studying, as well as to writing commentaries on *Faust*, which he has

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677 See *ibid.*, pp. 264–265.

678 In Yiddish the novel was serialized in *Forverts*. In English it was published in two volumes, under two different titles: *Manor* and *Estate*.

679 See Sholem Ash, *Der tilim yid*, *op. cit.*, pp. 299–300.

680 See Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, *op. cit.*, pp. 33–34.

been working on for many years.<sup>681</sup> To the upper class Germans, education and culture do matter, so do a sense of duty, family honor and military service. These positive values are contrasted with his utter heartlessness in private life—von Sticker does not show love to his wife, does not share important values with his children, and offends Hans Bodenheimer, who, according to von Sticker, has no right to take his daughter to a concert although von Sticker does business with his father. His most grievous fault, however, is indifference to his son's depravity, to his wife's hateful attitude towards her own daughter, and to his wife's and son's tormenting Lotte. As a consequence, von Sticker commits suicide and Wolfgang kills his own sister.

The author not only tries to provide positive examples of Jewish and Christian coexistence but also often describes rich Jews who have not lost touch with simple people and who regard it their duty to help the poor. Reb Yekheskiel Gombiner from *Dos shtetl* should be placed among such characters, as well as Reb Shloyme Noged from the same novel. The latter is well known locally—whenever he goes back home on the Sabbath, peasants in the villages which he passes by try to sell him something. He never refuses, but puts whatever he has bought on his cart and moves on.<sup>682</sup> The obligation of the rich to help the poor concerns the gentiles as well. On his way, Reb Shloyme Noged invites poor Jews to his cart and takes them to town for the Sabbath.<sup>683</sup> But this does not exhaust the list of his good deeds. When he brings home a load of money, he asks his sons to give a banknote to a rabbi, to a shochet, and to others, whereas he stuffs his pockets with small change, goes out and distributes the coins to the poor and the sick, because he believes that God made him rich so that he can share his wealth.<sup>684</sup> Just like Reb Shloyme Noged, Asch's older brothers were relatively well-to-do merchants. He describes such characters in *Reb Shloyme Noged* and calls them “Gombiner,” a nickname of Asch's father that derived from the place name. They are burly strong Jews who, according to the narrator, are not afraid of gentiles and who do not think that they are exiles living in the Diaspora. They are raised close to nature and sunburned. Additionally, “[e]very Jew like that has a dozen children and lives a hundred and twenty years without worries and troubles, earns the daily bread till the last minute of his life, and when he is seventy, he brings forth a new child.”<sup>685</sup>

681 See Sholem Ash, *Bam opgrunt*, op. cit., pp. 265–271.

682 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noged*, op. cit., p. 136.

683 See *ibid.*, p. 136.

684 See *ibid.*, p. 140.

685 *Ibid.*, pp. 173–174; *Yederer aza yid hot a tuts kinder un lebt oys zayne hundert un tsvantsik yor on tsar un veytik, fardint zikh zayn broyt tsu der letster minut fun zayn lebn, un tsu zibetsik yor brengt er nokh a nay kind af der velt.*

Of interest are female equivalents of vendors from Gąbin—they are women from Gostynin,<sup>686</sup> big and strong. They eat like a horse, sell and buy clothes at the market, and rule at home, where their husbands spend all days at sewing machines.<sup>687</sup>

Asch is clearly critical of rich Polish Jews living in the cities—in his novels he reproaches them mainly for their indifference to the fate of the Jewish community and their reluctance to help the poor. Among other novels, he does it in the second volume of the trilogy *Farn mabl*, in *Varshe*, which features assimilated ladies who theoretically provide assistance for Hurvits' school, but in practice it is rather moral than financial support—they keep checking the children's knowledge of the Polish language, which raises suspicions of a Russian school inspector.<sup>688</sup> Asch is even more critical of the governing board of the Jewish community in Warsaw, whose members dismiss the poor with coal coupons and vague promises of further help during a particularly severe winter.<sup>689</sup> Another negative character is also a Jewish factory owner from Łódź, whom Zakhari tries, in vain, to persuade to employ Jewish laborers. He watches indifferently when small family businesses go bankrupt and does not offer the Jews work because otherwise he would feel obliged to provide them with additional help and, besides, they would not like to work on Saturdays.<sup>690</sup>

In cities and towns presented by Asch, there are also other characteristic figures. Among them there are Russian policemen, who are usually corruptible. One of them is Pan Natshalnik,<sup>691</sup> who the Pole robbed by the tightrope walker complains to. Pan Natshalnik receives a bribe and is invited to a good dinner. Besides, when checking the documents of circus performers, he comes across a letter written to the tightrope walker by a Russian colonel who fell in love with

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יעדערער אַזאַ ייד האָט אַ טויך קינדער און לעבט אויס זיינע הונדערט און צוואַנציק יאָר אָן צער און ווייטאָג,  
פֿאַרדינט זיך זיין ברויט צו דער לעצטער מינוט פֿון זיין לעבן, און צו זיבעציק יאָר ברענגט ער נאָך אַ ניי קינד  
אויף דער וועלט.

686 As already mentioned, Gąbin and Gostynin are small towns situated near Kutno, Asch's family town.

687 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noked*, op. cit., p. 174.

688 See Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, op. cit., p. 56.

689 See *ibid.*, pp. 238–248.

690 See *ibid.*, pp. 321–338.

691 Asch often uses the Polish term of address “pan” just as a name and also to emphasize the fact that a given character comes from the upper class, for instance, Pan Kwiatkowski or Pan Wiadomski. Here the family name is replaced with the social function, which in this case is the most important. In this way the author stresses that non-Jewish characters who appear in his novels are shown from the Jewish perspective—otherwise, not much is known about them and that is why the author consistently calls them the way his Jewish protagonists call them.

her. This is enough to make him tell the gentile that surely such a lady is not a thief and then to add in confidential whisper that “if you visit a woman of easy virtue, you do not take along a bag full of money—after all, you should be cautious.”<sup>692</sup> In the episode, Asch successfully depicts the figure of a Russian official and also includes humorous overtones.

Another policeman appears in a totally different place at a totally different time, but also in this case the situation is infused with humor. In *Grosman un zun*, Zilbershtayn tells Grosman a story behind the construction of a local orthodox synagogue. The families who build it dream about having a temple as beautiful as the Tempel of the reformed Jews. The costs are high, the whole community puts up money, local Christians make their contribution too, the builders run up a debt and at some point they have no money to pay the interest on the loan. Then suddenly an Irish policeman comes to their rescue. When he accidentally overhears a loud exchange in a shop, he asks what this is all about and then wants to know whether it is a Protestant or a Catholic synagogue. When eventually the Jews understand the sense of his unusual question and state it is “a Catholic synagogue,”<sup>693</sup> the policeman decides to help and explains that after all it is God’s house. Since then he charges out-of-town drivers a ten-dollar “fee”—it is easy to violate traffic rules in an unfamiliar town.<sup>694</sup>

Doctors are other characters appearing in Asch’s novels. Doctor Leyzerovitch, Dovid’s father from *Meri*, lives in the poorest district of the town so that he can treat Jewish patients for free. He not only treats them, but also gives them milk for children for free and does his best to help them in a variety of ways.<sup>695</sup> The Polish quack Pan Kwiatkowski from *Farn mabl* is undoubtedly an interesting character. He is the only Christian in the Hurvitses’ tenement house. Above the entrance door to his apartment there is a holy picture and the letters K+M+B,<sup>696</sup> which reappear every year. Usually he is nice to his neighbors and tries to talk with them in Yiddish, from time to time using some Hebrew expressions, which do not make much sense. Sometimes he gets impatient and calls the

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692 Sholem Ash, *Motke Ganev*, op. cit., p. 190; *az men geyt tsu a nekeyve. Nemt men nit ka tash mit gelt mit zikh, iz men forzikhtik.*

או מען געהט צו א נקבה. נעהמט מען ניט קיין טאש מיט געלד מיט זיך, איז מען פארזיכטיג.

693 Sholem Ash, *Grosman un zun*, op. cit., p. 225; *katoylishc sinagoge*.

694 See *ibid.*, pp. 224–226.

695 See Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., pp. 51–52.

696 The letters K+M+B stand for the Latin benediction “Christus mansionem benedicat,” which is traditionally written by Catholics on the door on the day of Epiphany. For this reason many people wrongly associate the three letters with the initials of the names of the Three Magi: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar (in Polish Kacper, Melchior, and Balthazar), and use K instead of C (translator’s note).

Jews names, but they know it is just bad mood which will pass away soon.<sup>697</sup> He promises Rokhel Leye Hurvits help in many different matters, for instance, in setting up a kitchen for the poor in winter<sup>698</sup> or in finding lodgings for a destitute writer. He invites him to his place and promises to teach him Polish. Although Pani Antonia,<sup>699</sup> the quack's pious cook, feeds Note Leyb with pork, which he tries to vomit out in the hall immediately upon eating, Pan Kwiatkowski's hospitality is an immense help for the young Hasid from the provinces. Pan Kwiatkowski explains to Mrs Hurvits the motifs of his behavior, saying that the Jews are not the only people in the world who know how to help others. Besides, he believes that "the country needs educated citizens. The more we are educated, the stronger we will become. And you kikes have wise heads upon your shoulders."<sup>700</sup>

Doctor Borekh Khazanovitsh from *Ist river* is an avowed atheist, just like his father was a pious Hasid. He treats the poor in his district, mostly for free, and his wife has to help him as a nurse. Doctor Khazanovitsh takes interest in the case of the paralyzed Nosn Davidovski—he believes that well-chosen physical exercises may improve his condition. When he sees a change in Nosn's behavior, he arranges the boy's stay in the hospital where Nosn should learn to walk on his own.<sup>701</sup> Doctors in Asch's novels are either Christians or non-believing Jews. No matter what they really are, they possess a positive power which drives them on. They believe in progress and in that changes are possible—in the meantime they do their best to help those who need it most.

In *Farn mabl*, the counselor Salomon Osipovitsch Halpern represents the older generation. Fully assimilated, rich and respected for his captivating orations in court, he has many wealthy clients but he takes up hopeless cases, trying to help the Jews who come from the provinces. Among his clients there are also Christians. The author presents a scene in which a delegation of peasants led by a priest comes to visit the counselor to ask him to intervene in the ministry of religious cult. On the other hand, he refuses to defend Akimov, an influential senator, who, while drunk, embezzled money. His refusal results from his conviction that he can offer help only to honest people.<sup>702</sup> Halpern organizes a meeting of

697 See Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, op. cit., pp. 47–50.

698 See *ibid.*, pp. 256–257.

699 See *ibid.*, p. 121.

700 *Ibid.*, p. 50; *dos land badarf hobn gebildete mentshn. Vos mer bildung, alts shterker veln mir zayn. Un ir, yidelekh, hot gute kepelekh.*

דאָס לאַנד באַדאַרף האָבן געבילדעטע מענטשן. וואָס מער בילדונג, אלץ שטערקער וועלן מיר זיין. און איר, יידעלעך, האָט גוטע קעפעלעך.

701 See Sholem Ash, *Ist river*, op. cit., pp. 102–111.

702 See Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, op. cit. pp. 16–25.

Jewish capitalists with a young revolutionary, who asks them for financial contributions in support for his cause. Thanks to the counselor's captivating speech he ensures their assistance.<sup>703</sup> After the February Revolution, Gabriel Mirkin and Halpern persuade a group of capitalists, which thanks to liberalism of the new epoch consists of Jews and Christians, to set up the Nay-Rusland Society, whose task is to buy out capital, mines and factories from foreign owners and to sell the shares to the masses.<sup>704</sup>

Teachers appearing in Asch's novels are typical melameds from Eastern European Cheders. They are shown as minor characters. In many passages the author criticizes keeping small children within the four walls of a chamber and restricting their world to that described in holy scriptures, which makes them unable to live the happy years of their childhood to the full and to learn more about the real world around them. Positive examples of teachers, mostly female ones, are given prominence in the novels which are set on the other side of the Atlantic. Miss Isabel Forster comes to the United States as a child. Her parents do their best to provide their children with good education. Isabel graduates from a teachers' college and runs evening classes for immigrants. There are Poles, Italians and Jews, who are her favorite students because thanks to her childhood memories she understands best how they feel in a foreign country.<sup>705</sup>

Asch presents simple Jews living in shtetls, city workers, poor immigrants in the United States, and rich families, living in Europe and across the ocean. There is also another group—that of artists. Painters, sculptors and writers appear in Asch's European and American novels. What is interesting, none of them becomes the protagonist of the novel though they definitely play an important role in the plot. They often appear in collective scenes as the author clearly likes descriptions of artists' meetings, for instance, in *Di muter* there is a whole chapter describing such a meeting.<sup>706</sup>

To Asch, artists seem to stand beyond the limits of time and society. They travel much, gain experience, do not enter stable relationships, and even after death they live on in their works. Such an artist is Kowalski in *Meri*—what is interesting, initially it is not known whether he is a Jew or a gentile. What matters is that most of all he is a painter, an artist.<sup>707</sup> As a result, he transcends usual problems and divisions. When Misha refers to the tragedy of the Jewish nation, which does not possess its own country, Kowalski answers resolutely that an

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703 See Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, op. cit., pp. 48–53.

704 See Sholem Ash, *Moskve*, op. cit., pp. 20–23.

705 See Sholem Ash, *Di muter*, op. cit., p. 167.

706 See *ibid.*, pp. 330–340.

707 See Shmuel Niger, *Sholem Ash. Zayn lebn un zayne verk*, op. cit., p. 114.

artist has his own eyes and what he sees belongs to him.<sup>708</sup> In the conversations with the fictitious Michał Kowalski, Isaac Levitan (1860–1900) is often mentioned. He is a historical figure, a well-known Russian landscape painter of Jewish descent.<sup>709</sup> His landscapes are full of light and it seems that Kowalski tries to imitate them in his own works: the descriptions of scenes which Kowalski admires and wants to paint resemble Levitan's real paintings. Another artist shown by Asch is Adolf Bodenheimer from *Bam opgrunt*, the youngest of the three sons, about whom his family is much concerned, because instead of preparing for the job in a company, he decides to become a painter. Soon, however, he realizes he will not create anything outstanding so he takes to collecting art. In the prewar Berlin, he wears one set of clothes and one pair of shoes, and he starves, so that he can have money for new paintings.<sup>710</sup> The artists presented in Asch's novels are not only Jews; in the novel *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen*, in Rome, the reader meets Cesare Pastila, a young Italian painter, who admires a young Jewess and paints her as the Virgin Mary.

Apart from artists, there are patrons of the arts but Asch does not devote much space to them as he probably looks at them from the perspective of a painter, a sculptor or a writer who hopes to receive financial support. For instance in *Di muter*, Bukhholts succeeds in obtaining a two-year grant to travel to Europe, Rome and Paris.<sup>711</sup>

The figure of a beautiful Jewess, which appears in many Yiddish works, also transcends time and space. In Asch's novels, one can see various women epitomizing the biblical Esther or the already mentioned Esterka, the legendary beloved of King Kazimierz the Great. Asch was fascinated with beautiful objects, he collected paintings, old books, various artifacts, mostly liturgical. Reading between the lines of his letters to his wife, one can learn how much he loved her but also how much he was fascinated by other beautiful women, who his wife was clearly jealous of. This may be the reason why the descriptions of women in his novels are sensual but at the same time faithful to detail. During one of his trips Reb Shloyme Noged meets the beautiful Rokhel, a young daughter of his acquaintance, who puts him up: "Black, thick hair wrap her head like the sea, she has big eyes and a strong white neck, which looks out from the jerkin. She has red lips and strong white teeth, and when she laughs, everything brims over with joy with her."<sup>712</sup>

708 See Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., p. 30.

709 See *ibid.*, pp. 30 and 137.

710 See Sholem Ash, *Bam opgrunt*, op. cit., p. 308–314.

711 See Sholem Ash, *Di muter*, op. cit., p. 363.

712 Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noged*, op. cit., p. 190; *Un di shvartse gedikhte hor, vi a yam vaser, baleygt ir kop, un groyse oygn hot zi, a shtarkn, vaysn haldz, vos kukt aroys fun*

At the same time, beside youth, beauty and strength, Jewish girls symbolize intelligence, curiosity, and often education. In *Meri*, it is Kowalski who remarks that when Jewish girls meet, they discuss the world, whereas when young Christians meet, the usually just dance and laugh.<sup>713</sup> In the context of the whole scene, this is not a value judgment but a simple observation of a fact. In *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen*, which is set a few centuries earlier, in the Roman ghetto, Cesare Pastila meets a Jewish girl who seems to him a superhuman creature, a divine miracle. She seems to be a vision rather than a real human being. Her eyes are

like the eyes of a dove, which evokes painful sympathy. Yet her eyes did not evoke sympathy but deep sadness. Sadness out of this world, sorrow which was not human. Her forehead was clearly sketched, oval, raised and reaching far up, just like the forehead of *Saint Anne* by Leonardo da Vinci.<sup>714</sup>

The beauty of the girls depicted in Asch's novels sometimes leads to their destruction. In *Kidush hashem* the young Cossack falls in love with Dvoyre and at first saves her from the tragic fate but eventually he kills her anyway. In *Der tilim yid*, Stefan Dąbrowski's love makes a Jewish girl commit suicide. There are more events like that in Asch's novels: a young Italian painter is in love with the beautiful Jewish girl Yefte so he helps her and her grandfather escape from the ghetto, he hides them and plans further escape. At the same time it seems to him that it is the Virgin Mary who descended upon the young girl so as to reveal herself to people.<sup>715</sup> As a result, Yefte is burnt at the stake as a witch.

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*oysgeshnitenem kofil, un royte lipn, un shtarke, vaysye tseyen, un az zi lakht, lakht ald mit ir.*

און די שוואַרצע געדיכטע האַר, ווי אַ ים וואַסער, באַלייגט איר קאָפּ, און גרויסע אויגן האָט זי, אַ שטאַרקן, ווייסן האַלדז, וואָס קוקט אַרױס פֿון אויסגעשניטענעם קאָפּטל, און רױטע ליפּן, און שטאַרקע, ווייסע צײַן, און אַז זי לאַכט, לאַכט אַלץ מיט איר.

713 See Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., p. 75.

714 Sholem Ash, *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen*, op. cit., p. 8; *vi di oygn ba a toyb, vos dervekt rakhmones biz tsu veytik. Nor ba ir hobn di oygn nit dervekt ka rakhmones, nor a tife troyerikeyt. A troyerikeyt fun nit di velt, un fun nist mentshlehkn tsar. Der shtern iz geven a boyleter, a runder, an ufgehoybener un hot dergraykht vayt af ir kop aruf vi der shtern fun Leonardo da Vintshis "heylike Anna."*

ווי די אויגען ביי אַ טױב, וואָס ערוועקט רחמנות ביז צו וועהשאַג. נור ביי איהר האַבען די אויגען ניט ערוועקט קײן רחמנות, נור אַ טײפע טרױעריקײט. אַ טרױעריקײט פון ניט די וועלט, און פון נישט מענשליכען צער. דער שטערען איז געווען אַ בולט'ער, אַ רונדער, אַן אויפגעהויבענער און האָט דערגרייכט ווייט אויף איהר קאָפּ אַרױף ווי דער שטערן פון לעאָנאַרדױ דע ווינטש'ס, „הײליגע אַנאַ“.

Most likely, the author has in mind the famous painting by Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1512) showing the Virgin and Child with Saint Anne.

715 See Sholem Ash, *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen*, op. cit., pp. 54–61.



In Asch's novels a variety of characters are always presented with respect to their faith and with understanding of their beliefs and behavior. While creating figures of memory related to particular characters, the author tries to be objective and sometimes turns against prevailing stereotypes. Even if the characters he creates seem to confirm negative stereotypes, he tries to quote examples to the contrary, thus telling the reader that one should never generalize. At the same time his criticism is in a way evenly distributed—there are negative and positive examples among Christians and Jews.

### 4.3.6 Feasts, celebrations and everyday life

Figures of memory which appear in Asch's novels and relate to events of everyday life consist of a number of image clusters. The first one includes happy scenes of celebrations and feasts, for instance, the Sabbath and family occasions such as a childbirth or a wedding. Betrothal and marriage are a clear borderline between childhood and adulthood, the latter in Asch's novels being full of worries and troubles. Also the very transition from childhood and youth to adulthood is not always a happy occasion for everyone involved. In adulthood one has to make decisions on behalf of oneself and one's family—sometimes the decisions are particularly difficult and involve, for instance, leaving one's own town and moving across the ocean to a foreign country, to "goldene medine" (in Yiddish: "golden country"), as the Jews would call the United States. Others decide to choose almost an archetypal path and move to Israel, regarded as a sentimental fatherland. Although representatives of both groups meet in their dreamlands many problems, they hardly ever decide to go back to Europe.

In many passages Asch describes natural and indispensable elements of Jewish life: prayer, Sabbath, Jewish feasts. Sometimes he includes Christian feasts or church visits but as a rule they receive a cursory mention only. Another image is related to the events at the Corpus Christi procession.

In *Der tilim yid*, the procession moves along Yekhiel's house and their Christian neighbor across the street builds an altar in front of his house. Rivke, Yekhiel's mother, is scared to death—she shuts the doors and windows, gathers children and prays, shaking with fear. The scene reminds the reader that the fear Asch introduces is not just a means to develop the plot but it is rooted in reality outside the novel. On the other hand, the resulting tension is defused by Yekhiel, who stands in the doorway, watches the moving crowd through the door gap and keeps saying silently: "Hurry, convert to Judaism before the Messiah comes so you will rise from the dead."<sup>716</sup> The boy, who wishes well to the whole world,

<sup>716</sup> Sholem Ash, *Der tilim yid*, op. cit., p. 37; *Geshvinder, zayt aykh megayer, eyder Meshiyekh kumt, vet ir ufshteyn tkhiyes-hmeysim*.

for long has been sympathizing with gentiles and he is afraid that at the Last Judgment they will be severely punished. When Yekhiel notices Hebrew letters on the cross carried in the procession, he forgets that he should be cautious and leans fast against the door which opens up and, screaming, the boy suddenly falls among the praying peasants. Rivke says goodbye not only to the life of her son but also to her own life and that of other children, but in comparison with her fears nothing really bad happens—Yekhiel is thrown back into the house, the door is shut and the only harm is the welt on his face made by a string of beads and a cut sidelock.<sup>717</sup>

The Sabbath, which is observed every week at every Jewish house, is invariably presented in the same way, no matter where and when it takes place in a given novel. In *Mary*, the Sabbath in the house of Miriam and her son Yeshua is observed with the reverence unmatched anywhere else in Nazareth. Yeshua helps his mother to prepare it, he brings vegetables and fruit from the garden, whereas she makes a simple meal consisting of fish and a challah. The house is cleaned and decked with flowers. Miriam and Yeshua take a bath, dress up and sit at the table. Miriam lights candles and Yeshua blesses wine.<sup>718</sup>

In *Kidush hashem*, the innkeeper Mendel and his wife are the only Jews living in Złoczów. At some point they panic because they have forgotten what day of the week it is and thus they do not know when to celebrate the Sabbath.<sup>719</sup> Another Saturday is disturbed by a Polish landlord who demands that the inn be opened or that at least he be served alcohol through the door. Mendel refuses, the Poles call him names and complain: “The damn Jew. When a Jew observes his Sabbath, all Poland is forced to go without vodka.”<sup>720</sup> All these scenes show the solemnity and holiness of this particular day of the week, which cannot be really disturbed by any outside events.

In *Dos shtetl*, a solemn dinner is given when Yekheskiel Gombiner’s house is visited by his daughter’s fiancé. The table is extended to its full length, silver candlesticks are put on it, and everything is enveloped in candlelight. To show respect to the fiancé, silverware is used. Malkele, the lady of the house, wears a white silken dress with gold trim and a white lacy bonnet. In front of Reb Yekheskiel Gombiner’s place, two challah are laid, covered with an embroi-

געשווינדער זייט איך מגיר, איידער משיח קומט, וועט איר אויפשטיין תזית-המתים.

717 See *ibid.*, pp. 35–40. A secret watching of Christian processions appears quite often in Yiddish literature, e.g. it is mentioned in *Fun a velt vos iz nishto mer* by Israel Joshua Singer, an autobiographical novel.

718 See Sholem Asch, *Mary*, op. cit., pp. 293–295.

719 See Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit., pp. 20–21.

720 *Ibid.*, p. 46; פאַרשאַלטענער איד. אַז דער איד האַלט זיין שבת, מוז גאַנץ פּוילן אָדן אַקעוויט בלייבען; *Farsholtener yid. Az der yid halt zayn shabes, muz gants Poyln on okevit blaybn.*

dered towel. However, in Asch's novel, the family dinner is not a completely private affair: through the open windows those inside can hear the sounds of nature, like frog croaking, or smell summer flowers, or see the Jews coming back home along with their guests they managed to invite to the Sabbath dinner. In Asch's novel, the Jews, enjoying their Sabbaths, think with pity: "The poor gentiles, they do not have the Sabbath."<sup>721</sup>

The Sabbath celebrated in the family of Reb Shloyme Noked in the novel under the same title is likewise solemn. The family is wealthy so the host invites many poor guests—the more the happier he becomes. The dining room floor is scrubbed and sprinkled with sand, copper candleholders shine on the walls and everything is ready.<sup>722</sup> When the evening comes, the table is already unfolded and covered with a white tablecloth, candlesticks and silverware are in their place. All family members are gathered in the room.<sup>723</sup> In the shtetl, the Sabbath is associated with joyful quietude and in the novel it is emphasized by nature—in *Reb Shloyme Noked*, "the Sabbath approached with quiet steps. The dark night, like a dark silken shawl embroidered with stars, enveloped the sky."<sup>724</sup> While describing the Sabbath dinner at the house of Reb Shloyme Noked, Asch underlines the respect one should have for the poor and for the guests, which he finds an important part of Jewish tradition. The young wife, who does not want the dirty poor men to sit at her table, prepares for them a separate table in the kitchen. On his return from the synagogue, Reb Shloyme Noked is ashamed of her, and remembers the words of the Tzadik of Gostynin that a guest is like God, that when one greets a guest in one's home it is as if one greeted God Himself.<sup>725</sup> When the host moves to the table for the poor, all family members follow suit and they eat dinner in the kitchen.<sup>726</sup>

721 Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., p. 96; זיי האָבן האָבן נישט קיין שבת, *goyim, nebekh, zey hobn hobn nisht ka shabes*.

722 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noked*, op. cit., pp. 138–139.

723 See *ibid.*, p. 141.

724 *Ibid.*, p. 144; *Dervayl iz der shabes ongekumen mit ruike trit. Ibern himl hot zikh a tunkele nakht oysgeshpreyt, vi a shvarts, zaydn tukh mit shtern baneyt*

דערווייל איז דער שבת אָנגעקומען מיט רואיקע טריט. איבערן הימל האָט זיך די טונקעלע נאַכט אויסגעשפּרייט, ווי אַ שוואַרצן, זיידן טוך מיט שטערן באַנייט.

725 It brings to mind the Polish proverb "Guest at home, God at home," see Julian Krzyżanowski (ed.), *Nowa księga przysłów i wyrażen przysłowiowych polskich*, Warszawa: PIW 1970, 4 vols., Vol. I, p. 717. It is possible that Asch borrowed the expression from Polish. In the Bernstein collection, see Ignaz Bernstein, *Jüdische Sprichwörter und Redensarten*, Warschau 1908, there is no equivalent of the proverb in Yiddish, though the tradition of inviting guests to the Sabbath dinner is by all means Jewish.

726 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noked*, op. cit., pp. 144–146.

In *Dos shtetl*, on Saturday morning all shtetl inhabitants visit the synagogue. Women dress up in silken gowns and Kalisz lace. Here the narrator cannot resist a stinging comment that the dresses are so tailored “that the Jewess looks as if she inhabited the inside of the dress along with half a dozen children.”<sup>727</sup> Another fashionable item is small hats featuring flowers or feathers fixed with wire. Men dress up too—they put on clean shoes and collars as well as Sabbath coats or satin gabardines. Those who are rich enough sport a silken tie. Also in this descriptive passage nature matches the festive atmosphere: “the sun spilled brightly over the sky—the fresh, brilliant and new sun has come to celebrate the Sabbath.”<sup>728</sup> Similar descriptions of one’s Saturday best and the sun, which fills the shtetl with its shine, appear in Asch’s other novels, for instance in *Reb Shloyme Noged*.<sup>729</sup>

In the morning Reb Shloyme Noged comes to a synagogue which is filled up with people. The sun is even brighter than usual, inside it is crowded and warm, and beautiful women wearing scarfs studded with diamonds can be seen in the part of the building assigned to females. Everyone prays, the young people vie for taking an active part in the prayer and buy from one another the privilege of opening the Torah ark. The most prominent townspeople are called upon to read the Torah.<sup>730</sup> Coming back home, everyone, including the invited guests, sits down at the dinner table: “first enormous carps’ heads were served, then thick pieces of fish in aspic, followed by a good gulp of alcohol and some tasteful liver mixed with onion, goose cracklings and goose lard, sprinkled with pepper, so that everything smelled from afar.”<sup>731</sup>

The abundance of served food is additionally emphasized by the fact that the narrator mentions all the dishes in one go, describing several dishes in one sen-

727 Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., p. 104; *az di yidene hot oysgezen, glaykh zi voynt in der kleyd mit a halb tuts kinderlekh.*

אז די יידענע האָט אויסגעזען, גלייך זי וואוינט אין דער קלייד מיט אַ האַלב טוט קינדערלעך.

728 Ibid., p. 105; *di zun hot zikh likhtik tsegosn ibern himl, a frische, a likhtike, a naye, ongekumen af shabes.*

די זון האָט זיך ליכטיק צעגאַסן איבערן הימל, אַ פֿרישע, אַ ליכטיקע, אַ נייע, אָנגעקומען אויף שבת.

729 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noged*, op. cit., p. 169.

730 See *ibid.*, p. 163.

731 Ibid., p. 167; *Me hot tsuersht derlangt di grayse karpn-kep afn tish; di breyte shtiker fish mit der gegliveter fish-yoykh, dem gutn trunk bronfn nokh dem fish und dos bisl gute leberlekh, durkhgehakt mit tsibeles, mit grivn un durkhgemisht mit gendzl-smalst un mit fefer bashotn, az es shmekht fun der vaytns.*

מען האָט צוערשט דערלאַנגט די גרויסע קאַרפֿן־קעפּ אויפֿן טיש; די ברייטע שטיקער פֿיש מיט דער געגליוועטער פֿיש־יויך, דעם גוטן טרונק בראַנפֿן נאָך דער פֿיש און דאָס ביסל גוטע לעבערלעך, דורכגעדיקט מיט ציבעלעס, מיט גרויון און דורכגעמישט מיט גענדזל־שמאַלץ און מיט פֿעפֿער באַשאַטן, אַז עס שמעקט פֿון דער ווייטנס.

tence. Next the narrator reports that the present interrupt their eating to sing songs and to talk, upon which the servants bring in kugel, cholent with potatoes or roasted geese with buckwheat. Everyone is served a mug of Tokay. According to the narrator, a high fat dinner should be followed by a glass of lemonade and a short nap.<sup>732</sup>

Sabbath dinners celebrated in the United States are less sumptuous, but still they bring joy and are much awaited. In the novel *Di muter*, Anshel works hard as a tailor; he leaves home early in the morning, comes back in the evening and feels he is torn apart from the old life in the shtetl, which he misses very much. But when he sits at the table with lit Sabbath candles “the world becomes one—the ocean separating the two worlds disappears.”<sup>733</sup> On the one hand, the Sabbath scene in the United States is joyful, but on the other hand, it is sad, because it clearly demonstrates that the older generation will never find real home here, they will never be truly happy and will always miss the shtetl. At Moyshe Volf Davidovski's house, Friday evening is the only time when the whole family, otherwise so busy with their jobs, can sit together at the table. The table is laid out with a white tablecloth and brass candlesticks. Moyshe Volf blesses the wine and after dinner there is time for traditional songs.<sup>734</sup>

The Sabbath in Jerusalem presented in *Der veg tsu zikh* resembles Friday evenings in the shtetl. The street is quiet, the singing is heard through the open windows and candles are lit on the table, covered with a white tablecloth. The scene also emphasizes that the family returned to the land of their forefathers, which may really become their new home. In spite of this, Misha comes to the conclusion that along with Rokhele they should move to the United States, because this is where the Jewish nation is and with it the Shekinah, the divine presence of God.<sup>735</sup> While reading *Der veg tsu zikh*, published in 1914, one has an impression that at the time Asch was not fully convinced that it made sense for young people to settle in Palestine—he changed his mind some time later, which can be seen in *Dos gezang fun tol*, published in 1938.

On the one hand, the description of celebrations of family feasts and holidays makes the reader aware of their importance in Jewish life, and on the other hand they convey much information about traditions and customs, including those related to clothes and food, as well as to a variety of beliefs and ways of dealing with difficulties in all stages of life—from birth to death. Jewish fami-

732 See *ibid.*, p. 168.

733 Sholem Ash, *Di muter*, op. cit., p. 131; *un es vert eyn velt—es farshvindt der yam, vos ligt tsvishn di tsvey veltn.*

אין עס ווערט איין וועלט - עס פערשווינדט דער ים, וואָס ליגט צווישען די צוויי וועלטען.

734 See Sholem Ash, *Ist river*, op. cit., p. 87.

735 See Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, op. cit., pp. 148–149.

lies are large and every childbirth is awaited with joy but also with some trepidation, because often, though not as often as in the case of non-Jewish neighbors, either the mother or the child, or both, die at childbirth.<sup>736</sup> In Asch's novel *Reb Shloyme Noged*, the first wife of the protagonist dies during a difficult childbirth, while all townspeople recite psalms and women gather in front of her house. The same happens at the birth of Reb Shloyme Noged's young wife Khanele's son, but this time it ends happily.<sup>737</sup>

The circumcision of their son is a solemn occasion attended by the Tzadik of Gostynin himself. The preparations begin much earlier, women bake cookies and butter buns, but older Jews complain: "Butter cake is good for those from Greater Poland, who consider it the greatest treat when they eat butter cake and drink coffee. What we need is a piece of good fish and some onion."<sup>738</sup>

On the night before the circumcision, no one goes to bed—the whole family keeps vigil at the young mother's room because "it is a dangerous night, many times used by Satan to harm many a child before it could become a 'Jew.' As it is generally known, to harm the child, Satan assumes the shape of a cat or a dog on that night."<sup>739</sup>

Upon completion of the first stage of their education, some young Jews enter middle school and later some enroll in a university. The latter is not always an easy option because of the *numerus clausus*.<sup>740</sup> In *Meri*, Misha says that he has sent an application not only to Saint Petersburg, where he would like to study, but also to Kiev, where they are more lenient with the rules, whereas

736 See Rafał Żebrowski, Zofia Borzymińska, *PO-LIN. Kultura Żydów polskich w XX wieku*, op. cit., p. 47.

737 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noged*, op. cit. pp. 210–211.

738 Ibid., p. 213; *Puter-kukhn iz gut far di groys-poylishe, vos der grester yontev iz, ven men est puter-kukhn un men trinkt kave. Mir darfn dos gute shtikl fish un dos gute bisl tsibeles.*

פוטער-קוכנס איז גוט פֿאַר די גרויס-פּוילישע, וואָס דער גרעסטער יום-טוב איז, ווען מען עסט פוטער-קוכן און מען טרינקט קאַווע. מיר דאַרפֿן דאָס גוטע שטיקל פֿיש און דאָס גוטע ביסל ציבעלעס.

739 Ibid.; *a gefערlekhe nakht, un nisht ba eyn kind iz shoyen der sotn mazek geven in der nakht, eyder dos kind vert a "yid."* *Un vi es iz bavust, farshtelt zikh der sotn in der nakht in a kats oder in a hunt tsu shedikt dos kind.*

אַ געפֿערלעכע נאַכט, און נישט ביי איין קינד איז שוין דער שטן מוזק געווען אין דער נאַכט, איידער דאָס קינד ווערט אַ "ייד." און ווי עס איז באַוואוסט, פֿאַרשטעלט זיך דער שטן אין דער נאַכט אין אַ קאַץ אָדער אין אַ הונט צו שעדיקן דאָס קינד.

740 In 1887 the Minister of Education in the Russian Empire forbade the children of coachmen and servants to be accepted at schools and a law on *numerus clausus* was instituted, which limited the number of Jews who could study at universities and established their acceptable percentage there, see Piotr Wróbel, *Przed odzyskaniem niepodległości*, in: Jerzy Tomaszewski (ed.), *Najnowsze dzieje Żydów w Polsce*, op. cit., pp. 11–139, here p. 23.

Shmuel, Meri's brother, who was not accepted in Kiev, decides to study as far away as in Switzerland.<sup>741</sup> As a rule the parents support their children's thirst for learning and sometimes they spend their last penny on providing education for their son or daughter. In *Meri*, the father of Dovid Leyzerovitsh's school friend says that he did not eat or drink to make sure his son could attend a middle school; he would go to see the governor himself to win his favor and would kiss the principal's hand to ensure that his son is accepted at the school.<sup>742</sup>

Also at the other side of the ocean Jewish parents are concerned with their children obtaining education. The only dream of Charlie's mother in *Onkel Mozes* is that he graduates from college. The narrator's comment is that "back at home her greatest dream might have been for Charlie to become a rabbi, here her greatest dream is that Charlie graduates from college."<sup>743</sup> So when the deadline for paying the tuition fee approaches, the mother tries to collect the required sum—she frantically visits her relatives and neighbors, takes sewing home or even finds a temporary job outside of home. What is striking in the above quotation is the phrase "back home," meaning the former motherland; it implies that the immigrants do not feel at home in the United States as the real home is always the one they left behind in Europe.

Engagement is a joyful occasion and in Asch's novels it is usually presented as such. At the same time, however, and often in a different passage, Asch quotes facts without commenting upon them, e.g. says that the marriage was arranged because of "a good match," whereas the young are in love with someone else. In spite of this, they never question the tradition or rebel against it. This is the case of Layele, Reb Yekheskiel Gombiner's daughter in *Dos shtetl*, who is in reciprocated love with Gabriel, the Rebbe's son,<sup>744</sup> but she marries Reb Mordekhay Konskevolyer's son, earlier in the book named Konsker.<sup>745</sup> Layele's engagement is celebrated sumptuously: the whole family gets together, cookies and cakes are baked. Wearing their best clothes, they all get on the bedecked carts and go to the village, situated half-way, where the engagement is to take place. The family of Avriml, the fiancé, arrive at the inn, too. Men sit in one room and question the fiancé, while the fathers go out to the garden to talk about the dowry. Women sit in the other room and examine the fiancée on her house-

741 See Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., pp. 16 and 23.

742 See *ibid.*, p. 101.

743 Sholem Ash, *Onkel Mozes*, op. cit., p. 109; *In der heym volt efsher ir grester ideal geven tsu zen Tsharlin a rov; do iz ir ideal geven tsu zen Tsharlin a geendikt kolledzh.*

אין דער היים וואָלט אפשר איהר גרעסטער אידעאל געווען צו זעהן טשאַרלין אַ רב, דאָ איז איהר אידעאל געווען צו זעהן טשאַרלין אַ געענדיגטען קאלעדזש.

744 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., pp. 68–70.

745 See *ibid.*, p. 28.

hold skills. Then women leave and the fiancé enters the room so that the engaged could say whether they like each other. Left alone in the room, the girl and boy are scared and embarrassed, and do not say anything—soon the mothers come back to announce happily that the children like each other so they can get married.<sup>746</sup> Obviously, the scene is ironic but it is presented in a subtle way, as if the narrator did not want to hurt the feelings of Layele and Avriml. At the same time the reader has an impression that the author is not entirely happy with the customs under description, but he does not dare to question them openly in the novel.

Having lost his first wife, who dies at childbirth, Reb Shloyme Noged marries Khanele, a young, nineteen-year-old girl. They love each other but even many months after the wedding Khanele is still afraid of her husband and feels much closer to his oldest daughter, who is already married. Khanele finds herself in an impossible situation—she comes from a good Jewish family, but her father went bankrupt and has no money to marry his oldest daughter off. That is why she agrees to marry a widower with seven children, who, on top of that, supports financially his father and pays for Khanele's trousseau. Love and respect for her husband come after the wedding.<sup>747</sup> Also here the reader has an impression that the author does not entirely approve of the customs imposed by tradition but he strives to be as objective as possible.

However, the times keep gradually changing; already in *Motke Ganev*, the novel which takes place at the beginning of the 20th century, when Motke asks the Jew he knows for help in the talk with Khanele's father, the Jew answers that the times are different now and that first Motke should talk with the girl and only then with her father.<sup>748</sup> In spite of this, when the young meet and Motke asks the girl whether she wants to become his fiancée, the girl lowers her eyes and says: "I will do everything my daddy and my mommy tell me to. They know better what is good for me."<sup>749</sup> It turns out the changes are superficial and the parents still inculcate old customs in the young girls and only few of them are strong enough to set themselves free. Also Masha from *Onkel Mozes* is not able to withstand the pressure of her family and of the whole neighborhood, and she does not rebel against her engagement with Uncle Mozes. However, she is scared to death and she does not want to imagine what it will be like after the

746 See *ibid.*, pp. 78–88.

747 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noged*, op. cit., pp. 137–143 and 155–156.

748 See Sholem Ash, *Motke Ganev*, op. cit., p. 275.

749 *Ibid.*, p. 316; *Ikh vel alts ton, vos der tateshi un di mameshi heysn mir. Zey veysn beser vos iz gut far mir.*

איך וועל אלעס טאָן וואָס דער טאַטעשי און די מאַמעשי הייסען מיר. זיי ווייסען בעסער וואָס איז גוט פאַר מיר.



wedding, she cannot sleep out of fear and suddenly fantasizes that it does not really matter because she will not marry him as she is going to die before. She does not know how and why, but the thought calms her down.<sup>750</sup> Also in this case the narrator just reports the scene and the contrast between the simple, terse style of the narration and the scene itself shows how dramatic it is: a young girl is to marry an older man, whom she finds repugnant, she is paralyzed with fear, and she prefers to die rather than to marry him. At some point she realizes “that she has no longer any right to happiness, that she was brought up with a hangman’s halter on her neck and that she was sold out when she was still a child.”<sup>751</sup>

The issue of prearranged marriages is a common thread in Yiddish literature, including theater plays, for instance, the comedy *שמענדריק* (*Shmendrik*) by Avrom Goldfaden,<sup>752</sup> in which because of financial reasons a young girl agrees to marry a foolish Yeshiva student whom she does not love. She is rescued in the last minute by Dovid, her true beloved. Also in the famous drama *צווישן צוויי וועלטן - דער דיבוק* (*Tsvishn tsvey veltn—der dibek*, 1919) by An-sky<sup>753</sup> the unwanted marriage is the central theme. Again, because of financial reasons, a girl is to marry someone else rather than her beloved Yeshiva student, whom she was promised to already in her childhood. The student tries to stop the marriage using cabalistic practices; as a result, he dies and his soul enters the body of his darling girl as a dybbuk, a spirit that demands justice. A similar situation occurs in the drama *דער תקיעת כף* (*Der tkyes kaf*, 1913) by Perets Hirshbeyn,<sup>754</sup> where Dovid dies after his beloved Khanele broke the engagement under the pressure from her parents and promised to marry someone more appropriate. In *די פוסטע קרעטשמע* (*Di puste kretshme*, 1916), another drama by Hirshbeyn, the young man succeeds in abducting the bride in the last minute, whereas her parents’ house and the inn where the wedding was to take place are burned to the

750 See Sholem Ash, *Onkel Mozes*, op. cit., pp. 111–112.

751 Ibid., p. 164; *az zi hot nit mer ka rekht af ka glik, az zi iz ufgetsoygn gevorn mit a shmur afn haldz, az men hot zi farkoyft, ven zi iz nokh a kind geven.*

אַז זי האָט נישט מעהר קיין רעכט אויף קיין גליק, אַז זי איז אויפגעצויגען געוואָרען מיט אַ שמור אויפן האַלדז, אַז מען האָט זי פערקויפט, ווען זי איז נאָך אַ קינד געווען.

752 Avrom Goldfaden (1840–1908) is considered the originator of modern Yiddish theater. He made his debut in Jassy in 1876. He was not only an author of theater plays but also stage director and producer. His theater troupe appeared in Europe, among other places in Bucharest, Odessa, Moscow, Lvov, Paris and London, as well as in New York. *Shmendrik* became so successful that the title word, describing a clumsy and foolish young man, entered the Yiddish language for good.

753 S. An-sky (1863–1920, real name: Shloyme-Zanvl Rapoport) was a folklorist and writer.

754 Perets Hirshbeyn (1880–1948) belonged to the most outstanding playwrights, who elevated the status of theater dramas in Yiddish.

ground. Also in Hirshbeyn's best known dramatic work, the trilogy *גרײַע פעלדער* (*Grine felder*, 1916), there appears the theme of a prearranged marriage.

The wedding of Layele and Avriml in *Dos shtetl* takes place in winter. Earlier Malke goes to Łowicz to fetch the trousseau for her daughter, and a tailor, hired specially for the occasion, arrives from Kalisz. On the day of the wedding three wedding processions come to the synagogue: Layele and Avriml, but also the coachman Reb Yekheskiel Gombiner, Note and Yente, Malkele's servant, as well as the third happy group, the association of psalmists, to whom the beggar Akiba presented a small Torah, which he spent his entire savings on. In this way Asch emphasizes the observance of tradition and customs—the rich merchant marries his daughter off but he does not forget to take care of his servants. At the same time he introduces the theme, quite common in his novels, of poor people for whom faith and service to God are the most important. In a sense the third procession eclipses the other two with joy and momentum.<sup>755</sup>

For his oldest daughter, Reb Shloyme Noged chooses a poor but well-educated husband, whom he later supports financially. This fictional situation is a typical one and at the same time reflects a real-life situation.<sup>756</sup> The wedding outshines any other event in the town. A wedding feast for the poor is offered eight days before the wedding itself. Tables and benches are borrowed and large cauldrons of food are cooked. The bride and her father wait on the guests, dance for them, and give silver coins to those who leave.<sup>757</sup> Likewise, the wedding of Reb Shloyme Noged with young Khanele is sumptuous, music plays and most beautiful girls and bachelors come.<sup>758</sup>

The first wife of Uncle Mozes from *Onkel Mozes* is a girl from Galicia. He decided to marry her because this is better for his developing business but he has no time to think about love. However, his young wife loves him, she “would love anyone who would marry her because she was born to love, to adore and to be a slave.”<sup>759</sup> As in other short episodes, the narrator briefly presents the situation without passing any value judgments. A similar thread is present in *Khaim Lederers tsurikkumen*, where Khaim Lederer marries a girl whom he neither knows well nor likes. What he wants is to forget his constant worries about daily

755 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., pp. 124–130.

756 See Heinrich Graetz, *Historja Żydów*, op. cit., Vol. 8, p. 321.

757 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noged*, op. cit., p. 154.

758 See *ibid.*, pp. 156–157.

759 Sholem Ash, *Onkel Mozes*, op. cit., p. 47; *yedn eynem, vos volt mit ir khasene gehat volt zi lib gehat, vayl zi iz geboyrn gevorn lib tsu hobn un tsu fargertern un zayn farshkluft*

יעדען איינעם, וואָס וואָלט מיט איהר חתונה געהאט וואָלט זי ליעב געהאט, ווייל זי איז געבוירען געוואָרען ליעב צו האָבען און צו פֿערשטערן און זיין פֿערשקלאַפֿט.

bread and he hopes to become his father-in-law's partner in his house manufacture.<sup>760</sup> In *Bam opgrunt*, Yudkevitch tries to persuade Ester to divorce Rabinovitch and to marry him instead. When the woman says that she does not love him, he answers that it really does not matter, it is clear that she does not love her husband either.<sup>761</sup> Emilye from *Gots gefangene* lives in a rich, Americanized family. This, however, does not mean that she is not forced to marry. She is an older sister so the family expect her to marry first: "Emilye thought she stood in a line to a ticket office, to buy a ticket and go away. Others stand behind her, they push her and urge her on. Her choice is simple: either she buys a ticket or she loses her place in the line."<sup>762</sup>

What is genuinely frightening is not only the haste with which such a weighty decision is made but also the comparison of marriage to a business deal, to purchasing a ticket, which is not for a train journey, but for life. Moreover, the woman experiences the wedding night as a traumatic experience, comparable to death.<sup>763</sup>

The engagement of Miriam and Joseph in *Mary*, the plot of which takes place almost two thousand years earlier, has a totally different character. In the evening, after work, dressed-up guests come along and each brings something to eat and a present. Joseph does not come empty-handed either. Following the tradition, he brings money which is a gift to his future wife, and rich presents for his brother-in-law, mother-in-law, and Miriam. Upon signing the contract, the children are given nuts and honey cookies, and the adults feast till late in the night.<sup>764</sup> In the novel, Asch also presents the biblical wedding at Cana of Galilee. The whole family and Miriam in particular try to help prepare the wedding of a poor relative. On the solemn day older women wash the bride and dress her up. She goes to the wedding place in a joyful procession. Next the wedding feast begins; it is modest as the betrothed are poor. Everyone is happy, they eat, drink and dance. Suddenly it turns out there is no wine. Miriam resolves to ask Yeshua for help, but he, according to the New Testament account (Jn 2,4), hesitates and says that his hour has not yet come; still, he does not refuse. Next he asks the

760 See Sholem Ash, *Khaim Lederers tsurikkumen*, op. cit., p. 14.

761 See Sholem Ash, *Bam opgrunt*, op. cit., p. 78.

762 Sholem Ash, *Gots gefangene*, op. cit., p. 33; *Emilyen hot zikh gedakht, az zi shteyt in a rey ba a ban-kase tsu koyfn a bilet avektsiforn. Hinter ir shteyen andere un shtupn zi, yogt zi unter, far ir iz ibergeblibn eyns fun beyde: dem bilet tsu koyfn, oder aroystsufaln fun der rey.*

עמיליען האָט זיך געדאַכט, אַז זי שטייט אין אַ רייע ביי אַ באַן־קאַסע צו קויפֿן אַ בילעט אַוועקצופאַרן. דינטער איר שטייען אַנדערע און שטופֿן זי, יאָגן זי אונטער, פֿאַר איר איז איבערגעבליבן איינס פֿון די בייִדע: דעם בילעט צו קויפֿן, אַדער אַרױסצופֿאַלן פֿון דער רייע.

763 See *ibid.*, p. 35.

764 See Sholem Asch, *Mary*, op. cit., pp. 30–34.

servants to fill containers with water and then to pour out some and give it to the wedding guests. Joy returns among the poor and everyone is surprised why the bridegroom serves the best wine last.<sup>765</sup>

The scene presenting the wedding of the son of the innkeeper Mendel of Łloczów in *Kidush hashem*, whose plot takes place in 17th-century Poland, verges on the absurd. The wedding marks the opening of the synagogue, the bride and the bridegroom are not old enough for matrimony,<sup>766</sup> but it does not bother anyone. A hardly ten-year-old girl stands under the chuppah and plays with her dress while waiting for her fiancé, who hid away under a chair and kicks those who try to pull him out. It is only his father who succeeds in dragging him under the canopy. After the wedding the young couple sometimes quarrel—when Shloyme comes back from the Cheder and finds his wife playing in the sandbox, he usually takes her bonnet off and fills it up with sand, and then they argue who is more guilty—he or she, because she sits with her bare head.<sup>767</sup>

In Asch's novels, the wedding is followed by adult life, usually rife with troubles. Apart from everyday worries, there are disasters, not only man-made. In emergencies and facing common danger, Jews and Christians can unite and help each other. A good example is the fight against fire in *Dos shtetl*, when townspeople unite to save their houses and property.<sup>768</sup> However, in the context of the tragedy, Asch displays subtle humor when he presents the subsequent rebuilding of the destroyed town, during which the gentiles work and the Jews just sit, watch, and offer good advice.<sup>769</sup>

The Jewish life presented in Asch's novels is difficult, beginning with small problems and ending with more serious ones, often resulting in death. Among the problems which make life difficult is the law, already mentioned above, restricting for how long Jews could stay in certain areas and selected cities and towns of tsarist Russia. Michał Kowalski of *Meri* has no right to stay in Saint Petersburg, so he sleeps in many different places and eventually moves to nearby Finland.<sup>770</sup> The job of the tsarist police has a threatening aspect—they decide who goes on exile in Siberia, who lives and who dies. The Socialist

765 See *ibid.*, pp. 344–357.

766 Jewish boys achieve religious maturity when they are 13 and Jewish girls a year earlier. Formerly, this meant they could get married at an early age. As late as the second half of the 19th century, religious marriages between a 13-year-old and a 12-year-old would take place, though the legal age to enter into marriage was 18 for the man and 16 for the woman. Such early marriages were related to the parents' desire to secure their children's future, see Rafał Żebrowski, Zofia Borzymińska, *PO-LIN. Kultura Żydów polskich w XX wieku*, op. cit., p. 44.

767 See Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit., pp. 38–40.

768 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., pp. 71–73.

769 See *ibid.*, p. 90.

Dovid from *Meri*, who is sentenced to death, does not want to have his eyes covered and bravely looks at the firing squad.<sup>771</sup>

Some Jews living in Russia and in the territories of partitioned Poland believed they could improve their fate by changing the current political and social conditions. In *Meri* there is a description of a quite unusual demonstration. Two political parties, which hope to ensure support for their cause among the inhabitants of a poor Jewish quarter, call for a strike, promise the eight-hour workday and better accommodation. The Jews rightly respond that they have no one to strike against—after all, everyone works in a small family factory, there are no rich employers and exploited workers. Nevertheless, because of poverty, illnesses and hopelessness of their lives, they would like to change it, but do not know how and whom to blame. Ultimately, they agree to march peacefully through the town center without any slogans or flags, just to demonstrate that they exist. The march is attended by the old and the crippled, ill women carrying children. The townspeople are afraid of the demonstration and its possible consequences, they take shelter wherever they can, close the shutters, and worry that “it has started.” It turns out, however, that the policemen just laugh at the crippled and the ill, and no pogrom takes place.<sup>772</sup> The author aims at showing a dead-end situation of poor Jewish townspeople. Practically it is impossible to predict any change in their fate, the strikes are not organized on their behalf, while rich people, including Jews, simply try to ignore them and to remove from their mind the existence of the poor quarter. The situation is truly tragic but the passages in which Asch presents the quarter are not very successful: there are many repetitions and the presented demonstration is in a way a travesty, additionally accentuated by the laughter of the policemen. In the passage under discussion the phrase “it has started” appears. Contrary to what one could expect, it is not a reference to the outbreak of a social revolt, although the plot takes place at the time of the 1905 Revolution. Instead, it is a reference to pogroms, deeply embedded in the subconscious of Eastern European Jews and deeply feared, especially in the times of political upheavals. The expression stands for the tragedy of the Jews living in Eastern and Central Europe, where they never slept peacefully.

Because of that many of them decide to leave their homeland and the world they are familiar with. Moving to the United States<sup>773</sup> is an important decision, which can be seen in *Di muter*, where Shloyme-Khaim collects money for the

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770 See Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., p. 138. In the years 1809–1917 the Grand Duchy of Finland was connected to Russia on the strength of a personal union, which in practice meant it was dependent on the Empire.

771 See Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit. p. 237.

772 See *ibid*, pp. 107–116.

journey and his father, while asking when Shloyme-Khaim intends to finally depart, sometimes asks a direct question when the Messiah is going to come.<sup>774</sup> In a sense, the scene is comic, but it clearly shows that to the Shloyme-Khaim family the decision to move beyond the ocean is as important as landmark events in Jewish history—not only the past ones but also those that will come in the future, as their religion teaches.

While leaving Europe to save their lives or just to improve their quality, usually the Jews act half-legally or simply break the law. The scenes showing illegal border crossing appear quite often in Asch's novels. In *Amerika*, Khane-Leye along with her children and all their belongings take a train to a railway station, the name of which is put on a scrap of paper, where they are collected by a guide who takes them to a border inn, from where at night large groups of Jews are led to the other side of the border. Often they are completely confused and scared to death because they leave their family shtetl for the first time in their life but they understand this is the only way. On the one hand, Asch shows a complete ignorance of the outside world among poor Jews, but on the other hand, their resolution to risk everything to make the life of their families better. At the same time Asch's novels demonstrate how Jews help each other in difficult times and how they create a community that takes care of its weakest members.<sup>775</sup> The family of Sore-Rivke and Anshel from *Di muter* cross the border in a similar manner—they are also led by a guide at night and they compare the crossing to the Jewish exodus from Egypt.<sup>776</sup> The ignorance of the world and the readiness to help each other can be best seen during the return of small Yosele and his older sister, who takes care of him, to Russia. Rokhele learns, while talking to other passengers on the ship, that to be able to enter Russia one needs a passport. They not only collect food and money for the children, but also help find a doctor for Yosele in Berlin and finally someone who has a passport claims them at the border as his family, thanks to which this unlikely journey has a happy ending.<sup>777</sup> A complete ignorance of reality is shown when Shloyme-Khaim leaves for the United States. His father gives him a letter to his uncle, who is certain to take care of him. As he cannot find the uncle's address, he

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773 In the years 1881–1914 more than 1.5 million Jews left Russia, often illegally, thanks to bribery or someone else's passport. Jews from Greater Poland would move to German cities and the poorest would go to the United States. In the years 1881–1910 about 300 thousand Jews left the territory annexed by the Austrians. See Piotr Wróbel, *Przed odzyskaniem niepodległości*, op. cit., pp. 29–30, 67–68 and 88.

774 See Sholem Ash, *Di muter*, op. cit., p. 25.

775 See Sholem Ash, *Amerika*, op. cit., pp. 44–54.

776 See Sholem Ash, *Di muter*, op. cit., pp. 107–108.

777 See Sholem Ash, *Amerika*, op. cit., pp. 85–91.

gives his son an envelope addressed “To Cousin Pinkhes in America”<sup>778</sup> and tells him that when he arrives in New York, everyone he meets is bound to tell him where cousin Pinkhes lives because New York and America are one.

The Jews who emigrate to the United States reach it after a long sea voyage. To most of them it is a new experience they are afraid of. In *Amerika*, Khane-Leye embarks a ship following a crowd of people, she does not glance at the water and she entrusts her family to God's care. Those having cheap tickets are offered primitive living conditions—they are put in large rooms where they sleep on straw. The narrator reports that the places seem to be assigned on the basis of ethnicity as all the Jews lodge together. Soon they befriend each other, they all pray and eat together. Fear comes at night and little Yosele imagines that Leviathan rams the ship which sinks in the ocean depths.<sup>779</sup> In *Amerika*, Asch presents an interesting scene when the ship approaches the shores of the new land. Everyone dresses up, comes up on board and enjoys the end of the journey. Asch describes particular groups of immigrants, who the Jews will meet later. So, among other nationalities, there are Russian peasants, Poles, and Italians. They all gather round their symbols, the Catholics sing religious songs under a church banner, and the peasants, who are members of the Orthodox Church, kneel round the cross. All are afraid of high-rises seen on the horizon.<sup>780</sup> Although the scene is definitely amplified, it renders the immigrants' joy of having safely crossed the ocean but also their confusion and the multiplicity of nations and religions which would soon inhabit the same land.

In *Amerika*, Asch describes the help offered to newly arrived immigrants by those Jews who came earlier. Every newcomer can count on someone's meeting him at the port, he is offered a temporary place to live, everyone is helped with finding a job and accommodation, advice is freely given, and immigrants are invited to various meetings and to private houses. At the same time they are the source of news about the family shtetl, they bring letters from the family, and tell stories about the changes.<sup>781</sup> It is likely that thanks to this sense of responsibility for others, immigration on such a scale was at all possible. In the novel *Di*

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778 Sholem Ash, *Di muter*, op. cit., p. 29; צום פעטער פּוּחַס אין אַמעריקע *Tsum feter Pinkhes in Amerike*.

779 See Sholem Ash, *Amerika*, op. cit., pp. 55–60. Often mentioned in the Old Testament, Leviathan is a mythical beast, usually visualized as a snake or a huge whale.

780 See Sholem Ash, *Amerika*, op. cit., pp. 61–67. It was not only the Jews that would leave Polish territories. Overpopulation of villages and poverty in towns forced many other inhabitants to leave, among them Polish peasants, Germans and Ukrainians. Often people would form a group, find a priest who would lead them and, as a group, they would leave the country and settle down in the fertile land of the United States.

781 See Sholem Ash, *Amerika*, op. cit., pp. 19–32.

*muter*, the family of Sore-Rivke and Anshel receive similar support from their compatriots: for a start, they are offered some money and a credit in a local shop until they find work.<sup>782</sup>

In the United States the majority of poor immigrants find employment in small clothes companies. In *Khaim Lederers tsurikkumen*, upon retirement, the title protagonist visits his “shap.”<sup>783</sup> What does it look like? Typewriters can be heard clattering in the offices, customers view samples of goods, materials are chosen and the details of delivery and payment are discussed. Upstairs, dozens of workers lean over omnipresent sewing machines—there are no faces but just arched backs, which seem an extension of a machine, sometimes hands can be seen. Khaim Lederer suddenly realizes “that this is not a factory, these are not people and inanimate machines, but it is one huge, enormous living animal, breathing hundreds of breaths and moving thousands of hands, which leans over innumerable backs and the only single thing it has is the soul and the will.”<sup>784</sup>

782 See Sholem Ash, *Di muter*, op. cit., p. 116.

783 A sweatshop, which the Jews popularly called שַׁפּ *shap* was a relatively small workshop or factory. They became popular in the second half of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century in the United States, and they were known for poor and dangerous working conditions, long working hours, low wages, drudgery, and child employment. Among other things, “shaps” would produce toys, shoes and furniture, but the most popular items were shirts, dresses and clothes. Their popularity was due to the mass immigration to the United States. Immigrants could find a job there but it was menial and very badly paid. In Yiddish literature a sweatshop is presented e.g. in a well-known play by Yankev Gordin (מַעַנְטש און טייִוול) *Got, mentsh un tayvl*, (1900). In a sweatshop producing prayer shawls, a young man dies and the owner commits suicide because of remorse. Towards the end of the 19th century a new trend appeared in Yiddish poetry, which urged Jewish workers to fight sweatshop exploitation. One of the representatives of this trend was מאָריס ראָזענפעלד Moris Rozenfeld (1862–1923), who, among other poems, wrote אין שַׁפּ (*In shap*), published in 1897 in the collection דאָס לידער בוך (*Dos lider bukh*, whose title refers to *Buch der Lieder* published in 1827 by Heinrich Heine /1797–1856/, a German poet of Jewish origin and a source of fascination for many Yiddish writers). In the first stanza, Moris Rozenfeld presents a human being lost in the hum of machines, who becomes a machine himself, works ceaselessly, and never questions the sense of his effort. In the same collection the poet included another well-known poem מיין יינגעלע (*Mayn yingele*), in which the father complains that he does not know his own son because he leaves for work at dawn, and when he comes back in the evening, his son is already asleep.

784 Sholem Ash, *Khaim Lederers tsurikkumen*, op. cit., p. 54; *dos iz nisht ka shap, dos zenen nisht ka mentshn un nisht ka toyte mashinen. Az dos iz eyn groyse, groyse lebedike khaye, vos otemt mit hunderter otems un bavegt zikh mit toyzender hent, un boygt zikh mit umtselike rukns, nor a neshome un a viln hot zi eyne.*

דאָס איז נישט קיין שַׁפּ, דאָס זענען נישט קיין מענשען און נישט קיין טויטע מאַשינען. אַז דאָס איז איין גרויסע, גרויסע לעבעדיגע חיה, וואָס אַטעמט מיט הונדערטער אַטעמס און בעוועגט זיך מיט טויזענדער הענט,



The loss of individual identity of the Jews working in the sweatshop is shown in a terrifying way. Humans lose their will, they become as if thoughtless parts of a machine. Their hopeless situation is further underlined by the fact that Khaim Lederer does not notice the problem, but he is proud that he set up a “shap”. In this way the factory owner assumes the role of God the Creator, who builds for his employers an alternative world, where there is only work—no identity or free will. Poverty and relative easiness of finding a job make people choose a “shap.” Once there, they face a dead end. They are afraid to protest against exploitation and most of them are too passive to risk leaving the factory and finding another job. Workers are exploited by owners, mostly their countrymen, who either arrived earlier or are more resourceful and shrewd than others. Khaim Lederer, just like Onkel Mozes or Irving Davidovski, is proud because he is able to provide work for his countrymen, he believes he helps them and expects gratitude. Khaim Lederer does not understand that in this way he is responsible for shaping another generation who since their early age have to work hard, deprived of education and prospects for a better future. This is well expressed by old Motke from *Khaim Lederers tsurikkumen*, who out of his own accord goes back to the factory though he does not have to, as his children support him. He goes back because he does not know what to do with free time, he has not done anything else throughout his entire life. Motke says that “the factory casts a bad spell—once you step in, it will hold you in its forceps until you breathe your last.”<sup>785</sup> Khaim Lederer reaches the same conclusion and that is why he wants to go back to work. He thinks that he has nowhere to go and that “the whole life is a ‘shap.’”<sup>786</sup> Lederer’s thoughts confirm the existence of a parallel world, from which there is no escape—he builds this world for his workers but he does not realize that he himself is trapped in it. Many others see the work in a factory as a dead end: in *Ist river* Irving urges Mary to do all she can to stay away from factories, because they “are the pit which one never leaves.”<sup>787</sup>

There are those who try to fight with “shaps.” In *Onkel Mozes*, Charlie organizes a strike in Uncle Mozes’ factory. At first the strike succeeds, but later, when Sam, the boss’s right hand, starts talking to the strikers, they become afraid they may lose their jobs and decide to apologize to Uncle Mozes. They

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און בייגט זיך מיט אונזערהליגע רוקענס, נאָר אַ נשמה און אַ ווילען האָט זי איינע.

785 Ibid., pp. 57–58; *der shap hot shoyrn aza beyzn kishef, koyrn biste arayngefaln in em, vet er dikh halt in zayne tsvangn, biz du vest dem letstn otem opgebn.*

דער שאפ האָט שוין אַזאַ בייזען פּישוף, קוים ביזטו אַריינגעפאלען אין איהם, וועט ער דיך האַלטען אין זיינע צוואַנגען, ביז דו וועסט דעם לעצטען אַטעם אָפּגעבען.

786 Ibid., p. 109; דאָס גאַנצע לעבען איז איין שאַפּ *dos gantse lebn iz eyn shap.*

787 Sholem Ash, *Ist river*, op. cit., p. 93; *עס איז אַ גרוב, פֿון וועלכער מען קומט שוין נישט אַרויס; es iz a grub, fun velkher men kumt shoyrn nisht aroys.*

change their mind when Charlie's father's friend compares the strike to the Exodus and Charlie to Moses, who the people also complained about as they yearned for the times of captivity because they found their present life in the desert unbearable. The old Jew reminds his fellow immigrants that their forefathers reached the Holy Land only when the generations raised in captivity died out. The strikers set off to picket at the factory but there they are met by the counter forces organized by Sam: prostitutes and plain clothes policemen. Prostitutes accost the strikers, call the police for help and as a result the strikers are beaten and some of them end up in detention.<sup>788</sup> Interestingly enough, the ultimate argument which persuades the strikers not to give up derives from the Pentateuch and compares the strike with the wandering through the desert. The Socialist Charlie, who wants the workers' good and tries to secure better working conditions for them, is not able to reach their hearts. On the other hand, the old Jew, who makes a reference to the Bible, is able to make a real impact on them.

In the United States everyone misses the shtetl, the orchards, the breeze from the fields, the river. In the new world they work all day long, not really knowing whether the sun is out or not.<sup>789</sup> They can also spend hours remembering those who used to live in the shtetl. They all want to go back home to die when they retire, but when they actually make their plans come true, nothing suggests they are ready to die. On the contrary, they are glad and happy. Old Melnik tells everyone that when he dies and meets their fathers in the other world and they will ask him what their sons do in America, he will tell them that they do not eat kosher food and defile the Sabbath. He also adds: "Your father will visit you at night and scare you with his heavy breath."<sup>790</sup> Here again grotesque Yiddish humor<sup>791</sup> underlines a joyful scene of saying farewell before returning to Europe.

There are crowds of Jews journeying to the United States but only few journeying back to Europe: those who do stand out and come to the fore. Asch presents them in *Amerika*. One of the travelers is an old man who goes back to Europe to die and to be buried there. Another one is a Jew who says he has already visited most countries in the world to find home but has never felt attached to anything. Now he goes back to Russia to visit his parents' grave. Once he dodged military service so he knows he risks his life but he has to visit his father's grave. Another young Jew goes back because, as he says, he does not

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788 See Sholem Ash, *Onkel Mozes*, op. cit., pp. 191–201.

789 See *ibid.*, pp. 67–68.

790 *Ibid.*, p. 74; נאכט ביי צודישען דייר און וועט דיר און קומען צו דייר און וועט *vet er kumen tsu dir un vet dir tsudishn ba nakht*.

791 See Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Odcienie tożsamości. Literatura żydowska jako zjawisko wielojęzyczne*, op. cit., pp. 22–23.

want to lose his fatherland. He knows he is likely to be drafted in Russia but nevertheless he is resolved to go back.<sup>792</sup> The characters under description are unique in their resolve to “swim against the current” and to return to Europe.

Although such cases are rare in Asch's novels, they find a confirmation in reality—his parents, for instance, came back to Kutno before death. Just like elsewhere, also here the author signals problems and dilemmas faced by immigrants, who escape poverty, religious and social inequalities, and often direct persecutions by moving to the country where they have a chance to earn their livelihood, and where they can enjoy religious and social freedom. They know they have to stay there but they do not feel at home and miss their native land.

For instance, the longing is present in *Ist river*, where everyone believes that their stay in the United States is temporary. They all dream about making money and going back to Europe. The Italians talk about vineyards they will buy in the region of Naples or in Sicily, the Slavs talk about Poland, Slovakia or Russia. The Germans send every penny they earn to German banks as they plan to buy a farmstead in Germany. Even Jewish intellectuals who fled from czarist Russia wait for a miracle to happen. This is how the narrator comments on these hopes and expectations: “The Messiah is split—those members of intelligentsia who have Socialist views see the Messiah in the Russian Revolution, whereas those who support nationalism, talk about a Zionist Messiah.”<sup>793</sup>

Already in Asch's early novels, which mostly focus on poor Jews, the reader is sometimes offered a glimpse of a totally different, affluent world which the author himself was fascinated with. On a ship going from the United States to Europe, first-class passengers enjoy live music, beautifully dressed women dance with elegant men in tailcoats, pearls and diamonds shimmer.<sup>794</sup>

In Asch's novels, apart from dreams of going back from the United States to Europe, there are more intimate ones, cherished deep in one's heart. From time to time every Jew considers going to the Holy Land to be buried among his forefathers. One of the greetings says: “Next year in Jerusalem.” The promise is fulfilled very rarely and otherwise remains a fantasy, though, for instance, among the ancestors of Reb Shloyme Noged there is a custom of going to Israel on the last journey before death.<sup>795</sup> To others a certain compensation and substitute is a money box where they put money to buy land in Palestine. An emissary collect-

792 See Sholem Ash, *Amerika*, op. cit., pp. 82–85.

793 Sholem Ash, *Ist river*, op. cit., p. 67; *Der Meshiyekh iz tseteylt: der teyl inteligents, vos iz sotsyalistish, zet dem Meshiyekhn in der rusisher revolutsye; di, vos zenen natsyonalistish, reyd'n vegn a tsyonistishn Meshiyekh.*

דער משיח איז צעטיילט: דער טייל אינטעליגענטן, וואָס איז סאָציאַליסטיש, זעט דעם משיחן אין דער רוסישער רעוואָלוציע; די, וואָס זיינען נאַציאָנאַליסטיש, ריידן וועגן אַ ציאָניסטישן משיח.

794 See Sholem Ash, *Amerika*, op. cit., p. 81.

ing money for the Holy Land visits the little town shown in *Dos shtetl*. He wears a white satin robe, tells stories, and shows pieces of limestone chipped from the Western Wall or soil from the grave of Rachel.<sup>796</sup> The Jews believe that if a small sack with soil from Palestine is placed in the grave, the body shall find an underground passage to the Land of Israel. A sack with soil or a stone from the Holy Land appear in some of the novels, for instance in *Amerika* the stone is worn on the heart by a Jew returning to Europe.<sup>797</sup> Jews move to the United States mostly because of economic reasons, whereas those who go to Israel know fully well that they chose a hard way and apart from money for the journey, they often need money to buy land upon arrival. Many decide to move due to ideological reasons as they want to build Jewish life in the Holy Land. Additionally, they are frequently motivated by tragic experiences in Europe, where they feel not only threatened but also alienated, and where they would always remain second-class citizens. For instance, this is the case of Misha in *Der veg tsu zikh*, who wants to start from scratch as a simple farmer and to forget about the years he spent in Russia.<sup>798</sup>

Asch does not write much about burials as the end of human life. Naturally they do take place though they are hardly ever discussed at length, although there are exceptions. When Reb Shloyme Noked's first wife dies in childbirth, her burial is attended by the whole town and her grave is placed in the best possible location, close to that of the rabbi's wife. All boys from the town say Kaddish because the merchant's wife was like a mother to all.<sup>799</sup>

In this category the figures of memory mostly concern Jewish life—there are hardly any references to non-Jewish reality. The writer tries to focus on various aspects of Jewish life from birth to death, he shows different choices the protagonists face, their emigration to the United States and to Israel, their worries and problems, but also their joys, such as family celebrations and peace, symbolized by the Sabbath.

### 4.3.7 The world of culture and ideas

Asch's novels provide much information about spiritual and mental life of particular social groups. Besides faith and tradition, the figures of memory encom-

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795 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noked*, op. cit., p. 147. The motif of journey to the Land of Israel appears in many literary works in Yiddish, see Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Odcienie tożsamości. Literatura żydowska jako zjawisko wielojęzyczne*, op. cit., p. 22.

796 See Sholem Ash, *Dos shtetl*, op. cit., pp. 113–115.

797 See Sholem Ash, *Amerika*, op. cit., p. 83.

798 See Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, op. cit., pp. 20–22.

799 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noked*, op. cit., p. 153.

pass culture, understood broadly to include language, literature and art, as well as patriotism and various ideas, such as Zionism or Socialism, which Asch's protagonists embrace.

It is language which is the fundamental marker of national or cultural identity. To most Eastern European Jews it was Yiddish which was their native language, although members of intelligentsia or affluent classes often became Polonized or Russianized. The situation was different in Western Europe, where Western Yiddish was ultimately replaced by German at the time of the Haskalah. Among the immigrants in the United States, the young generation quickly adopted the English language, which they would bring home from school. Also in more affluent Jewish communities, English would become the first language thanks to extensive contacts with American society.

In Palestine the situation was peculiar as the new Jewish world was to be built on the national foundations and at the same time the Jewish Diaspora and the Yiddish language as its immanent element were seen as transitory. Although they were considered necessary for the nation, its religion and traditions to survive, they should be abandoned at the time of building a new homeland. Such a philosophy gave rise to many problems, which sometimes led to tragicomic situations, just like the already mentioned situation presented in *Der veg tsu zikh*, where the kibbutz managing officer tries to impose the Hebrew language on young people by force.<sup>800</sup>

Literacy was not common even among the Jews. Although boys would learn how to write at Cheder, in the course of time those whose jobs did not require the skill would forget what they had learned at school.<sup>801</sup> This is why as a young man Asch could earn money by writing letters others would dictate to him. In the reality depicted in Asch's novels, illiteracy is widespread among peasants and because of that the Jews were much in need. In *Meri*, Kowalski reads a letter to a peasant woman which she received from her husband serving in the army. The letter abounds in Jewish words because, as the narrator explains, "a Jew wrote it and when writing it he knew that a Jew would read it."<sup>802</sup> Yiddish, widely known and used on an everyday basis by the characters of Asch's novels, is sometimes replaced by other languages. When the young people in *Meri* use

800 Ahad Ha'am (real name: Asher Tsvi Ginsberg, 1856–1927) was the main proponent of the rebirth of the Hebrew language in Palestine. It was a difficult task because the colonists hardly knew it or did not know it at all.

801 See Chone Shmeruk, *Historia literatury jidysz*, Wrocław / Warszawa / Kraków: Ossolineum 2007, p. 20.

802 Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., p. 63; *a yid hot em geshribn un der shrayber hot gevust, az a yid vet em leyenen*

א איד האָט איהם געשריבען און דער שרייבער האָט געוואוסט, אז אַ איד וועט איהם לעזען.

Russian while talking to each other, it is quite natural as they all graduated from Russian secondary schools and plan to go to Russian universities. On the other hand, it seems a little unnatural when their mothers or teachers begin talking in German just to show they are educated.<sup>803</sup> It seems it was Asch's intention to stress this unnaturalness and thus to criticize lack of respect for one's own language. There is an interesting episode in *Farn mabl*, where the reader learns that Zakhari Mirkin learned Yiddish exceptionally fast.<sup>804</sup> The author wants to demonstrate that the language, tradition and culture of one's own nation lie as if dormant and what is needed to wake them up is a dose of good will. In the same novel a Jewess who speaks Yiddish only and so is not understood by anyone pays a visit to the counselor Halpern. He saves the day because he remembers the language of his childhood and feels happy that he can hear it again.<sup>805</sup> We should also mention here relatively comic but likeable episodes appearing in the novel *Varshe*, where the Polish quack Pan Kwiatkowski tries to speak Yiddish to emphasize his relation with the Jewish tenants.<sup>806</sup>

There is also a positive scene in *Meri*, where the banker Kenig, a Polish Jew living in Russia, is happy at the prospect of talking to Kowalski in Polish.<sup>807</sup> Apparently Asch is not critical of his characters preferring the language of the country they live in, it seems to be quite natural to him. The assimilated Polish Jews do not use Yiddish—this is the case of the Blum family in *Der veg tsu zikh* until one of the sons becomes a Zionist, befriends other Zionists who speak Yiddish, brings home books written in Yiddish, and when Christians visit the family, he deliberately starts speaking it.<sup>808</sup> Here language is shown as, on the one hand, an instrument of the young man's self-identification and, on the other hand, as a deliberately erected barrier between the assimilated family and the Christian neighborhood. When Meri travels by train to the Polish mountains in search for Kowalski, she has problems communicating with her co-passengers. As she knows that Russian is similar to Polish, she first asks in Russian whether they could recommend a hotel in Zakopane. Next she tries to speak German only to provoke a response from one of the passengers who says—in French—they are in Poland where it is Polish that should be spoken.<sup>809</sup> In the scene, Asch shows the respect the Poles have for their language but also some xenophobia.

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803 See *ibid.*, pp. 66 and 72. A similar situation occurred in the Polish society where it was the French language that signaled one belonged to the upper class.

804 See Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, op. cit., pp. 176 and 375.

805 See *ibid.*, p. 157.

806 See Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, op. cit., p. 48.

807 See Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., p. 72.

808 See Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, op. cit., pp. 80–81.

809 See *ibid.*, p. 63.

Later Meri meets Jewish girls from Poland, who teach her Polish, which she likes and soon she starts wearing Polish dresses and considers herself a Pole.<sup>810</sup>

It is different in the United States. Here the Jews are not emotionally attached to the language, it is treated instrumentally and at home they speak Yiddish, from time to time using simple English phrases, which the children bring from school. Uncle Mozes from *Onkel Mozes* also speaks some English, especially when he wants to stress that he is someone better and more important.<sup>811</sup> In *Gots gefangene* Emilye's parents come from Germany. The father speaks English without an accent when he is not upset, whereas the mother retains a strong German accent and sometimes she speaks German only, although no one understands her.<sup>812</sup> To satisfy their ambitions, wealthier Jews tend to change their names. Khaim Lederer's wife was Sore in the old homeland, but in the United States she calls herself Sarah.<sup>813</sup> Likewise, the oldest son in *Khaim Lederers tsurikkumen* is called Morris and it is only Khaim's memories which reveal that once his name was Moyshele.<sup>814</sup> It is clear the novel reflects the outside reality where such changes frequently concerned not only first names but also family ones. In Asch's novels, the older generation has no command of English, which often leads to comic scenes. Charlie from *Onkel Mozes* calls his mother "old chap" in English and she laughs at him, thinking he calls her "alte shkap" (in Yiddish "old mare").<sup>815</sup> An additional, though probably unintentional comic effect is setting English words in the Hebrew alphabet—the reader has to think hard what is really meant because words are set phonetically and not all English sounds have exact counterparts in Yiddish. As an example one could quote the beginning of the pledge mentioned before that Charlie learned at school and that he tried to inculcate in his mother—the whole scene has comic undertones as the boy strongly believes in what he says, whereas his mother repeats after him "I pledge allegiance to my flag"<sup>816</sup> only to make him stop bothering her.

Considering the way Asch presented language-related scenes in his novels, it is obvious that he considers Yiddish as the most important language as the characters who use the "mameloshn," their native language, are emotionally attached to it. Those who know Asch's biography will not be surprised to learn that he has a positive attitude to Polish as well. Russian, the second native language of many of his characters, is treated with respect in his novels, just like

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810 See *ibid.*, p. 83.

811 See Sholem Ash, *Onkel Mozes*, op. cit., pp. 38–41 and 62.

812 See Sholem Ash, *Gots gefangene*, op. cit., pp. 11–12.

813 See Sholem Ash, *Khaim Lederers tsurikkumen*, op. cit., p. 23.

814 See *ibid.*, p. 114.

815 See Sholem Ash, *Onkel Mozes*, op. cit., p. 114.

816 *Ibid.*, p. 115; אי פלעדזש אלדזשענס טו מאי פלעג; *Ay pledzh alidzhens tu may fleg.*

Hebrew, which the colonists in *Dos gezang fun tol* learn with much zeal, but which, at least initially, Asch did not know what to think about, as corroborated by *Der veg tsu zikh*.

According to the narrator in *Moyshe*, before the history and customs of the people of Israel can be written down, they are transmitted orally. It is the elders who guard them and who can repeat everything word by word.<sup>817</sup> This is followed by written language. In Asch's novels, what the characters read and what they identify with can be regarded as a figure of memory. To the Jews, books have a special meaning. That is why the stake which Yefte is to be burnt at in *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen* is built of books pillaged by the Inquisition from synagogues and family libraries. The fire is to consume the Talmud scrolls written on papyrus, poetry and religious songs of Spanish-Jewish poets, the Pentateuchs copied from Babylonian originals, Maimonides' manuscripts, and first printed editions of the Talmud.<sup>818</sup> The scene emphasizes the barbarity of inquisitors, who not only kill people but also destroy precious cultural treasures.

*Belles lettres* appear in Asch's novels, though not as often as could be expected. Dovid in *Meri* is fascinated by Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* (published in 1875–1877), which he reads with total abandon.<sup>819</sup> The bohemian circles gathering in the wealthy drawing rooms of Saint Petersburg extol Tolstoy, yet it is not his literary works that are praised but his socio-political views<sup>820</sup> and he himself is compared to Moses, who led the Jewish people through the desert to a better world.<sup>821</sup> On the other hand, in *Bam opgrunt*, when Hans Bodenheimer imagines that Hitler is a golem, a devil's or death's envoy, he compares him to the patricide Smerdyakov from *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, published in 1881.<sup>822</sup>

The books have a different meaning for the Polish Jews, who treat them as sources of patriotism. Thus Adam Mickiewicz's drama *Dziady* (The Forefathers' Eve)<sup>823</sup> becomes a sacred book in the Blum family portrayed in *Der veg tsu zikh*. The family members recite Polish poetry and children are told stories about national uprisings.<sup>824</sup> Jaś Blum's ideal of a woman—proud, sad, and ready for sac-

817 See Sholem Ash, *Moyshe*, op. cit., pp. 40–41.

818 See Sholem Ash, *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen*, op. cit., pp. 129–131.

819 See Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., p. 53.

820 What is implied here is probably Christian anarchism.

821 See Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., p. 164.

822 See Sholem Ash, *Bam opgrunt*, op. cit., p. 730.

823 A series of Romantic dramas written by Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855) in 1820–1832 and partly concerned with the Polish struggle for independence from the Russian Empire.

824 See Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, op. cit., pp. 78 and 80.



rifices for her homeland—comes from Polish literature.<sup>825</sup> Yet in *Farn mabl*, the Hurvitses, who are non-believers, do not stop treating the Sabbath as a special day, because this would mean giving up, at least partly, a better life. Because of that on Friday evening they light a candlestick and eat dinner together. Because of the Sabbath the teacher Hurvits feels like going to the mikveh and changing his shirt. The Sabbath atmosphere reigns at their home and they do not discuss the politics, as they do on other occasions, but the day is assigned for “Sabbath songs,” to use the phrase applied by Mrs Hurvits, that is for reading aloud Polish literature banned by the Russians. What they read is, among other works, *Noc listopadowa* (The November Night),<sup>826</sup> *Konrad Wallenrod*,<sup>827</sup> and *Dziady*.<sup>828</sup>

The books include revolutionary literature, often circulating illegally among the youth. In *Di muter*, on the first date, Henekh reads Dvoyre a poem about the spring and freedom, about casting off chains of social enslavement.<sup>829</sup> The title of one of the chapters of *Der veg tsu zikh*, *Der toyt in Venedig*, is borrowed from the novel *Der Tod in Venedig* by Thomas Mann (1875–1955).<sup>830</sup> Jaś tells Meri that, possibly under the influence of the book he has just read, it seemed to him that when in the evening they took a gondola back to their hotel, they were followed by Death and since then he has associated Venice with death. The young couple start thinking whether there is life after death and the chapter closes with the image of a funeral procession following their gondola.<sup>831</sup> What Asch borrows from Mann's novel is mostly the atmosphere and feelings rather than particular events.

Khaim Lederer, another protagonist, reads extensively in his youth; the books open up a different world in his mind, he realizes that there is more to life than securing a piece of bread and a roof over one's head. He reads everything he can lay his fingers upon: novels and books on popular science, first in Hebrew, which he learned in his childhood, and then in Russian, which he learns at

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825 See *ibid.*, p. 105. Most likely what Asch has in mind is Zosia, a female character from Adam Mickiewicz's epic poem *Pan Tadeusz* (Pan Tadeusz or the Last Foray in Lithuania), published in 1834.

826 *Noc listopadowa* is a drama by Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907), published in 1904, presenting issues related to the Polish national uprising against Russians in November 1830–September 1831.

827 *Konrad Wallenrod* is a poetic story by Adam Mickiewicz, published in 1828, one of the most famous patriotic poems of Polish Romanticism.

828 See Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, *op. cit.*, pp. 106–114.

829 See Sholem Ash, *Di muter*, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

830 *Der Tod in Venedig*, a short story written in 1912, considered one of the most important short epic narratives by Thomas Mann, presents the theme of the writer Gustav von Aschenbach's love for a Polish boy, who embodies an ideal of beauty for him.

831 See Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, *op. cit.*, pp. 156–162.

night by studying Russian grammar and paying students for private tutorials. He would find it easiest to read in Yiddish but in his youth there are not too many books that are written in this language.<sup>832</sup> When Khaim retires and does not know what to do with free time, he remembers his old dream: one day he hoped to have enough money and time to buy out the whole bookstore and to read all the books there. Now he expects to find a sense of his life in books. The old bookstore is gone but he finds another, bigger one, and with the help of the assistant chooses books in English, Russian, and Yiddish. Happy, he returns home and starts reading. However, after some time he realizes that reading does not bring him satisfaction—he either cannot understand some of the texts or cannot find answers to the questions that have been on his mind. The narrator relates Khaim's thoughts: he believes that in the past books were different and now authors write about everything but not about what really matters.<sup>833</sup> Here Asch shows the confusion of the old man, who for many years has not have time for books, which is naturally one of the reasons why he finds it difficult to understand the texts he obtained. Yet at the same time Asch criticizes the rapid development of the publishing business—there are more and more books in bookstores and it is more and more difficult to find those which matter.

Nevertheless, Asch's novels express appreciation for books. In the *Farm mabl* trilogy, the trust that Shloyme Hurvits first puts in religion is then invested in science. He thinks that man's ultimate asset is his intelligence and mind and that it is his responsibility to develop them. As a youth, he zealously studies the Talmud; as a mature person, he reads academic books with equal enthusiasm.<sup>834</sup> However, Hurvits' love for books is not blind; he is capable of an extremely generous gesture and sells the library in order to finance his friend Kenigshteyn's journey to the Land of Israel.<sup>835</sup> In the context of scholarly publications, a comic episode appears in *Bam opgrunt*. Mrs Bodenheimer, an elderly lady, ponders her son, her pride and joy, Heinrich, who is a scientist and essay writer: "They say he writes wise books. Although writing books is not a proper occupation for a Bodenheimer and she, an old mother, would prefer her son to work in a company, they say his writing is of great benefit to the home country."<sup>836</sup>

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832 See Sholem Ash, *Khaim Lederers tsurikkumen*, op. cit., p. 12.

833 See *ibid.*, pp. 29–31.

834 See Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, op. cit., pp. 9–10.

835 See *ibid.*, pp. 380–383.

836 Sholem Ash, *Bam opgrunt*, op. cit., pp. 90–91; *Men zogt, er shraybt kluge bikher. Es iz tsvar nisht ka basheftikung far a Bodenhaymer bikher tsu shraybn, es volt ir, der alter mame, mer nikhe geven, ven er get zikh op mit gesheft. Ober men zogt, az er brengt dem foterland groys nutsn mit zayn feder.*

Many specimens of Yiddish literature discuss patriotism of the Jews. One could mention here a novel by Yosef Opatoshu, another part of *In poylisher velder*, which was published in 1929 under the title *1863*. In Asch's novels the notion of "homeland" is not viewed by the Jews unambiguously. Definitely, they can perceive the Land of Israel<sup>837</sup> in this role, but all Jews also have their personal, local homelands, the neighborhood they miss. The identity of the inhabitants of shtetls is affected by the language they have to use in order to communicate with Polish landowners and peasants, and sometimes additionally by the experience of obligatory military service. The time of wars and partitions affords no simple answers, so Asch's early novels do not touch upon the issue of patriotism. Yet even there one can find some Polish elements: Borekh Lensker, an old acquaintance of Reb Shloyme Noged, cannot say how old he is, but he can still remember Napoleon and the Polish uprising during which he provided beef to the insurgents who hid in the woods.<sup>838</sup> The image of a Jew who brings insurgents food and clothing recurs in Asch's novels. Reb Shmuel, an innkeeper of Łęczyca, a character in *Der veg tsu zikh*, helps the Poles during the uprising of 1830–1831. His son joins the Poles during the uprising of 1863 and is killed in action. The portrait of the young man, in Polish uniform, decorates the walls in the houses of all the family members, and mothers tell their children stories about the soldier. From then onward, it becomes a tradition in the well-to-do family of the Blums to teach children about Polish culture, and their primary objective is to propagate the Polish language among Jewish children.<sup>839</sup>

In Asch's novels, affection and responsibility for the homeland are expressed in a variety of manners. The educated and assimilated Jews have a deep love for their native country. The uneducated groups cherish the place where they were born and where they are probably going to stay for their lifetime. Even the author's affection for the land can be observed in his depictions of the countryside. These are not fictitious images, but realistic and sentimental pictures of Polish and Russian rural landscape. No wonder the Polish government awarded Asch with a medal in recognition of the beauty of these descriptions.

Besides their affection for the homeland, Jewish protagonists of Asch's novels feel responsibility in the face of social problems. Therefore they become rev-

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מען זאגט, ער שרייבט קלוגע ביכער. עס איז צוואַר נישט קיין באַשעפטיגונג פאַר אַ באַדענהיימער ביכער צו שרייבן, עס וואָלט איר, דער אַלטער מאַמע, מער ניהא געווען, ווען ער גיט זיך אָפּ מיטן געשעפט. אַבער מען זאגט, אַז ער ברענגט דעם פאַטערלאַנד גרויס נוצן מיט זיין פעדער.

837 See Jolanta Żyndul, *Kim są Żydzi?*, in: Feliks Tych (ed.), *Pamięć. Historia Żydów Polskich przed, w czasie, i po Zagładzie*, Warszawa: Fundacja Shalom 2008, pp. 7–26, here pp. 18–24.

838 See Sholem Ash, *Reb Shloyme Noged*, op. cit., p. 187.

839 See Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, op. cit., pp. 76–77.

olutionaries who want to build a new world not only for their nations, but for all people, and to that end they undertake education efforts and support domestic industry. Jaś Blum in *Der veg tsu zikh* dreams about the reborn Poland, and in the Russian school suffers for his sentiment for the Polish language. As a secondary school student, he is the first in his form to protest against the lies of his history teacher. This short scene showing Polish youth opposing Russian indoctrination is reminiscent of *Szyfowe prace* (The Labors of Sisyphus), an 1897 novel by Stefan Żeromski (1864–1925, a Polish writer), and its representation of the secondary school in Klerykowo. In Asch's novel, Jaś Blum converts to Catholicism, because he thinks this denomination is a prerequisite of being Polish.<sup>840</sup> Another Polish patriot is Hurvits, a teacher in the *Farn mabl* trilogy. His greatest joy and an opportunity to forget all his sorrows is reading *Dziady* by Adam Mickiewicz, a Polish Romantic work prohibited by the Russian authorities. Risking loss of employment, he teaches Jewish children to speak Polish. His eldest son Jaś, when released from his Siberian prison after the revolution, immediately returns home, to Poland. The ending of the trilogy, however, includes a more sober assessment of the situation in the re-established state: Zakhari says it is better than it used to be, and Hurvits admits he is right, but adds his expectations were entirely different.<sup>841</sup>

In Asch's novels, the Poles and sometimes the Polish Jews are shown as revolutionaries, not because of their idealistic, but romantic tendencies: "The Polish nation has always been a romantic one, a nation of knights, and Polish blood is the blood of heroes. People need a revolution in every generation, they need victims. For the nation, victims are spiritual nourishment."<sup>842</sup>

840 See *ibid.*, pp. 102–104.

841 See Sholem Ash, *Moskve*, op. cit., p. 450.

842 Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, op. cit., p. 100; *Dos poylisher folk iz fun shtendik on geven a romantish folk—a riter-folk; dos poylish blut—a giber blut. Un a folk darf, az yeder dor zol hobn zayn revolutsye, zayne korbonos—korbonos dos iz di gaystike shpayz fun a natsyon.*

דאָס פּוילישע פּאָלק איז פון שטענדיג אָן געווען אַ ראָמאַנטיש פּאָלק - אַ ריטער-פּאָלק; דאָס פּויליש בלוט - אַ גיבר בלוט. און אַ פּאָלק דארף, אַז יעדער דור זאָל האָבען זיין רעוואָלוציע, זיינע קרבנות - קרבנות דאָס איז די גייסטיגע שפייז פון אַ נאַציאָן.

One must admit that although this assessment of the Poles is stereotypical, it is also a surprisingly accurate one; it proves Asch knew Poland well. In his novels, the patriotism of Polish Jews<sup>843</sup> is noted by several characters. Meri feels envious, realizing that her Polish friend has a homeland she loves and misses; moreover, Meri wonders what she can claim as her own and finds no answer.<sup>844</sup>

The patriotism of Russian Jews is a different matter. Both Gabriel Mirkin and Salomon Halpern in *Farn mabl* are avid Russian patriots, which is visible in their actions and in the famous speeches of the latter, especially during the revolution, when the rich try to form a joint-stock company in order to keep mines and other industrial sites in Russian hands and to be able to sell inexpensive stock to the general public. The prosperous Jews think that in hard times everyone should fulfill their tasks: soldiers ought to fight, while bankers and factory owners guard Russian business.<sup>845</sup> A clear contrast is offered in the representation of rich Russian merchants in an earlier novel, *Der veg tsu zikh*; they are not guided by any ideas, mind only their profit and look for good bargains. Fearing local pogroms, they arrive in Berlin, where they spend money in hotels, shops and restaurants, and purchase forests and factories from one another, not knowing whether they still exist. They also have a mercantile attitude towards the Land of Israel: they think about doing business there, wonder if it has enough resources, or if it is possible to make Arabs till the soil while they sell and buy. Misha, who is an idealist, is quite terrified by these conversations.<sup>846</sup>

In *Farn mabl*, the patriotism of Halpern, the counselor, is manifest also in the time of peace, in Saint Petersburg. He voices his conviction that Russia is not only an empire, a state and a nation—it is more than that. For Halpern, his homeland is a philosophical doctrine and a lifestyle. The speech shows his profound love for Russia and its people, with whom he clearly feels kinship; Halpern believes his native land is unique and the Russian soul is different, special, better and purer than other.<sup>847</sup> Also Gabriel Mirkin shares the opinion that the Russian soul is exceptional; he mentions that when expressing his commise-

843 Polish Jews participated in Polish national uprisings and they also joined the Polish Legions under Piłsudski's command. They showed their solidarity with Poles, contributing towards the defense effort preceding World War II. Later on, they were active in the underground resistance movement, both in ghettos and in guerilla troops. See Jolanta Żyndul, *Żydzi w Polsce przed 1939 r.*, op. cit., pp. 52–56; Barbara Engelking, Andrzej Żbikowski, *Żydzi w Polsce 1939–1945*, in: Feliks Tych (ed.), *Pamięć. Historia Żydów Polskich przed, w czasie, i po Zagładzie*, op. cit., pp. 77–154, here pp. 77–78, 80, and 143–149.

844 See Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, op. cit., p. 46.

845 See Sholem Ash, *Moskve*, op. cit., pp. 35–36.

846 See Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, op. cit. pp. 30–34.

847 See Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, op. cit., pp. 41–42.

ration with Senator Akimov, who, tempted by great profits, faked a signature when drunk. In this case, this aspect of the Russian soul is perhaps nothing to be proud of, but it is still your own soul, your darling one. The old Mirkin might seem to play the devil's advocate, yet Asch does not resort to irony in fashioning his character's statement that one should not judge Akimov too hastily as in Russia the same could happen to anybody; moreover, lawyers pay attention only to regulations, while the Russian understanding of the law is different since Russia has special views on ethics and morality: "what is considered a criminal offense by other nations is not a reference point for Russia. Here, we look at the man, not at the law."<sup>848</sup> In the context of the circumstances presented in the novel, the reader may get the impression that Asch favored this opinion too.

Asch's attitudes to Russia can be seen in his assessment of the largest group of its inhabitants, the Russians, who were role models for many Jews. It is in the resplendent parlors of Saint Petersburg where the Jews and the Russians meet, discussing mainly literature and art, but also the sense of life. On such an occasion, another conviction about the Russian soul is expressed: apparently it can never rest, it will always desire something and search for it. This restlessness dries up the souls of the intelligentsia, artists, and also peasants. According to the protagonists, thanks to these qualities of the Russian soul, the world can admire the greatest achievements of culture, literature and art, such as the works by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Leo Tolstoy, and Nikolai Gogol (1809–1852).<sup>849</sup>

In *Farn mabl*, an interesting figure is Halpern's daughter Nina, who has been engaged to Zakhari for some time. She listens to the analysis produced by a friend and literary critic, Boris Abramovitsh Levinshtayn, who juxtaposes the similarities and differences between the Russians and the Jews. Boris Abramovitsh says that the shared values are solidarity and peaceful cohabitation, because every nation with a painful history develops brotherly feelings. The greatest difference between a Jew and a Russian is that the latter reveals his or her sins to others, while a Jew focuses on the assets. Nina concurs with her friend and adds that this is why she does not like the Jews. It is not fair to be always good and right. Therefore she prefers to be a sinner, "like all goim."<sup>850</sup> It is not the only occasion in *Farn mabl* when Asch wants to scrutinize the Russian soul, of which he is clearly fond, just like his characters. Not only Nina, but also Gabriel Mirkin wants to be like the Russians, at least in some aspects; though re-

848 Ibid., p. 234; *vos ba andere felker heyst a farbrekhn, iz es nokh nisht ka mos far Russland. Mir hobn do an aynzeenish mitn mentshn, nisht mitn gezets.*

וואָס בײַ אַנדערע פעלקער הייסט אַ פאַרברעכן, איז עס נאָך נישט קײן מאָס פאַר רוסלאַנד. מיר האָבן דאָ אַן אײנזעעניש מיטן מענטשן, נישט מיטן געזעץ.

849 See Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., pp. 171–172.

850 Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, op. cit., p. 224; ווי אַלע גוים זענען *vi ale goyim zenen*.

liable and particular in business, he sometimes reveals his fiery Slavic temperament, indulges in reveling and drinking. Even Halpern gets carried away by his own impassioned speech on the essence of being Russian; he can hear not only the applause of the congregation, but also a remark by Duchess Sapieha, who claims that the Jews are truer Russians than native Russians.<sup>851</sup>

German Jews, more strongly assimilated than Central and East European Jews, are shown as ardent patriots who fight on the fronts of World War I, just like Max Bodenheimer in *Bam opgrunt*, and strive to serve their native country during the harsh postwar period. A character who serves his homeland without posing any questions is Heinrich Bodenheimer, who goes to the French-occupied Ruhr district<sup>852</sup> in order to organize resistance movement and oppose the enemy.<sup>853</sup> Whereas the Polish and Russian Jews in Asch's novels adopt some national characteristics of the communities among whom they live, the German Jews in his works remain distinct from the milieu, albeit some affinity is still to be observed. The divergence and discrepant hierarchies of values can be perceived, for instance, in the episode that takes place in the Ruhr region under French occupation. The crowds gather to watch parading soldiers and listen to the military band. Heinrich Bodenheimer is surprised by such conduct of the Germans in the occupied zone. The commenting narrator proposes this is "the most solemn and sacred ritual recognized by this nation: an army parade."<sup>854</sup> When the French flag enters the scene, the Germans stand still and take off their hats. Bodenheimer is instructed by a stranger to follow suit, and when he bristles at saluting the occupying troops, he is informed that a flag is a flag, no matter whose.<sup>855</sup>

In *Bam opgrunt* there appears a clear demarcation line between the Germans and the German Jews. The latter tend to assimilate, but the former always treat them as alien and inferior people, who might be good business partners but ought to be kept at a maximum distance. Two competitors of Yudkevitch, a smart stock trader, state:

"They are to blame for all this trouble. First they started the war between the Christians. Now they spur inflation to get rich on it." "And yet the Christians bring their

851 See *ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

852 The French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr in January 1923 to assure Germany should pay war reparations.

853 See Sholem Ash, *Bam opgrunt*, op. cit., pp. 173–177.

854 *Ibid.*, p. 187; *do hot zikh gehandelt vegn dem heylikstn un hekhstn gotes-dinst, vos dos folk anerkennt—in a militerishn parad.*

דאָ האָט זיך געהאַנדלט וועגן דעם הייליגסטן און העכסטן גאָטעס־דינסט, וואָס דאָס פֿאָלק אָנערקענט - אין אַ מיליטערישן פֿאַראַד.

855 See *ibid.*, pp. 185–188.

money to them.” “They are associated in the international qahal and this is how they know how to invest their money and make profit.”<sup>856</sup>

They openly despise Yudkevitsh, yet hoping to obtain important stock exchange information, they decide to ask him what happened and why he is out of his office. Yudkevitsh is fully aware of his competitors’ opinion about him, so he does not tell them the truth (i.e. that he wanted to have some rest). Instead, he says it is obvious that—as it is Saturday—the international qahal ordered the stock exchange should close down for the Sabbath and there are no new stock quotes.<sup>857</sup> One can see here bitter irony, typically employed by Asch’s Jewish characters in response to rumors about them. Also Heinrich Bodenheimer thinks it is the Jews who are to blame for any problems, not all Jews, but Polish Jews in particular; if it was not for them, the world would have forgotten about the Jews altogether. In his view, Polish Jews ought to become assimilated as soon as possible. Arn Yudkevitsh answers there is no need for East European Jews to assimilate as they are no foreigners in their countries, but they form part of societies there. Yudkevitsh’s simple reply focuses on the difference between the German Jews, who, though markedly better assimilated, are not approved of by the Germans, and the East European Jews, who, according to the novelist, are perceived not as aliens, but community members. At that point Asch idealizes the realities again.

In the United States, some immigrants form a strong emotional bond with their new country and its values. They are, among others, Nosn Davidovski in *Ist river*, and Charlie in *Onkel Mozes*. The latter is a young man who has interesting opinions about people that arrive in the United States. Charlie loves his new homeland, but he is glad not to have been born in New York. He thinks all immigrants are useful because each of them brings something from his or her old country to build America.<sup>858</sup> The United States is a country of freedom, which is underlined in many places in Asch’s novels, especially in the context of the willfulness of children who disobey their parents. In the novel *Di muter*, the theme of liberty appears in a comic scene, when Dvoyre and friends visit the

856 Ibid., p. 38; - *Fun zey kumen dos aroys ale tsores. Tsu ersht hobn zey milkhome gemakht tsvishn di kristin. Istst makhn zey di inflatsye, kedey zey zoln fun ir raykh vern. - Un dokh brengen di kristin tsu zey dos gelt. - [...] Az zey zenen fareymikt in an internatsyonaln “kool,” veysn zey durkh dem, vi azoy zeyer gelt optsuleygn un zikh tsu baraykhern.*

- פון זיי קומען דאָס אַרויס אַלע צרות. צומערשט האָבן זיי מלחמה געמאַכט צווישן די קריסטן. איצט מאַכן זיי די אינפלאַציע, פּדי זיי זאָלן פּון איר רייך ווערן. - און דאָך ברענגען די קריסטן צו זיי דאָס געלט. - [...] אַז זיי זענען פאַראייניגט אין אַן אינטערנאַציאָנאַלן „קאָהאַל“, ווייסן זיי דורך דעם, ווי אַזוי זייער געלט אַפּצולייגן און זיך צו באַרײכערן.

857 See *ibid.*, pp. 38–39.

858 See Sholem Ash, *Onkel Mozes*, op. cit., p. 131.



Moskovitsh family. The idea of freedom proves seductive to the parents who bring up their children without any restraints and give them unusual names. The sons are called Karl Marx and Lassalle,<sup>859</sup> the daughter, Frayhayt (which in Yiddish means “freedom”). Mr Moskovitsh informs his guests he would like to change his sons’ names, from political to literary ones: Karl Marx is going to be renamed Jack London or Walt Whitman, while Lassalle will be given a friend’s name, which is not specified. He decides to leave the girl’s name unaltered.<sup>860</sup> Although many immigrants are overwhelmed by whatever the new homeland has to offer, some of them are not satisfied with the obtained sense of safety and freedom. The children expect their parents to provide more than food and a roof over their heads; they want to be given values, traditions, religion, anything that is supportive. In *Khaim Lederers tsurikkumen*, Morris is reproachful towards Khaim Lederer, because his sister and he were not taught anything at home:

We had to part from our family early, to go to strangers’ houses and rooms so as to see how other families live, how the children gather around their parents on the Sabbath day or holiday. We never heard our father recite the kiddush, we had no Passover seder, we did not go to the house of prayer.<sup>861</sup>

Morris’s accusations against his father reflect the tragedy of Jewish youth that came from prosperous, partly assimilated families. The parents were able to support their children materially, but forgot about spiritual gains; they did not give their offspring anything that might help them find their own way of living, which had to be identified in the changing world, sometimes far from home, in a new country. Asch discusses these problems also in *Meri* and *Der veg tsu zikh*, which are set chiefly in Russia.

The start of a new life in Erets Yisroel is a theme of many literary works in Yiddish which were written by authors who visited Palestine or decided to stay, temporarily or permanently, in the land of their ancestors. One of them was Kadye Molodovskii, who moved to Israel in 1948, and four years later returned

859 Ferdinand Lassalle (1825–1864) was a German Socialist of Jewish extraction. As a young man, he was a friend of Karl Marx (1818–1883).

860 See Sholem Ash, *Di muter*, op. cit., pp. 208–209 and 211.

861 Sholem Ash, *Khaim Lederers tsurikkumen*, op. cit., p. 100; *Mir hobn gemuzt fri avek fun der heym, in fremde heyzer, in fremde shtubn, tsuzen vi andere familYES lebn, vi kinder kumen zikh tsuzamen tsu zeyere eltern ba a shabes-fest, oder ba a yontev-fest. Afile ka kidush hobn mir nisht gehert bam tatn, peysekh ka seder nisht gehat, in ka tempel nisht geven.*

מיר האָבען געמוזט פרי אַוועק פון דער היים, אין פּרעמדע הייזער, אין פּרעמדע שטובען, צוזעהן ווי אַנדערע פאַמיליעס לעבען, ווי קינדער קומען זיך צוזאַמען צו זייערע עלטערן ביי אַ שבת־פעסט, אָדער ביי אַ יום־טוב־פעסט. אפילו קיין קידוש האָבען מיר נישט געהערט ביים טאַטען, פסח קיין סדר נישט געהאַט, אין קיין טעמפלעל נישט געווען.

to America. In her novel *ביים טויער: ראָמאַן* (*Bam toyer: roman*, 1967), she shows the country and its inhabitants from the point of view of a woman, or rather an immigrant girl from Eastern Europe. Israel is a significant motif in the poems by Avrom Sutskever, who arrived in Palestine in 1947.

As I said earlier, Asch's attitude to the return to the Land of Israel, as manifest in his novels, is at first ambivalent. In *Der veg tsu zikh*, following pogroms in Russia, Palestine becomes the destination of many young people who have abandoned their studies and their rich parents, are not used to living in local climate, and they hold spades, not pens, in their hands for the first time in their lives. They have been guided by idealism and the desire to revive the Jewish way of living in the land of the forefathers. Some of them cannot find jobs as older settlers prefer employing cheaper labor force, the Arabs. This is why several young immigrants go back to Europe. Misha in *Der veg tsu zikh* initially decides to stay, but he sees this is not a country of his dreams. Perhaps the majority of Jewish settlers were brought here by their ideals and sentiment, of which very little has been left. Now people care only about better incomes. Neither in Jerusalem, among the old Jews, can Misha find the longing for, the faith in and the expectation of the coming of the Messiah as he knew them in Europe. The Jerusalem matters of utmost importance turn out to be common everyday trifles and worry about the daily earnings. The narrator reports that the people that most vividly resemble the biblical Jews, who used to live in this land, are actually present-day Arab inhabitants.<sup>862</sup>

Nevertheless, in *Der veg tsu zikh*, Asch puts stress on the events that take place in Palestine and are important for the formation of one's identity in the new, not exclusively Israeli, world. Throughout the years of living in the European Diaspora, the Jews were murdered, fell victim to pogroms and callousness of their neighbors. Moyshe, Misha's friend, dies in an Israeli farming settlement, but his death has a different dimension. He gets killed with his weapon in his hand, defending Jewish fields against the Arabs. There, a Jew is no longer a helpless victim, but bravely faces the enemy. The skirmish with the Arabs unites the inhabitants of the kibbutz; they feel proud fighting shoulder to shoulder and defending their property. Their experience of such incidents is very deep, which is conspicuous in the behavior of Blumental, the agronomist. During the fight, he forgets his Hebrew and gives orders in his mother tongue, that is German.<sup>863</sup> On the one hand this is a comic scene, but on the other, it makes it possible for Asch to demonstrate the significance of the situation. The description of the de-

862 See Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, op. cit., pp. 119–126. The young people who came from Russia to Palestine in 1904–1906 were the second immigration wave, the second *aliyah*. They were mainly optimistic idealists, not accustomed to hard work.

863 See Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, op. cit., pp. 132–137.

fense of the kibbutz against the Arabs contrasts with the previous helplessness of Misha and other Jews who had to watch a pogrom in a poor district of their Russian shtetl; they could not interfere as the assailants and the victims were cordoned off by the Cossacks.<sup>864</sup> The events in Misha's kibbutz are a reflection of the actual fate of Jewish settlers. Those who got killed opposing the Arabs include a Hebrew writer Yosef Khaim Brenner,<sup>865</sup> whose death is commemorated in Arn Tseytlin's play ברענער (*Brener*, 1929). The Jewish military effort was also commented on by Asch in 1929 in *Nowy Dziennik*.<sup>866</sup>

Asch looked for opportunities to show the courage of the Jews in combat not only in distant places outside Europe, but also in the remote history of his nation, i.e. in locations that are topographically, but not temporally, close. In *Kidush hashem*, during Khmelnytsky's rebellion, the Jews and the Poles defend their towns against the Cossacks together. In Tulczyn their valor wins the admiration of the aggressors.<sup>867</sup>

In Asch's novels one can observe the patriotism of the Jews, their affection for their homeland and eagerness to shape it. Sometimes these feelings and desires are stifled by basic sustenance problems, the need to earn one's living and overcome the omnipresent poverty. But even when no stronger bonds with the entire country can be seen, singular scenes manifest sentiment for the Polish language, landscape and cultural achievements.

Asch's books reflect his own experience, biography, and cultural fascinations. In the represented world, the characters visit museums and art galleries, attend concerts, and go to the theater, where they come in contact with works of culture that originated in the real world in Asch's lifetime. Therefore the readers, having become acquainted with his books, achieved more knowledge about their environment, and the information about famous paintings or sculptures, which function in the novels as figures of memory, supplements their images remembered by the readers thanks to their direct experience. As in the case of books, it is important that Asch does not only mention these works of art exist, but also shows the protagonists' response and conduct when they face them, especially that sometimes only the name of the painter and a general description of the painting is provided, which makes it impossible to identify the art object.

The Hermitage Museum, a renowned art gallery which was established in the latter half of the 18th century under the auspices of Empress Catherine in

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864 See Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., pp. 235–236.

865 יוסף חיים ברנר Yosef Khaim Brenner (1881–1921) was one of the pioneers of modern-day Hebrew literature. He emigrated to the Land of Israel in 1909. Brenner was killed by the Arabs in a riot in Jaffa.

866 See Szolem Asz, *Szalom Asz o wypadkach palestyńskich*, op. cit.

867 See Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit., p. 159.

Saint Petersburg, is presented in *Meri* in negative light. According to the narrator, the collected works of art were stolen and brought there chiefly from Russian-occupied Poland: “the cultural heritage of many centuries was destroyed when they were accumulated at random and unsystematically in one place where no one can admire them; neither can one find any photographs.”<sup>868</sup>

Asch collected paintings and his descriptions of people or nature make the reader think that he not only read some reports, but also saw the described scenes. Images created by Asch are more than “paintings in words” or frequently praised landscapes. The novelist had a special skill to refer to actual objects of art while depicting his characters. For instance, when describing *Meri*, he compares her to the representation of St Anne by Leonardo and to Cranach’s portraits of women.<sup>869</sup> Paintings are admired by the protagonists in museums and are collected by well-off families. Moreover, Asch discusses fictitious paintings produced by his characters. In *Gots gefangene*, Emilye and Frank visit a Parisian art gallery. According to the narrator, paintings in small galleries are

like chamber music to which you listen in a group of few. Art can be admired only in private. Paintings, which are dead in museums, like tombstones in cemeteries of art, are resurrected when they are appreciated in a moment of solitude, hanging on the wall of a private house or a small gallery.<sup>870</sup>

The comment reveals the attitudes of the author, who was fascinated with art and loved to be surrounded by beautiful furniture and paintings. In the gallery, Emilye and Frank take a long time to marvel at landscapes by Cezanne and Pissarro, and they realize they are witnessing a miracle:

[The painter] is no God who creates worlds. He is a man who sees the world; a man who was created in order to talk about God’s creation: “I don’t want to die, I’m go-

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868 Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., p. 201; *tseshtert a kultur fun hunderter yorn un tsuzamengeshlept zey af eyn ort, on tam un on sistem, ka mentsh zet zey nisht, ka rekhte fotografyze iz dokh s’ mol nishto fun zey*

*צושטערט א קולטור פון הונדערטער יאהרען און צוזאמענגעשלעפט זיי אויף איין ארט, אָדן טעם און אדן סיסטעם, קיין מענטש זעהט זיי נישט, קיין רעכטע פאָטאָגראַפיע און דאָך ס’ מאָל נישטאָ פון זיי.*

869 See Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, op. cit., pp. 155–156.

870 Sholem Ash, *Gots gefangene*, op. cit., pp. 280–281; *vi kamer-muzik in intime krayzn. Kunst kon men nor genisn in intimkeyt. Bilder, vos zenen toyt un zenen nor a matseyve af dem besoylem fun kunst in di muzeums, shteyen uf tsum lebn, ven men genist zey aleyv af der vant fun a privat-hoyz, oder fun a kleyner galerye..*

*ווי קאָמער-מוזיק אין אינטימע קרייזן. קונסט קאָן מען נאָר געניסן אין אינטימקייט. בילדער, וואָס זענען טויט און זענען נאָר אַ מצבה אויף דעם בית-עולם פון קונסט אין די מוזעאומס, שטייען אויף צום לעבן, ווען מען געניסט זיי אַליין אויף דער וואַנט פון אַ פריוואַט-הויז, אָדער פון אַ קליינער גאַלעריע.*

ing to speak up about God's work. I'm going to talk as well as I can, using the modest means that were given to me by You, oh God. The Lord be praised for that!"<sup>871</sup>

Again, the narrator's comments reveal Asch's beliefs; as a Jewish writer, he was aware of his mission. In the novel *Grosman un zun*, paintings are not only admired in museums, but also collected at home by Klara Grosman, who suddenly discovers her passion for such works, purchased with her husband's money. The walls of her house are soon decorated with pictures by Matisse, Monet, Degas, and Picasso. When rebuked by her spouse, Klara explains that paintings are excellent investments.<sup>872</sup>

Besides painting, Asch's novels are preoccupied with sculpture and, above all, music. In Florence, Jaś and Meri (*Der veg tsu zikh*) take pleasure in the works by Michelangelo, especially *David*,<sup>873</sup> which originated in 1501–1504, while Hans and Lotte (*Bam opgrunt*) love music and often spend the last of their money for standing room in the concert hall. The narrator remarks every concert by Beethoven or Wagner is like Holy Mass to them—it is not to be missed. Lotte's God is Wagner, Hans', Beethoven, and Mahler is worshiped by both of them.<sup>874</sup> On the other hand, in Asch's novels the theater is a place where the protagonists seek amusement, whether in New York or Warsaw. Motke Ganev is kind to the girls that work for him, takes them for walks in the Saski Public Garden or for plays in the Jewish theater, where he is recognized and respected as he pays for the tickets with rubles. His favorite plays are those that show praying boys and singing children.<sup>875</sup> Apart from that, Asch's novels do not refer to any specific plays and theater is presented mostly as entertainment. Important factors are feelings and emotions, as exemplified by Motke's preferences.

Other figures of memory are ideas that are supported by the protagonists. Although Asch was of the opinion that neither Zionism,<sup>876</sup> nor Bolshevism are

871 Ibid., p. 283; *Er iz nisht ka got, vos bashaft veltn. Er iz a mentsh, vos zet di velt; a mentsh, vos iz bashafn, kedey tsu dertseyln vegn gots verk: "Ikh vel nisht shtarbn, ikh vel dertseyln vegn gots verk. Un dertseyln vel ich es, azoy vi ikh kon: mit di orime mitlen, vos du, Got host mir gegeben. Zay gelaybt derfar!"*

ער איז נישט קיין גאט, וואָס באַשאַפֿט וועלטן. ער איז אַ מענטש, וואָס זעט די וועלט; אַ מענטש, וואָס איז באַשאַפֿן, כדי צו דערציילן וועגן גאָטס ווערק; „איך וועל נישט שטאַרבן, איך וועל דערציילן וועגן גאָטס ווערק. און דערציילן וועל איך עס, אזוי ווי איך קאָן: מיט די אַריבע מיטלען, וואָס דו, גאָט האָסט מיר געגעבן. זיי געלויבט דערפאַר!"

872 See Sholem Ash, *Grosman un zun*, op. cit., p. 87.

873 See Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, op. cit., p. 165.

874 See Sholem Ash, *Bam opgrunt*, op. cit., p. 462.

875 See Sholem Ash, *Motke Ganev*, op. cit., p. 266.

876 In Palestinian lands, which from 1918 were part of the Ottoman Empire, more and more Jewish settlers appeared in the early 20th century as a consequence of the Zionist movement. In 1917, following the Balfour Declaration, Great Britain expressed approval for

appropriate alternatives to anti-Semitism, he represents the advocates of either ideology in positive light, discussing related problems. In his novels, Zionists are often detached dreamers who think that it is enough to reach the Land of Israel, where everything will take care of itself. Some of them leave spontaneously, following a quick decision, others prefer to be prepared, but both groups encounter many obstacles, having arrived at their destination.

Zakhari comes to Warsaw, a town inhabited by Europe's largest Jewish population at that time. *En route*, he visits Vilnius, where he becomes fascinated with the recently discovered Hebrew prayers and Zionist ideology. Later on he tells his Varsovian friends he does not understand why it is that not all Jews want to leave for Palestine at once.<sup>877</sup> Hurvits' friend and Zionist, Zalmen Kenigshtayn, makes a decision to emigrate. He thinks the Land of Israel is not for dreamers, but workers and builders. Why should one want to live here, in exile, what can one expect to achieve in life in this place? "To go to Erets Yisroel, to cultivate the land, to sow the fields, to hold a spade, to live in the open air. With nature, Mother Earth, as our parents used to live."<sup>878</sup>

Asch's novels discuss also the difficulties that are encountered by the Jews who come to Palestine. Apart from the change of climate, the land that is hard to till, and the disagreements with the local Arabs, there are many other problems stemming from various motivations and convictions of the immigrants, who are not sure at all how they should get organized in their new home. *Der veg tsu zikh* describes a kibbutz manager, an assimilated German Jew, Blumental. When in Europe, he is involved in Palestinian settlement efforts: purposefully, he graduates in agriculture, and also learns Hebrew. His ideal is a new Jew, a farmer, and new peasant culture, based on the Hebrew language. Blumental does not allow young people to talk in Yiddish, expecting them to speak Hebrew at all times. Moreover, he tries to transplant German customs to the Israeli environment: he shows the inhabitants of the kibbutz German folk dances, and composes new songs. The result is an artificial lifestyle that cannot replace family traditions, so the new arrivals in the kibbutz feel strange and alienated.<sup>879</sup>

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the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Finally it was only in 1947 when the United Nations adopted the resolution to form two separate states in the region, the Arab and the Jewish one, which made it possible to proclaim the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.

877 See Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, op. cit., pp. 73–76.

878 Ibid., p. 378; *Kin Erets-Yisroel geyn. Erd baarbeyn, felder farzeyen, dem shufl in di hant nemen, unter freyen himl lebn. Mit der natur, mit der mamen erd, vi undzere eltern hobn geton.*

קיין ארץ-ישראל גיין. ערד באארבעטן, פעלדער פארזייען. דעם שופל אין האנט נעמען, אונטער פרייען הימל לעבן. מיט דער נאטור, מיט דער מאמען ערד, ווי אונדזערע עלטערן האבן געטון.

879 See Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, op. cit., pp. 121–122 and 128–131.

Asch presents his positive views concerning the Jewish–Polish relations in the second volume of the *Farn mabl* trilogy, where he writes about the cooperation of Polish and Jewish Socialists, organizing their common demonstration on the First of May, when they are going to sing songs in various languages, such as *Czerwony sztandar* (The Red Flag), the song of the Polish proletariat, and Bund's anthem *Di shvue*.<sup>880</sup> Later, Zakhari works together with Polish Socialists and a Polish lawyer in order to help Hurvits' son escape from Siberia. Zakhari is assisted by his former schoolmates, Russians.<sup>881</sup> Significantly, the reader is usually informed whether the character is Jewish or not, whereas in the Socialist circles this question is never posed. In *Peterburg* the narrator relates a discussion with a young revolutionary who seeks financial support of Halpern's rich friends. The youth openly declares:

We see no difference between what is Jewish or not. Capital has no nationality, it is international. [...] For our purposes, we want to use the dissatisfaction with the activities of the present authorities that is felt among this populace. [...] Then, when we reach our goal, we shall see what we can do about you.<sup>882</sup>

Nonetheless, the prosperous Jewish merchants decide to help him. They do that for the sake of their nation, believing they can help Russia in this manner too. They have their own opinions about the revolution and think that a different way should be sought in order to achieve its ambitious goals as the one that was chosen by young revolutionaries may prove disastrous: "This country is still in a state of chaos. Nothing is stable, everything is tottering. [...] How is revolution possible under such circumstances? When you take away just one stone, the building is going to collapse."<sup>883</sup>

880 See Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, op. cit., p. 391. The General Jewish Labor Bund of Lithuania, Poland and Russia was a Jewish social democratic party which was established in 1897 in Vilnius. It enjoyed great popularity, especially in Poland between the First and Second World War. *די שבוועה* (*Di shvue*), Bund's anthem, was composed in 1902 by S. Ansky.

881 See Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, op. cit., p. 426.

882 Sholem Ash, *Peterburg*, op. cit., p. 51; *Mir veyasn nisht ka khilek tsvishn yidishn un nisht yidishn. Kapital balant nisht tsu ka natsyonalitet un iz internatsyonal. [...] mir viln oysnutsn di umtsufridnheyit, vos hersht tsvishn dem teyl bafelkerung tsu der ekzistirender makht, far undzere tsvekn. [...] un dernokh, ven mir veln dergreykh undzer tsil, veln mir zen, vos mir konen tun mit aykh.*

מיר ווייסן נישט קיין חילוק צווישן יידישן און נישט-יידישן. קאפיטאל באלאנגט נישט צו קיין נאציאנאליטעט און איז אינטערנאציאנאל. [...] מיר ווילן אויסנוצן די אומצופרידנהייט, וואס הערשט צווישן דעם טייל באפעלקערונג צו דער עקזיסטירנדער מאכט, פאר אונדזערע צוועקן. [...] און דערנאך, ווען מיר וועלן דערגרייכן אונדזער ציל, וועלן מיר זען, וואס מיר קאנען טון מיט אידן.

883 *Ibid.*, p. 122; *Undzer land iz nokh in a tsushtand fun khaos. Ba undz iz nokh ka zakh nisht fest ayngezetst, alts iz nokh vaklendik. [...] Vi azoy kon men do makhn a revo-*

Using these words, the old Mirkin wants to persuade his son that revolution in Russia is nonsensical. In another conversation, he enumerates the weak points of the plan that was put forward by the Socialists: “They want to adapt their doctrines, just as you modify a machine, to suit no longer Germans or Englishmen, but Russians. But a German shirt won’t fit a Russian man.”<sup>884</sup> Anyway, the old potentate believes some day Russia will see equality and social justice. He thinks that his home country will develop its own ideas and adjust them to the special local conditions. In Asch’s novels, the characters that are engaged in revolutionary movements are mainly Jewish youth, and their activities tend to find approval of the family members. In *Der veg tsu zikh*, Gabriela Blum, an eighteen-year-old student, is exiled to Siberia for stirring up revolt among factory workers and becomes a saintly figure and a role model for her relatives.<sup>885</sup>

In *Varshe*, Asch presents Zakhari as developing a better and deeper understanding of social problems. Having lived for many years in rich Saint Petersburg, Mirkin, upon his arrival in Warsaw, realizes that it is necessary to introduce changes and to fight for equal social rights for the Jewish people. He sees the poverty of the district where he is staying as well as the determination of its inhabitants to find meaning in their lives and, first and foremost, to retain their human dignity against all odds. Zakhari learns about the hardships of Jewish laborers, works in the same school as Hurvits and helps his wife to cook free meals for starving paupers. He establishes contact with the Socialists and goes to Łódź, where—in vain—he attempts to persuade Jewish factory owners they should employ Jewish workers. In Łódź, Zakhari becomes familiar with the problems of destitute, hardworking Jewish weavers: their small, family-owned workshops fall into ruin, unable to compete with the progressing industry. The misery of Jewish craftsmen and workers living in cities, as described in *Farn mabl*, is a reflection of the actual fate of those people in partitioned Poland.<sup>886</sup> Neither the old Mirkin in *Peterburg*, nor his son in *Varshe* are fully convinced that the path followed by the revolutionaries to reach social justice is the right one. Mirkin’s son asks comrade Anatol, later a Menshevik leader, for an expla-

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*lutsye? Nemt aroys eyn shteyn, tsefalt zikh der gantser binyen.*

אינדזער לאנד איז נאך אין א צושטאנד פון כאָס. ביי אונדז איז נאך קיין זאך נישט פעסט איינגעזעט, אלץ איז נאך וואַקלענדיג. [...] ווי אזוי קאָן מען דאָ מאַכן אַ רעוואָלוציע? נעמט אַרויס אין שטיין, צעפאַלט זיך דער גאַנצער בנין.

884 Ibid., p. 235; *zey viln ot zeyere doktrines, vi a mashinke tsupasn, fun daytshn, fun englishn afn rusishn mentshn. Dos daytshe hemdl past ober nisht farn rusishn mentshn.*

זיי ווילן אָט זייערע דאָקטרינעס, ווי אַ מאַשינקע צופאַסן, פון דייטשן, פון ענגלישן אייפן רוסישן מענטשן. דאָס דייטשע העמדל פאַסט אָבער נישט פאַרן רוסישן מענטשן.

885 See Sholem Ash, *Der veg tsu zikh*, op. cit., pp. 78–79.

886 See Piotr Wróbel, *Przed odzyskaniem niepodległości*, op. cit., pp. 36–39, 71–72, and 91–95.



nation, but even the latter cannot hide his doubts about the goals of social revolution. Comrade Anatol says one does not even need a purpose to take part in the revolution. According to him, “[t]he road to social revolution is neither paved nor tree-lined so that we could follow it in our philosophical stroll. This road is a pothole where we fall, whether we want it or not, under the pressure of time and events.”<sup>887</sup>

Anatol claims this step is not taken of one's own accord; the only thing one can do is to spur the events a little so as to speed up the process. In this way one fulfills one's obligation to the future generations, as the generations of the past did. Yet, comrade Anatol does not know if there is any purpose in it.<sup>888</sup>

Immediately after the revolution, the dreams of the Jews come true: they become rightful citizens of Soviet Russia. In *Bam opgrunt*, Arn Yudkevitch's brother, Misha, goes with the Soviet delegation to Berlin. Talking to Heinrich Bodenheimer, he states there are no followers of Judaism in Russia as all of them were converted. The Christians did the same, their godfather was Lenin, and so the state does not know any religious dissent as everybody is a Bolshevik.<sup>889</sup>

The most important figure of memory related to the world of ideas and culture is, first and foremost, the patriotism of the Polish and Russian Jewry. Asch presents Polish Jews as fascinated with the language and literature of Poland and taking part in military effort to win back its independence. Russian Jews are described as preoccupied with the Russian soul and the work for the benefit of their home country. Another dimension of patriotism concerns the Land of Israel, their sentimental homeland, reached only by few. In Asch's writings, an ambivalent point is the patriotism of the German Jews. Their actions speak about their profound love for their country, but at the same time it seems the affection is reserved for the land and not its inhabitants. Moreover, the German Jews are constantly aware of being different and separate. Contrariwise, the American Jews wholeheartedly embrace the values of their new home, but they feel they have European roots, so the identification is not complete.

887 Sholem Ash, *Varshe*, op. cit., pp. 287–288; *Der gang tsu der sotsyaler revolutsy iz nisht ka oysgeflasterter mit shteyner, bazetst mit beymer, kedey mir zoln durkh em undzer filozofishn shpatsir makhn. Der veg tsu der sotsyaler revolutsy iz a lokh durkh velkhn mir gishn zikh ale arayn, tsi mir viln, tsi mir viln nisht, geyogt durkh dem impet fun der tsayt, fun di gesheeshn.*

דער גאנג צו דער סאָציאַלער רעוואָלוציע איז נישט קיין אויסגעפלאַסטערטער מיט שטיינער, באַזעצט מיט ביימער, כדי מיר זאָלן דורך אים אונדזער פּילאָזאָפּישן שפּאַציר מאַכן. דער וועג צו דער סאָציאַלער רעוואָלוציע איז אַ לאַך דורך וועלכן מיר גיין און אַלע אַרײַן, צי מיר ווילן, צי מיר ווילן נישט, געאַגט דורך דעם אימפעט פון דער צײַט, פון די געשעענישן.

888 See *ibid.*

889 See Sholem Ash, *Bam opgrunt*, op. cit., p. 634.

Culture-related figures of memory include also the language, connected with the sense of national identity, and international cultural heritage, e.g. paintings by French and Jewish artists, German music, Italian Renaissance sculpture, literature, mainly Polish, Russian and American. Unexpectedly, specimens of French literature are not mentioned. Significant elements of memory transfer in Asch's novels are social and political ideas and convictions that are supported by his protagonists: predominantly Zionism, Socialism and Bolshevism.

### 4.3.8 The biblical world and historical events

The collective memory of a nation embraces also the memory of those historical events that affected its fate. As this book deals with the Jewish people, part of their history is obviously biblical history, which Asch supplements in his novels with the New Testament events. His Bible-related, historical and realist novels, quite understandably, contain many figures of memory that evoke the biblical or real world, and the writer tends to be a close follower of biblical or historical accounts, therefore only some of the images are going to be described in the following so as not to reiterate the information that is comprised in well-known sources, as drawn upon by Asch. Moreover, it was necessary to select those events that are represented by Asch in a particularly vivid way and at the same time are permanently inscribed in the collective memory, whether of the Jews or humankind, as it functions in the real world.

Many novels by Asch, especially the one treating of Moses, use the Old Testament as a rich source of motifs. In *Moyshé*, the writer relies on the biblical narrative rather heavily and all the significant scenes are recounted almost *verbatim*, e.g. Moses witnessing the burning bush in the wilderness and accepting his mission,<sup>890</sup> the miraculous Red Sea crossing,<sup>891</sup> the reception of the Ten Commandments,<sup>892</sup> the worship of the golden calf,<sup>893</sup> the arrival in the Land of Israel after many years, and the death of Moses.<sup>894</sup>

Asch, in accordance with his philosophy and convictions, attempts to complement the Jewish treasury of Old Testament figures of memory with those that come from the New Testament; also, he considerably expands some scenes as well as provides the protagonists' or the narrator's comments upon them. The Annunciation scene, as described in *Mary*, follows closely the New Testament account. Miriam sees an angel who announces she is blessed with God's grace

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890 See Sholem Ash, *Moyshé*, op. cit., pp. 106–111.

891 See *ibid.*, p. 172.

892 See *ibid.*, pp. 228–229.

893 See *ibid.*, pp. 259–262.

894 See *ibid.*, pp. 485–491.

and will give birth to a son who will be named Yeshua.<sup>895</sup> The life of Jesus was known to Asch thanks to accessible historical works, literary works, and Gospel narratives. The Gospel according to St Matthew originated in about 80 AD, to St Mark, in about 70 AD, to St Luke, in 70–80 AD, and to St John, towards the end of the 1st century AD. When the four Gospels were composed, there was no need to set the described events against the backdrop of historical, social and geographical circumstances as they were familiar to the then audiences. Both in *Mary* and *Der man fun Natseres*, Asch fills in relevant gaps in the knowledge of his contemporary readers, while presenting his own vision of what had transpired. In *Der man fun Natseres*, the Sadducees, who hold the power, turn against Jesus, who is backed by the Pharisees and the poor. Following the traditional Jewish interpretation, the Romans are shown as the real rulers of Judea, and in the novel it is they who are blamed for the death of Christ. Asch depicts also pagans, whose customs, such as slave labor of children or human sacrifice,<sup>896</sup> strongly contrast with Jewish customs. In this way the past realities are not polarized between the Jews and the followers of Jesus, and the biography of the latter can be outlined less schematically. Nevertheless, such additions apart, the majority of important events that are described in the novel are direct references to the biblical text, such as the chapter on Salome's dance and the beheading of John the Baptist,<sup>897</sup> or the description of the Sermon on the Mount, as perceived by Cornelius, though in the latter case the narrator cites the comments of the congregation and observes how impressed they were by the words of Christ.<sup>898</sup> Equally interesting is the writer's characterization of the figures that are derived from the Gospel. Judas is a disciple of Christ and also a Jewish patriot; he hopes that the coming of the Messiah will bring the Roman rule over his native country and the ensuing oppression to an end. Judas' betrayal is to speed up the process as he is sure the Messiah will not suffer to be arrested, let alone to be crucified: He should reveal His divine power.<sup>899</sup> While in *Der man fun Na-tseres*, the Resurrection is a hazy, unclear dream,<sup>900</sup> in *Mary* it is a fact. The testimony of Mary Magdalene is credited only by the women, but at the end of the novel the Apostles meet Christ Himself.<sup>901</sup>

The early days of Christianity are described in the book about St Paul. On the road to Damascus, Saul is converted. His conscience has been troubling him

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895 See Sholem Asch, *Mary*, op. cit., pp. 38–39.

896 See Sholem Ash, *Der man fun Natseres*, op. cit., Vol. 1, pp. 382–405.

897 See *ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 176–185.

898 See *ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 211–222.

899 See *ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 208–209 and 249–252.

900 See *ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 363–364.

901 See Sholem Asch, *Mary*, op. cit., p. 436.

for some time: Saul has wondered whether his chosen path is the one willed by God. Suddenly the figure of Christ appears in front of him. Jesus asks: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”<sup>902</sup> *The Apostle* gives a detailed account of the martyrdom of Christians in Rome. They are tortured, devoured by wild beasts in amphitheaters, which is witnessed by blood-thirsty crowds, or burned alive, as ordered by Nero. The followers of Christ do not defend themselves, they humbly accept their imminent death, praying and singing psalms.<sup>903</sup> These images resemble other scenes presented in Asch’s novels when it is the Jews who fall victim to a degenerate ruler or murderous mob. Thus Asch’s writings present unique brotherhood, the brotherhood of death.

Chronologically, the next representation of the history of the dispersed Jewish nation concerns the 15th and 16th centuries and the Marranos, shown by Asch also in one of his plays. Marranos are discussed in *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen*. Although they were baptized, many of them had to leave the Iberian Peninsula and look for shelter in Italy. There, some of them were allowed to reconvert to their former religion. Thanks to their network of trade contacts, they worked towards the prosperity of their new home towns. In the 16th century, under Pope Paul IV, there occurred a dramatic change in attitudes towards the Marranos: many of them were burned at the stake at the order of the Inquisition.<sup>904</sup>

The tragedies that result in deaths of many thousand Jews begin during Khmelnytsky’s rebellion, as described in the novel *Kidush hashem*. In the spring of 1648, at Żółte Wody, the first battle with the insurgents is fought. At that moment, the Jews are unconcerned yet. Quite the contrary, they see a connection between the uprising and the coming of the Messiah, which is expected in 1648; moreover, they think Khmelnytsky’s fate is going to be the same as Pavluk’s a decade earlier.<sup>905</sup> However, when their prayers in the synagogue are disrupted by a messenger who brings the news of the defeat of the Poles at Korsuń,<sup>906</sup> the inhabitants of Złoczów get frightened.<sup>907</sup> They go to Niemirów to defend it with the Poles. The town falls when the gates are opened to the Cossack troops: they

902 See Sholem Asch, *The Apostle*, op. cit., pp. 172–180. The question posed by Christ is quoted literally after the Acts of the Apostles (9,4).

903 See Sholem Asch, *The Apostle*, op. cit., pp. 747–768.

904 See Sholem Ash, *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen*, op. cit., pp. 21–23.

905 See Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit. pp. 89–90. Pavel Pavluk was the leader of the Ukrainian uprising against the Poles in 1637. He was executed in Warsaw when the Cossacks had capitulated.

906 It was the second major battle lost by the Poles to Khmelnytsky’s rebels. Out of 18 thousand Polish soldiers, only about a thousand survived; the rest were killed or taken captive.

907 See Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit., pp. 103–104.

are mistakenly considered to be the reinforcements sent by Duke Wiśniowiecki. The drunken Cossacks rape and murder the inhabitants. Some Jews, including the local innkeepers, the Mendel family, hide in the cemetery, expecting to be killed there. Yet the Cossacks do not arrive.<sup>908</sup> In the meantime, the Polish commanders count on the positive results of negotiations with Khmelnytsky, therefore Duke Wiśniowiecki, fighting the Cossacks, is left unaided, while the rebels can plunder Ukrainian towns. The Jews who survive the fall of Niemirów manage to reach Tulczyn.<sup>909</sup> They support the Poles in their defensive effort, but when the besieged town has no provisions, the Poles open the gates to the Cossacks, handing over the Jews in exchange for their own safety. Having killed the Jewish defenders, the Cossacks murder the Poles too.<sup>910</sup>

The life of the Jewry in the Russian Empire is an important portion of the East European history of that nation. In *Farn mabl*, Zakhari is brought up by a Russian nanny, Maria Ivanovna. She explains it to him that he has his own faith, religious festivals and God. She even takes him to a small house of prayer. At the beginning, Zakhari is scared when hearing a foreign language and seeing the strange clothes of the praying Jews. The congregating men are apparently former cantonists, Jewish boys who were forcefully conscripted at the age of twelve to serve in the Russian army. The decree was issued in 1827 by Tzar Nicholas I in regard to settlers' districts and occupied territories. Pursuant to that law, prior to military service, Jewish boys had to attend cantonist schools for six years. During that time, attempts were made to Russianize them and persuade them to convert to Christianity.<sup>911</sup> Zakhari goes to pursue his studies in Saint Petersburg, where his father lives, as Tzar Alexander II made it possible for Jewish merchants, intellectuals and craftsmen to reside outside the prescribed areas. Therefore families of wealthy doctors, merchants, bankers, lawyers, and scientists were able to live in the capital of the Empire. Although many families were practically assimilated and spoke only Russian, Saint Petersburg remained an important Jewish publishing center and the seat of many cultural and charitable

908 See *ibid.*, pp. 110–126.

909 The Jews fought the Cossacks in such towns as Niemirów, Tulczyn, Lwów, and Zamość. In Niemirów, the insurgents were aided by the Orthodox population: the majority of the Jews were murdered. In Tulczyn, the Poles and the Jews defended the town side by side, but finally the former surrendered the latter to the besiegers, crediting the Cossacks' promise that in this way safety could be bought. Having killed the Jews, the Cossacks exterminated the Poles as well. The day of the Niemirów massacre, 20 Sivan, was established as the day of fasting and remembering the martyrs, see Heinrich Graetz, *Historja Żydów*, op. cit., Vol. 8, pp. 368–371.

910 See Sholem Ash, *Kidush hashem*, op. cit., pp. 155–174 and 181.

911 The problem of drafting Jews to the army is present in many works of Yiddish literature, e.g. in the comedy *רעקרטישן* (*Rekrutin*, 1876) by Avrom Goldfaden.

institutions, while the local Jewish population played a vital role in the life of the entire Jewish community in Russia.

In *Meri*, Asch describes a situation at the onset of the 1905 Revolution: strikes and demonstrations in Saint Petersburg, the fear of pogroms among the inhabitants of Jewish shtetls, mass arrests and emigration of rich Jews abroad.<sup>912</sup> An Orthodox priest is the character who explains the causes of pogroms: “The first thing that the revolutionaries did when they came to peasants [...] was not to offer them education, not to teach them how to read and write, but to deprive them of God. Their faith was ridiculed. [...] Religion was taken away and no other morality was offered instead.”<sup>913</sup>

The scene is typical of the philosophy of the writer, who had a great deal of respect for other religions and also thought that evil had its root in lack of faith, so in his opinion it was imperative that people should have some religion and live according to its principles. Such statements recur in various contexts in many novels by Asch.

The third part of the *Farn mabl* trilogy, *Moskve*,<sup>914</sup> describes the revolution, and the readers have a chance to see for themselves that the concerns of the Mirkins, both the father and son, were not ungrounded. In the aftermath of the February Revolution of 1917, the Socialists are confused and do not know what to do. Indeed, they wish for social equality of all people, but they also need soldiers who will fight in World War I on the front lines and lay down their lives for their country. The readers learn about the events from the narrator’s summary:

Soon after the outbreak of the revolution, when the leaders of the Socialist revolutionary party<sup>915</sup> became the leaders of the provisional government, the party changed, one could say, into a patriotic organization. The achievement of objectives

912 See Sholem Ash, *Meri*, op. cit., pp. 182–200.

913 Ibid., p. 219; *Di ershte zakh, vos di revolutsyonern hobn geton, az zey zenen tsum poyer gekumen [...] iz nisht geven em bildung tsu brengen, em oyslernen shraybn un leyenen, nor dem Got ba em optsunemen. Zey hobn zayn emune tsum gelekhter gemakht [...] Di emune hobn zey ba em tsugenomen un ka ander moral nit gegeben.*

די ערשטע זאך, וואס די רעוואלוציאנערען האבען געטהון, אז זיי זיינען צום פויער געקומען [...] איז נישט געווען איהם בילדונג צו ברענגען, איהם אויסלערנען שרייבען און לעזען, נור דעם גאט ביי איהם אבצונעהמען. זיי האבען זיין אמונה צום געלעכטער געמאכט [...]. די אמונה האבען זיי ביי איהם צוגענומען און קיין אנדער מאראל נישט געגעבען.

914 This book treats mainly of the revolution and does not contain another panorama of Jewish town population; the reader deals mainly with individual characters. This concurs with historical facts as Moscow never had a large Jewish community, and at the end of the 19th century the Jews were just 1% of all the inhabitants. It was only after the outbreak of World War I that Moscow became the destination of many refugees from German-occupied territories and since then it was one of the centers of Jewish life.

defined in Socialist slogans was postponed until the time following the ultimate victory, while the party leaders went to the front lines so that their patriotic, Socialist speeches could spur soldiers to carry on fratricidal fight in the name of the revolution.<sup>916</sup>

After the triumph of the October Revolution the situation gets even worse: the old world is completely destroyed. Asch shows that in a symbolic scene when the counselor Halpern looks at his codes and encyclopedias burning in the stoves of his apartment, while the narrator relates his thoughts: "Codes are aflame, legal acts disappear, and the law, the law perishes! It seems to him that the foundations of the world collapse."<sup>917</sup> And what is the new world going to be like? No one knows. Even Lenin, "the man with the shining bald patch,"<sup>918</sup> as he is called by the narrator, has his doubts. In a moment of depression he thinks that he may be unable to reach all his goals because the human soul must hide a power that cannot be controlled. In Asch's novel, Lenin fears that people are never going to be equal, that the stronger are still going to abuse the weak, and that an ideal society would lack a motive power to develop and progress.<sup>919</sup>

During this "examination of conscience" Asch makes the Communist leader enumerate the main drawbacks of the Communist system. In this way the concept of the revolution is totally compromised in the eyes of the reader. However, the novelist does not condemn the leaders of the revolution, no matter whether

915 Probably this refers to the Socialist Revolutionary Party and Alexander Fyodorovich Kerensky (1881–1970), who was the Prime Minister of the Provisional Government from July 1917.

916 Sholem Ash, *Moskve*, op. cit., p. 92; *Bald bam oysbrukh fun der revolutsye, ven di firer fun der sotsyal-revolutsyonerer partay zenen gevorn di onfirer fun der provizorisher regirung, hot zikh di partay farwandlt, kon men zogn, in a patryotisher organizatsye. Di gute vuntshn fun di sotsyalistische lozungen hot men opgerukt af der tsayt nokhn endgiltikn zig. Un di firer fun der partay zenen arumgeform af di frontn tsu bageystern di soldatn mit patryotish-sotsyalistische redes tsu geyn in bruder-shlakht in nomen fun der revolutsye.*

באלד ביים אויסברוך פון דער רעוואלוציע, ווען די פירער פון דער סאציאל־רעוואלוציאנערער פארטיי זענען געווארן די אָנפירער פון דער פראָוויזאָרישער רעגירונג, האָט זיך די פארטיי פארוואנדלט, קאָן מען זאָגן, אין אַ פאַטריאָטישער אָרגאַניזאַציע. די גוטע ווונטשן פון די סאציאליסטישע לאָזונגען האָט מען אָפגערוקט אויף דער צייט נאָכן ענדגילטיקן זיג. און די פירער פון דער פארטיי זענען אַרומגעפאָרן אויף די פראָנטן צו באַגייסטערן די סאָלדאַטן מיט פאַטריאָטיש־סאציאליסטישע רעדעס צו גיין אין ברודער־שלאַכט אין נאָמען פון דער רעוואלוציע.

917 *Ibid.*, p. 242; *Kodeksn brenen, gezetsn farshvindn, dos rekht, dos rekht geyt unter! Un es dakht zikh em, az er zet di fundamentn fun der velt tsuzamenfaln zikh*

קאָדעקסן ברענען, געזעצן פאַרשווינדן, דאָס רעכט, דאָס רעכט, דאָס רעכט גייט אונטער! און עס דוכט זיך אים, אז ער זעט די פונדאַמענטן פון דער וועלט צוזאַמענפאַלן זיך.

918 *Ibid.*, p. 292; *der man mit der glantsiker lysine.*

919 See *ibid.*, pp. 295–296.

they are old idealists or young enthusiasts. Instead, using the persona of the narrator, he attempts to account for their feelings and thoughts as well as to demonstrate the tragic discrepancy between the results of their actions and their former hopes and dreams, which is most clearly manifested in the conversation between Zakhari Mirkin and Zoška, his fiancée Helenka's younger sister, full of trust and energy. Zoška admires the new world and tries to show Zakhari that Bolshevik ideology is right. She says Communists can do anything and bring about a system where there will be no weaker or stronger, and no oppression. Zoška is of the opinion that the revolution fulfills the dreams of many generations, it is the "time of the Messiah."<sup>920</sup> The young woman talks about the "time of the Messiah," but what the reader of *Moskve* sees is mostly poverty and starvation, abandoned children, who are ready to prostitute themselves for a slice of bread, the incompetence and cruelty of the secret police, the soldiers, who are to die a guiltless but sure death on the front, and the opportunists, who lead a comfortable life. Using Zoška as an intermediary, Zakhari establishes contact with the Bolsheviks. Then, for the first time, a Polish nobleman is mentioned; he is identified as "comrade Marek," who bears resemblance to Feliks Dzierżyński (1877–1926), the future ruthless boss of the secret police. All of a sudden, Zakhari, with a machine gun in his hand, finds himself in the center of the revolutionary turmoil in Moscow. Later, in Saint Petersburg, he observes the Bolsheviks dispersing the National Assembly. As Asch based his narrative on facts and historical events, the reader can find many more similar episodes in the pages of the trilogy. For instance, when the writer talks about Bolsheviks as German agents who were smuggled into Russia in sealed railway cars, the reader might recall that this is precisely what happened to Lenin: he was able to arrive in Russia in this manner thanks to the help of the Germans. And when Zakhari obtains the release of the counselor Halpern from prison, Asch mentions "comrade T," whom Halpern had defended in tsarist courts. The comrade is Leon Trotsky. The novel then has a cast of both fictitious and historical characters.

In *Farn mabl*, which was published in 1929–1931, the presentation of the Jewry in the Russian Empire and of their attitudes towards the revolution is rather schematic, but Asch succeeds in turning the reader's attention to the most significant problems. Above all, both the rich and the poor Jews favor the revolution as a method to abolish the longstanding political, social, religious and economic discrimination against them. This is not always true about the Polish Jews, for whom the political independence of Poland is more important than their own social advancement. National liberation in Asch's novels may mean the attempts both to create an independent Jewish state in Palestine and to regain

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920 Ibid., p. 331; משיח ציטן; *Meshiyekhs tsaytn*.



independence for Poland. According to the writer, the revolution leaders are idealistically minded, but they may not realize what consequences the country is going to suffer and are not prepared to face the ensuing problems. As to the idea of revolution as such, its weak points, in Asch's view, stem from the human factor because it is hard to tell apart idealists and opportunists. Secondly, it is not an idea but a fallacy because the postulated system stifles individual initiatives and, as a result, all growth and progress. The third weakness of the revolution is an attempt to implement Western solutions in Russia, whose society is not ready for the change. The ultimate conclusion that Asch shares with the reader is that the revolution broke out so that social justice could be available to all, yet it devolved into a murderous civil conflict, dominated by particular interests, revenge, and the desire to satisfy only individual needs. The writer presents his vision of history, frequently resorting to a complex system of metaphors and symbols. As history is always perceived and understood from the present vantage point, by looking at the past, one should remember about the double or even triple meaning of Asch's novel, which echoes actual historical events, envisions them from the perspective of the next decade, and invites yet another interpretation of the reader who may live in an entirely different era. One could even say the protagonist of *Farn mabl* is history as such.

As I mentioned before, in the discussed works by Asch, the Jews contemplate two possible ways of action: transforming the place where they live, for example, by joining some revolutionary movement, or emigrating. The emigration of East and Central European Jews to the United States was a mass phenomenon and thus gained its permanent place in the collective memory of the Jewry. The "American" novels by Asch present the realities of everyday living in the new country as well as political and historical circumstances, e.g. the activities of the Tammany Society, which were supported by Manes from *Onkel Mozes*. As an excellent agitator, he proves invaluable during the election campaign.<sup>921</sup> The Tammany Society is presented in more detail in *Ist river*: at the very beginning of the book the reader learns that the inhabitants of the district set off in large numbers for a picnic organized by the "boss," they are also to take a boat down the Hudson. The main representative of the Society in the neighborhood is a friend of Harry Grinshtok, an Irishman, Uncle Maloney.<sup>922</sup> Also Harry works for Tammany Hall, is backed by its top figures, and becomes an important person in the district, divided between him and Maloney. The latter "sees to" the Christians, while Harry becomes the informal "chief" of the Jews.

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921 See Sholem Ash, *Onkel Mozes*, op. cit., p. 199.

922 See Sholem Ash, *Ist river*, op. cit., pp. 9-11.

Thanks to the cooperation of the two men, the area is a peaceful one, relatively free from tensions between so different ethnic groups.<sup>923</sup>

In Asch's novels, life in the United States is also shown as holding in store some great tragedies that affect both Jewish and other immigrants. As I wrote earlier, the author describes a fire that actually occurred in one of New York factories. In *Ist river*, for some time Mary has had a better job in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, where she earns more. On 25 March 1911, her friend Sarah and she are working on the top floor of the building when suddenly a fire breaks out. The women cannot use the elevator to get to the first floor, and the door leading to the fire escape stairs is locked, as usual, against burglars. Consequently, the women working upstairs are defenseless against the merciless flames. The only emergency exit is the windows, nailed shut. Only few of the women manage to break some glass panes and to escape death by jumping down onto safety nets, spread below. Others avoid the horrible death by burning, but get killed when falling down onto the pavement. Sarah helps Mary to escape through a broken window and to stand on the narrow sill outside. The price is her own death as she falls out of the window all aflame, as a living torch. After a while, Mary has to take a decision and jump. Falling, she gets caught on a signboard in the fourth floor and someone manages to pull her inside.<sup>924</sup>

In accordance with historical facts, the narrator reports that the fire at Washington Place resulted in a better protection of workers' rights and improved industrial safety. Nevertheless, some factory owners, greedy for profit, continued to exploit their labor force, to employ minors, and subcontract work in the domestic system, which was hard to control, so that families, including young children, toiled at home. In Asch's novel, all those symptoms of injustice are opposed by the developing trade unions, which organize meetings during which workers are told that changes are necessary. Also intellectuals present to them their visions of a better world. One of the speakers at such a meeting is Nosn Davidovski, who stresses that the United States is the homeland of all immigrants; they should not look back at Russia as they are never going to return there. It is in the United States that they ought to put in practice the ideals of social justice, and they should fight not only for better living standards, but also higher moral standards.<sup>925</sup> At some point a special meeting is held when a group of workers need help in difficulty: due to their conflict with the employers they risk losing their jobs and subsistence. The attendants are representatives of char-

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923 See *ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

924 See *ibid.*, pp. 173–180.

925 See *ibid.*, pp. 363–368.

ity organizations, trade unions, some employers, and also, as it turns out at the end, Franklin Roosevelt, who listens to Nosn's speech with much interest.<sup>926</sup>

Later, the dramatic history of German and European Jews was strongly affected by the 1919–1923 hyperinflation in Germany. The circumstances in that country after World War I are analyzed in the novel *Bam opgrunt*. Mrs Bodenheimer, an elderly lady, is terrified with the situation. Her servant has to pay thirteen and a half thousand marks for the Sabbath fish.<sup>927</sup> An entire chapter in *Bam opgrunt* discusses Hugo Stinnes (1870–1924), a German industrialist and profiteer, who earned the title of *Inflationskönig*. The reader has a chance to get acquainted with Stinnes's aggressive business policies, thanks to which he becomes an influence in almost any branch of German economy. His enterprises are also shown from the point of view of simple workers who are totally dependent on him as their employer. Although he introduces the eight-hour work day and raises their pay, Stinnes uses the companies in his "empire" to increase the prices of food several times, so the workers cannot buy much for their wages anyway.<sup>928</sup> Another chapter describes the hyperinflation and the incessant printing of new banknotes: first with the nominal value of 1 million marks, then of 5, 10, and 50 million. Apart from the state currency, there appears money issued by local communities or companies, while old thousand-mark notes, with the Emperor's image, are used for playing or wallpapering.<sup>929</sup>

One of the consequences of the hyperinflation and the resulting stance of German people, who lost all hope for any improvement, was the rise of anti-Semitic attitudes. German society was susceptible to demagoguery, prone to follow any leader that might offer a viable solution. This novel, issued in 1936, includes many examples of anti-Semitic conduct. The lectures at the university in Berlin are disrupted by groups of men armed with clubs; they throw out the professors from the hall, beat Jewish students, vandalize the rooms, and break the plaster busts of Greek philosophers.<sup>930</sup> The image of the destroyed symbols of history and tradition accentuates the barbarian character of the incidents. In *Bam opgrunt*, Heinrich Bodenheimer talks to his German acquaintances about recent political events, also about Hitler. His interlocutors think that at the time of crisis many crooks, including East European Jews and Austrian rowdies, arrive in Germany to find a better fortune. "They say this man, Hitler, is not German at

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926 See *ibid.*, pp. 389–395.

927 See Sholem Ash, *Bam opgrunt*, op. cit., p. 86.

928 See *ibid.*, pp. 156–172.

929 See *ibid.*, pp. 665–669.

930 See *ibid.*, pp. 322–323.

all, and in fact he is of Slavic origin, a kind of Austrian crossbreed: Slavonic, Romanian, Hungarian, and lastly, Gypsy ...<sup>931</sup>

Although the talkers disparage Hitler, they conclude that he is dangerous as a charismatic person who attracts crowds.<sup>932</sup> Hans, chasing Lotte's murderer, Wolfgang von Sticker, arrives in Munich. At that time, as related by the narrator, an NCO from a neighboring state, who is staying in the Munich garrison, is becoming more and more popular. Some groups of former soldiers act as his subordinates and several intellectuals begin to support him too. Soon he gathers so many followers that he has to be reckoned with. His anti-Semitism is just a trump card, a commodity that helps to canvass yet more support among the general public. Pursuing Wolfgang, Hans happens to attend a meeting where Hitler is delivering a speech. Terrified, he observes the speaker and the hypnotized assembly. Suddenly he realizes who is standing in front of him: "Is this the devil? Yes, indeed! [...] This is an elemental force, a divine messenger against whom you can use neither reason nor logic. Resistance is nonsensical, death will have its revenge. Death created a golem."<sup>933</sup>

In Jewish tradition, a golem is a figure made of clay, shaped like a human but having no soul. A golem can only obey orders and work, it has no free will. The comparison between Hitler and a golem puts stress on the impasse: a golem cannot be opposed. At the same time one has to consider the words contained in the text: a golem is a messenger of God, made by death, while the tradition says it is a work of man. In this way the writer develops the awareness that the situation is a trap and, moreover, suggests all that was willed by God. This corresponds to Asch's philosophy of life; as he did not wish to succumb to despair, he had to look for a supreme sense everywhere.

Asch never wrote a book about the Shoah, which many critics held against him. However, he often referred to the extermination of Jews in a variety of manners: in reminiscences of the characters in the novels that are set after World War II or in prophetic visions of those protagonists who are described as living

931 Ibid., p. 177; *Men zogt, az der man, der Hitler, iz gor ka Daytsh nisht, er zol gor zayn fun slavisher opshnamung, aza min estreykhisher tsuzamenmish: slavish, rumenish, ungarish un shlislekh—tsigeynerish ...*

מען זאגט, אז דער מאן, דער היטלער, איז גאר קיין דייטש נישט, ער זאל גאר זיין פון סלאווישער אפשטאמונג, און מין עסטרייכישער צוזאמענמיש: סלאוויש, רומעניש, אונגאריש און שליסליעך - ציגיינעריש...

932 See *ibid.*, pp. 178–179.

933 Ibid., p. 730; *Iz es der tayvl? - Yo, er iz es! [...] Es iz a stikhische kraft, a sheliakh fun Got, akegn velkhn men kon ka farnunft, ka logik nisht onvendn. Bekhinem der kamf, der toyt nemt nekome. Der toyt hot goylem geshafn.*

איז עס נישט דער טייוול? - יא, ער איז עס! [...] עס איז א סטיכישע קראפט, א שליח פון גאט, אקעגן וועלכן מען קאן קיין פארניגן נישט אנווענדן. בדינים דער קאמף, דער טויט נעמט נקמה. דער טויט האט גולם געשאפן.

many centuries earlier. In the novel *Grosman un zun*, towards the end of World War II, Robert Grosman, accompanied by a rabbi, visits concentration camps in the American occupation zone and writes a letter whose content is shocking to all the family. Robert is of the opinion that evil does not result from the actions of a single man or just one nation. It has many sources and originates in different periods, it feeds upon the injustice that has accumulated for many decades. Robert sees this injustice also in America, in the exploitation of the labor force and in the continuous pursuit of financial gain. Although he does not know how to do it yet, he resolves to choose a different lifestyle which would truly bring him close to God.<sup>934</sup> In the novel *Der novi*, Isaiah sees a river of blood that flows from thousands of bodies of children and old people, and he sees the fire that consumes his folk.<sup>935</sup> Obviously, Asch's experience of the Shoah was so deep that he was unable to compose a book exclusively on that subject.

Biblical figures of memory in Asch's novels are, first of all, those events that proved of utmost importance for the Jewish nation: the story of Moses as the basis of Jewish tradition, the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, and their journey across the desert, as described in the Pentateuch. These images are supplemented by others, coming from the New Testament: the life of Jesus and the history of early Christians. Asch wants to ascertain that both memory crystallization centers, deriving from the Old and New Testament, are perceived as inseparable and that they are incorporated into the collective memory of the Jews and Christians alike. The subsequent novels deal with crucial periods in Jewish history, not only those that were landmarks in the life of the Diaspora, but also those that impacted the future existence of the nation. Therefore Asch discusses the banishment of the Sephardic Jews from Spain and Portugal, the annihilation of Jewish communities in the Ukraine during Khmelnytsky's uprising, the Jewry in tsarist Russia, their emigration to the Land of Israel and America, the Bolshevik Revolution and the hopes connected with it, and the interwar period in Germany. Contrariwise, as I stated before, the Shoah is not represented in any novel by Asch.

#### **4.4 Sholem Asch's novels as a medium for memory: a conclusion**

The problems in Sholem Asch's novels do not diverge from those that are dealt with by other authors writing in Yiddish, yet some differences do appear, e.g. in the works that are discussed here, Asch offers an essentially consistent, positive

934 See Sholem Ash, *Grosman un zun*, op. cit., pp. 128–130.

935 See Sholem Ash, *Der novi*, op. cit., pp. 277–278.

image of Christians.<sup>936</sup> As is the case of other literary works in Yiddish, Asch's topics are of concern to all Jewish readers, being related to their everyday life, culture and religion.

The figures of memory that may be distinguished in his output are, among others, landscapes and nature. Typical of Asch are their poetical descriptions as well as stressing that the world, in its form as we know it, is a creation of God. The novelist sketches the East European scenery and supplements the experiential memory of his readers with images of other lands, including the Mediterranean and Palestine.

Another group of figures of memory that are present in Asch's works concerns places that were inhabited by the Jews, small or large towns. One should definitely remember here his early novels, which idealize the life of the shtetl and thus depart from the traditional point of view of Yiddish literature. Later on, however, Asch takes up topics that were of interest to other Yiddish writers: the increasing social stratification and the ensuing impoverishment of shtetl and city population; as well as the advancements of technology, which are usually presented in an ambivalent manner since Asch novels give no proof of his fascination with technological progress, but instead show the dependence of the man on the machine and the loss of human identity of factory workers. Providing his readers with multi-faceted depictions of city life, Asch describes also the world of the rich. Moreover, Asch's usual practice of handing down the memory of good Christians to his readers contributes to the presentation of the mutual understanding and collaboration between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors.

The figures of memory connected with the household and kinship are hospitable homes and, above all, families whose members adopt traditional roles: commonly, the fathers are religious and hardworking, though they do not always manage to provide for their dependants; the mothers are submissive, run the house, take care of the children, and sometimes take up jobs. The sons attend a Cheder and later continue their education or find employment, whereas the daughters help with domestic chores until they get married. This consistent presentation allows for some exceptions which then, by contrast, put in relief the ideal, traditional family. The image tends to get distorted after the arrival of the family in the United States as the industrious fathers have less time for devout

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936 Chone Shmeruk maintains that Asch's oversimplified treatment of Jewish-Christian relations and his disregard for historical facts and contemporary experience stemmed from his tendency to seek recognition among non-Jews and did not reflect any significant trend in Yiddish literature, see Chone Shmeruk, *Legenda o Esterce w literaturze jydysz i polskiej*, op. cit., pp. 70–71. This opinion is not entirely justified: obviously Asch wished his works could attract non-Jewish readers and yet his attitude towards Christianity was based rather on his own beliefs than eagerness to please all tastes.

religious practices, while the children move out of their family home all too soon and do not look up to their parents any more; only the role of the mother seems to remain stable. Sketching his portraits of Jewish families, Asch attempts to accentuate the importance of tradition and religion in family life; on the other hand, on numerous occasions he clearly criticizes arranged marriages and the common subordination of women to men.

In Asch's novels, the memory of faith and religion is manifest also in the remarkable, respected figures, spiritual and religious; both Jewish and Christian characters of this kind are shown, generally in a positive light. Whenever his novels happen to mention a markedly negative personage of a Christian clergyman, it is in reference to the past. Regardless of this favorable outlook on Christianity, Asch's works acknowledge problems that arise as a result of mixed marriages or a conversion to Christianity. Although such conduct is not directly censured, it becomes apparent that for Asch it is extremely significant that the religion of his people should be upheld and cherished. The figures of memory that are related to religion comprise celebrations of the most important holy days, as well as various beliefs and fables; therefore Asch refers to, for instance, *Lamed Vav Tzadikim*. Basically, the writer's message to the readers is his certainty there is one God, and the insignificance of how God is worshiped, if only wholeheartedly.

Apart from typical family figures or religious authorities, the world represented in Asch's novels holds a variety of other common characters such as: a peasant, a worker, a nobleman, a prosperous merchant, a pretty girl, a doctor etc.; again, they have either a Jewish or Christian background. Once more, the Christians are described approvingly; one can also notice another feature of the world that the writer wants to be remembered: in general, all the simple, poor people, irrespective of their religion, are good, while wrong behavior typifies either affluent people or those that enjoy higher social status. Thus Asch's demarcation line does not divide the Jews and the gentiles, but those of ample and scanty means, and it is the latter who receive the writer's sympathetic treatment.

The figures of memory that are linked with celebrations, holidays and everyday existence, just like those pertaining to the family and home, concern the life of the Jewish community. Relevant passages, which contribute to the shape of the represented world in the reader's imagination, describe special events and feasts that are held at home as well as the crucial moments in the lives of the majority of the protagonists, such as, in many cases, their emigration to America or to the Land of Israel. On the one hand, the novelist discusses traditional conduct, costume and cuisine; on the other hand, he writes about dreams, decisions that are taken and sometimes their disappointing outcomes. While reading Asch's novels, one can form a picture of the fate of the Jews, of their usually

difficult and often tragic life, which, nonetheless, abounds in modest joys, humor and, remarkably, hope for a better future.

Asch's works transmit also the memory of the diverse passions of his characters, their approach to culture and science, and the ideologies they support. As emphasized by the critics, it is manifest that the writer presents both revolutionary and Zionist ideas objectively so that the choices made by the protagonists can be well understood. Asch's novels also show the patriotic feelings of the protagonists, their favorable attitude towards the vernacular of their country of residence as well as their fascination with literary works, mainly in Polish and Russian. This group of figures of memory embraces other cultural achievements of humankind, such as paintings, music and sculpture; what can be observed here is that the novelist supplements the represented world with significant elements, although at times he knows them only vicariously.

The last group of figures of memory refers to the events of the biblical world and to historical events; it should be remembered that in the awareness of the Jews the former are just as real as the latter. Asch's novels are a medium for memory of the history that is recorded in the Pentateuch as well as in the New Testament, with the focus on Christ. It is to be noted that the writer sees the history comprised by the Bible as a cohesive, continuous entity. This is a unique approach in Yiddish literature. In Asch's novels, memory crystallizes around those events that proved to be subsequent turning points for the Jewish Diaspora: the banishment of the Jews from Spain, Khmelnytsky's uprising, the Bolshevik Revolution, early emigration to the Land of Israel and the United States, and the rise of Nazi ideology in Germany after World War I. On the other hand, the Shoah and the virtual annihilation of Jewish life in the European Diaspora were not described in any of Asch's novels. This could be explained by the fact that Asch had no direct experience of those tragic events. But another possible explanation is that he created pictures of the Jewish world out of single figures of memory, invariably and in diverse ways providing the reader with specific information as well as trying to communicate trust and hope, which is symbolized by the ending of *Kidush hashem*.

As to artistic standards, Asch's novels are not inferior to other literary works in Yiddish in the same period, albeit one can state that some poets, prose writers and playwrights were definitely more skilled, had a better style, used more innovative strategies of narration and problem-probing, applied penetrating metaphors, sometimes grotesque humor, or a mystical approach that allured many readers. A well-educated person will probably find it more intellectually gratifying to study the poems by Itsik Manger and Avrom Sutskever, the prose writings of Yitskhok Leyb Perets and Isaac Bashevis Singer, or the dramas by



Shloyme Zanvl Rappoport (S. An-sky) and Perets Hirshbeyn, than many novels by Asch which are discussed in this book.

Nonetheless, Sholem Asch is an exceptional author of Yiddish literature. One of the reasons is that his works, which have been analyzed here, are relatively uncomplicated and thus could reach a broad readership so the writer, with the narrator and the characters as his intermediaries, was able to propagate his observations and convictions as well as to purposefully attempt to exert impact on his milieu by shaping the awareness of his readers. Moreover, Asch's novels touch upon a wide range of problems and hand down the memory of the history of his people from biblical times up to the 20th century, embracing the events in the Holy Land, in the European and then immigrant American Diaspora, and lastly back in the Land of Israel. Asch was one of the few fortunate Yiddish authors who survived the First and the Second World War and who wrote for almost half a century. Thanks to his vast perspective, the figures of memory that are comprised by his writings make up an almost complete picture—as perceived from the Jewish point of view—of the world of Asch's past and present, and therefore his novelistic *oeuvre* becomes a testimony, precious both to the readers and researchers.



## 5. A Polish author?

In the index to Bo Svensén's book concerning nominations for the Nobel Prize in Literature, the following entry is included: "Asch, Shalom (Polish author, 1880–1957)."<sup>937</sup> This demonstrates that in the archives of the Swedish Academy Asch was classified as a Polish writer. A similar observation, in reference to Svensén's book, is presented in an article by Katarzyna Gruber,<sup>938</sup> who worked for the Academy for many years as a librarian.

Still, it should not surprise us that Asch's name was pigeonholed in this manner. At the stage of nomination, the Swedish Academy would often apply the criterion of the country of birth or citizenship. Generally, this did not lead to any distortion of facts—with the exception of nominees and laureates of Jewish origin, and especially writers, whose personal files often contain a peculiar selection of information. Such was the case of the 1981 laureate, Elias Canetti, who was born in the territories of today's Bulgaria as a citizen of Turkey, but wrote in German and from 1912 lived in German-speaking countries (e.g. in Vienna, Austria from 1924); in 1938 he emigrated to Great Britain, and in 1952 received British citizenship, to move to Switzerland in the 1980s. Yet even a few years ago, his short biographical note on the website of the Nobel Prize Committee read as follows: "Elias Canetti, United Kingdom, b. 1905 (in Rustschuk, Bulgaria), d. 1994,"<sup>939</sup> so it did not mention the fundamental fact that Canetti composed in German, while his mother tongue was Ladino. The latter data could be accessed only via the link to a more extensive biography of the writer.

A similarly inadequate note was provided about the 1966 laureate, Nelly Sachs. She was born in Berlin, after the outbreak of World War II managed to leave Germany and settle down in Sweden, whose citizen she became in 1953. Again, the Nobel Prize Committee site did not say she had written in German, and the brief profile said: "Nelly Sachs, ½ of the prize, Sweden, b. 1891 (in

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937 Bo Svensén (ed.), *Nobelpriset i litteratur. Nomineringar och utlåtanden 1901–1950*, op. cit., p. 467; *Asch, Schalom (polsk förf., 1880–1957)*.

938 See Katarzyna Gruber, *Czy Polacy mogą oczekiwać kolejnego Nobla w literaturze?*, in: *Nowa Gazeta Polska*, 3, 2002, [www.poloniainfo.se/artikul.php?id=541](http://www.poloniainfo.se/artikul.php?id=541) (14 November 2006). Considering the aforementioned mistakes of Ben Siegel, it is curious to see a similar one in Katarzyna Gruber's text. She writes Asch was a Nobel Prize nominee in the 1930s, whereas Svensén's book unmistakably points us to the 1940s, especially that it quotes the Academy's opinion where much prominence is given to the first two volumes of Asch's Christological trilogy: *The Nazarene*, published in 1939, and *The Apostle*, issued in 1943.

939 [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1981/](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1981/) (29 January 2007).

Berlin, Germany), d. 1970.<sup>940</sup> Also here it was possible to access the most significant personal data only via the link to Sachs's autobiography.

Researchers of Jewish literature, in particular of its Yiddish branch, often face a dilemma when they need to answer a question about a Jewish writer's nationality, especially when the concept of nationality has political and geographical connotations for the inquirer, and not linguistic and cultural ones. The problem is manifest in the data of the Nobel Prize Committee and it resurges in various anthologies and lexicons. Hence there appear some eager, though unwarranted, attempts to compartmentalize Jewish writers as exclusively Polish, Russian, American etc. ones.

In this context one must remember the remarks of the undoubtedly greatest contemporary expert on Yiddish literature, Chone Shmeruk,<sup>941</sup> who pays attention to the fact that practically all Yiddish writers have Central and East European roots, and that other centers of Yiddish literature, either in Europe or elsewhere, were not fortunate enough to see a young generation of authors, born in their new homelands: all the literary achievements there belong to the immigrants, whose output clearly betrays the influence of the literature and culture of

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940 [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1966/](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1966/) (29 January 2007).

941 הגא שמערוק Chone Shmeruk, a world-famous researcher of Jewish culture and literature, was born on 5 January 1921 in Warsaw. He attended Jewish schools with Polish as the language of instruction, and in 1938 began to study at Warsaw University. Chone Shmeruk survived the war as a mine laborer, first in the Ural Mountains and then in Kazakhstan, where he was deported by the Soviet secret police. In 1946 he returned to Warsaw for a short stay, to leave for Germany and then the Land of Israel to meet there the only members of his family who had survived the Shoah. He studied history, the Yiddish language and Yiddish literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where in 1965 he became professor of Yiddish literature. From 1982 he was head of the Center of Research on the History and Culture of Polish Jews, which he himself had established. Thanks to political transformations in Poland, Chone Shmeruk was able to revisit it in 1984 and since then he vigorously supported research into the history and culture of the Polish Jewry, giving lectures, organizing the exchange of academics and students, and supervising publications. He died on 5 July 1997. As he had wished, he was buried at the Jewish cemetery in Okopowa, Warsaw; see Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Chone Shmeruk jako badacz twórczości Isaaca Bashevisa Singera*, in: Chone Shmeruk, *Świat utracony: o twórczości Isaaca Bashevisa Singera*, edited by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS 2003, pp. 7–12; Józef Andrzej Gierowski, *Konferencja poświęcona prof. Chone Shmerukowi*, in: *Acta Universitatis Jagellonicae*, 7–8 (223–224), year XV, April 1998, <http://www3.uj.edu.pl/acta/9804/16.html> (5 February 2012); Jerzy Wyrozumski, *Wstęp*, in: Chone Shmeruk, *Legenda o Esterce w literaturze jidysz i polskiej*, op. cit., pp. VII–XI.

the country of origin.<sup>942</sup> Following Shmeruk's argument, it is to be stated that cultural affiliations of Yiddish writers should be defined by at least two adjectives, denoting the language of their country of birth and the language they used in their writings, as well as, in some cases, also the language of their new country of residence.<sup>943</sup>

Sholem Asch was born in the Polish town of Kutno as a citizen of the Russian Empire, and in 1920 he obtained American citizenship; he wrote exclusively in Yiddish.<sup>944</sup> In the majority of encyclopedias and dictionaries he is classified as a Jewish American writer of Polish origin. However, *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* (PSB; Polish Biographical Dictionary) has no entry concerning Asch, although the first fascicle, including names starting with "A," was published in 1935, when he was a recognized writer even in his state of origin: he had been awarded the Order of Polonia Restituta two years earlier. What is more, in the interwar period he was one of the authors whose works were most frequently translated into Polish, belonged to those Yiddish writers that were the most respected by Polish artists, and was treated as an authority on social matters.<sup>945</sup> Nor did Asch's name find its way to the 2002 PSB supplement, which includes emendations and addenda to the first forty fascicles. On the other hand, in the introduction to the Polish edition of *Kidush hashem*, Michał Friedman calls Asch "one of the most Polish Jewish writers,"<sup>946</sup> and *Bibliografia Polska 1901–1939*<sup>947</sup> (Polish Bibliography 1901–1939) offers a full list of Asch's works

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942 See Chone Shmeruk, *Jews and Poles in Yiddish Literature in Poland between the Two World Wars*, in: *Polin*, Vol. 1, 1986, pp. 176–195, here p. 176.

943 By analogy, in the case of artists who write in the language of their country of residence, the adjective "Jewish" should not be omitted. The reason is that not only the culture of the country of birth or, later, of the émigré homeland, greatly influence the works of the authors composing in Jewish languages, but also Jewish culture, directly or indirectly, enriches the output of writers of Jewish origin who write in non-Jewish languages. This is not a revelatory statement, but it ought to be reiterated as one constantly comes across incomplete information in dictionaries and encyclopedias, not to mention examples of biased literary history research, focusing exclusively on selected aspects of the *oeuvre* of some authors. See also Chone Shmeruk, *Legenda o Esterce w literaturze jidysz i polskiej*, op. cit., pp. 5–7.

944 It is known that Asch made a few attempts to write in Hebrew and Polish, e.g. composing *Napoleńska czapka* (or *Czapka Napoleona*), see Szalom Asz, *Szalom Asz o Żeromskim i Reymoncie*, in: *Nasz Przegląd*, 20, 25 January 1926, pp. 6–7, here p. 7; Eugenia Prokop-Janiec, *Wstęp*, op. cit., p. 7; Chone Shmeruk, *Legenda o Esterce w literaturze jidysz i polskiej*, op. cit., p. 73. However, the result was just a single short story, all his later works were exclusively in Yiddish.

945 See Eugenia Prokop-Janiec, *Wstęp*, op. cit., p. 8.

946 Michał Friedman, [Wstęp], op. cit., p. 8.

which were published in Poland prior to World War II, mentioning also some translations that were issued in other countries.

The majority of Polish articles, recollections and introductions to the translated versions of Asch's books harp on the motif of the writer's links with Poland, Poles and the Polish language. But then these motifs occur also elsewhere.<sup>948</sup> One can learn a great deal about Asch's pro-Polish sentiments from those texts that were written in other languages and meant for non-Polish readers.<sup>949</sup>

The subject of "Asch, Poland, and Polish Jews" can be approached in a variety of manners. Its primary, purely literary dimension is discussed in several passages of the main part of the book. An intriguing question has to be addressed: among Asch's novels, none is entirely about Poland, none gives a broad view of relations between Poland's Jews and their Polish, not Jewish, environment. *Kidush hashem* describes Polish characters, yet the chief issue is the martyrdom of the Jews during Khmelnytsky's rebellion; one of the protagonists in *Der man fun Natseres* is Pan Wiadomski, a Pole, but apart from that the reader receives no information about the interwar Warsaw. The scene of *Motke Ganev* is the Polish capital and, in the former sections, other Polish localities, but the novel is set in the period of the partitions, so Asch, apart from the Jews, portrays chiefly Russians. Single Polish characters appear also in *Dos shtetl*, *Reb Shloyme Noged* and *Der tilim yid*, but these books, just like *Varshe*, lack a wide panorama of Polish society. Asch knew Poland and its problems well, both before World War I, when he visited Zakopane, Cracow and, of course, Warsaw, and before World War II, when he lived in the Polish capital for some time. Nevertheless, he never decided to pen a "Polish novel," although he was occasionally advised to; for instance, it was suggested he might produce a literary work set in Cracow, in the period when it was the royal town.<sup>950</sup> The reasons why Asch selected his themes in his own manner are likely to be twofold. First

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947 See unknown author, *Asz, Szalom*, in: Janina Wilgat (ed.) *Bibliografia Polska 1901–1939*, Vol. 1 A–Bars (volume's editor: Irena Olszewska), Wrocław / Warszawa / Kraków / Łódź: Ossolineum 1986, pp. 324–334. *Bibliografia Polska* registers the total of 210 items, including translations of Asch's works into various languages and different Yiddish editions of the same work. Disregarding the translations and Yiddish reeditions, one obtains information on about 70 smaller or larger volumes in Yiddish and 9 Polish versions.

948 See Chone Shmeruk, *Legenda o Esterce w literaturze jidysz i polskiej*, op. cit., pp. 71–73.

949 See Jacob Lestchinsky, *Aspects of the Sociology of Polish Jewry*, in: *Jewish Social Studies*, 28:4, October 1966, pp. 195–211, here p. 196.

950 See Dawid Lazer, *Dwa dni z Szalomem Aszem*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 190, 21 July 1930, pp. 3 and 14, here p. 3.

and foremost, as in those works that are set in other places in Europe, the United States or Palestine, Asch shows the world from a Jewish vantage point and therefore the representations that do not pertain directly to the Jewry are unavoidably fragmentary. On the other hand, he always stressed his strong emotional bonds with his home country and strove to represent Poland as favorably as possible. Therefore this topic was not free from taboos, and if Asch's depictions had been more elaborate, he would have had to show many negative aspects, notably anti-Semitism. Other interesting issues connected with Poland are present in Asch's non-literary texts, correspondence, various documents, introductions, reviews and articles, as well as in others' opinions—both in Polish and in Yiddish, yet published in Poland—concerning the writer and his works. In order to assess the reception of Asch's *oeuvre* properly, it is also essential to realize how many of his works were printed in Poland, in different periods, either in Yiddish or in Polish translation, and to know which of his dramatic works were staged and which writings were adapted for the screen.

Moreover, as a person who carefully built his own public image, Asch tended to express his thoughts and feelings most eagerly in both official and private contacts with Polish and Jewish artists. Therefore his attitudes can be fully comprehended only when one is acquainted with a variety of his articles, especially recollective ones: they help form a picture of Asch as a man and artist, and hence make it possible to get closer to his literary output in its entirety.

## 5.1 Asch, Poland, and Poles

In 1928 the newspaper *Chwila*<sup>951</sup> published the article *Szalom Asz gościem piśmiennictwa polskiego* (Sholem Asch as guest of Polish writers) which contained the writer's speech delivered at a meeting of the Polish PEN Club, a poignant expression of his love for the home country:

I do owe a great deal to Polish literature. The first books that I read were the works by Bolesław Prus. The truth is I could understand merely one word in ten, and yet I understood it. Then I was fortunate I met the great Polish artist Stanisław Witkiewicz, from whom I learned how seriously one's profession should be treated. It was this great Polish patriot who encouraged me to compose in the Jewish language. While everybody else was trying to convince me to write in Polish, he advised: "Stick to your language — only then can your writings be original." I was also lucky enough to stay close to Żeromski and Reymont, to whom I am greatly in-

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951 *Chwila* was a Jewish newspaper, written in Polish, which was issued in Lwów in the years 1919–1939. Since 1934 it also had an evening edition, see Barbara Łętocha, "*Chwila*" *gazeta Żydów lwowskich*, <http://lwow.home.pl/rocznik/chwila.html> (5 February 2012).

debted. But I have learned the most from the Polish lands, where I was born. The Polish landscape remained in my memory when I roamed the world.<sup>952</sup> And when the fall spreads over Poland—you must have observed that, gentlemen—such black nights envelop the entire countryside. It seems to me that no other country except Poland has such thick, black nights in this fall season. These nights appear to stitch the earth and the sky together as if God Himself wrapped the land in His mystic shroud. To my mind, every man born in this country hides the mystery of these mystical, black Polish nights and carries it along wherever he goes.<sup>953</sup>

Asch felt a deep sentiment for Poland and in his 1931 autobiography he writes, for instance, that he cherishes its image, just as he holds dear the image of his father's face; and that he has to visit his motherland, like his mother, every now and then, in order to breathe Polish air.<sup>954</sup>

In 1930 Warsaw witnessed an important literary event: the World PEN Congress. Poland was visited by writers from all over the globe who were welcomed by the representatives of the Polish and Jewish PEN Clubs. Towards the end of the Congress, the Europejski Hotel hosted a special farewell party at which one of the speakers was Sholem Asch, enthusiastically received by the present guests. Asch said he had been born and brought up in Poland and, as other emigrants, he had continued to be emotional about Polish fields and forests which were going to stay in his memory forever. He spoke about Poland's past, both glorious and full of suffering, and enumerated the writers who had carried on a victorious fight for the independence of their native country: Mickiewicz, Słowacki, Sienkiewicz, Prus, Konopnicka, Wyspiański, Reymont, and Żeromski.<sup>955</sup> It was from them, Asch maintained, that Yiddish writers could learn, even when promoting their own cause, how to care about freedom and happiness for all people.<sup>956</sup>

Asch's links with Poland can be noticed in very many places; sometimes these are trivia, such as the dedication in the Polish edition of *Nowele*, dated

952 Chone Shmeruk is right to remark that one of the reasons why Polish authors did not encourage Asch to write in Polish might have been that he did not know it well enough to use it as a tool of literature, see Chone Shmeruk, *Legenda o Esterce w literaturze jydysz i polskiej*, op. cit., pp. 72–73.

953 Unknown author, *Szalom Asz gościem piśmiennictwa polskiego*, in: *Chwila* 1928 No. 3426, quoted after Barbara Lętocha, "Chwila" gazeta Żydów lwowskich, op. cit.

954 See Schalom Asch, *Rückblick*, op. cit., p. 35.

955 Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), Juliusz Słowacki (1809–1849), Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1916), Bolesław Prus (1847–1912), Maria Konopnicka (1842–1910), Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907), Władysław Reymont (1867–1925), and Stefan Żeromski (1864–1925).

956 See unknown author, *Przemówienie Asza i d-ra Kahana na bankiecie Pen-Klubów*, in: *Nasz Przegląd*, 175, 24 June 1930, p. 6; Szalom Asz, *Przemówienie Szaloma Asza na zjeździe Pen-Klubów*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 165, 26 June 1930, p. 7.



1906, which reads as follows: “Stanisławowi Witkiewiczowi poświęca Autor” (To Stanisław Witkiewicz, with compliments from the author).<sup>957</sup> The writer’s attachment to Poland, its cities, shtetls and provinces is to be seen also in his texts, such as a short excerpt from the said *Nowele*, describing the tomb of Adam Mickiewicz in Wawel:

Mickiewicz! What’s he doing here?

His body had been brought back home<sup>958</sup> and pressed with the rectangular stone—in token of perpetual remembrance. [...]

His sword is not made of steel, which may corrode. His sword is the Word of God, the daily fresh dew—the eternal spiritual richness. [...]

Do you know that girl in a secluded village who is sitting in the window of her cottage, looking at the road? Over there, in the distance, among tall poplars, one can see a wandering Jew, with a bundle on his shoulders. From afar, from beyond the valleys and hills, a forgotten echo is approaching.

The girl is holding *Pan Tadeusz* in her hand, and her great-grandmother is telling her old stories which are flowing from one heart to the other.<sup>959</sup>

The above quoted passage and the remaining portion of the text make it possible to infer a great deal about Asch’s attitude to Polish culture. Undoubtedly, he knew and understood it well, and on the other hand, he did not conceal the fact that his role was that of an observer: though very kind, yet uninvolved; the section describing Cracow’s Main Square is symptomatically entitled *Oni i my* (We and they).<sup>960</sup> In the chapter *Kraków* (Cracow) the writer reproaches the Poles for imprisoning the nation’s spirit within the dead walls; Asch depicts the former

957 Szolem Asz, *Nowele*, translated probably by Z. Majorczyk and Wiktoria Stanisławowa Huzarska / Husarska, Warszawa: Księgarnia Powszechna 1906, p. 5 (unnumbered). Stanisław Witkiewicz (1851–1915) was a Polish painter, architect, and writer.

958 Asch referred to the fact that in 1890 Mickiewicz’s remains had been transferred from France to Cracow and buried there in the crypts of Wawel Castle.

959 Szolem Asz, *Nowele*, op. cit., pp. 117–118.

960 *Ibid.*, p. 113, one can find an image of a similar stratification in Asch’s home town of Kutno, as described in Artur Fryz’s sonnet (“teraz stoją nad miastem mojesza tablice / chociaż synów i wnuków tak nagle zabrakło / za mało łamaliśmy chleba kiedy miasto / niosło nasze ulice wasze kamienie” {Now facing the city stand the tablets of Moses / though the sons and grandsons are so suddenly missing / we shared not enough bread when the city / carried *our streets your houses*}); Artur Fryz, *wewnętrzny chleb*, in: Artur Fryz, *Miasto nad bitwą 24 sonety municypalne*, Kutno: Oficyna Wydawnicza Wandea 2001, p. 21. Fryz’s book contains also another sonnet devoted to Asch. As related by the writer’s great-grandson, David Mazower, Kutno used to be in fact a divided town: the Jews inhabited the center and earned their living as craftsmen and shopkeepers, while the Christian population, equally large, lived on the outskirts and were chiefly farmers; see David Mazower, *Sholem Asch: Images of a Life*, op. cit., p. 8.

capital of Poland as a museum which immures the days of former glory. He thinks that the country's spirit should stay awake in a living body, in a man's breast; as long as the spirit survives, it can shape the world, but when it is locked up in buildings, it must perish.

The readers accompany Asch when he crosses Cracow's Main Square, visits an unspecified museum and Mickiewicz's tomb, then reaches the district of Kazimierz. The writer stresses that just as any Polish village needed the presence of a Jewish innkeeper to complement its local color and homely atmosphere, so Cracow's indispensable element is its Jewish quarter. Asch feels quite comfortable there, but he also rebukes the Jews for distorting their living tradition and religion into veritable museum exhibits.<sup>961</sup>

The first friendly relationships between Asch and Polish artists originated at the beginning of the 20th century as he met some of them in the summer and fall of 1903 in Zakopane. Those acquaintances who later became Asch's friends were: Eliza Orzeszkowa (1841–1910, Polish writer), Stefan Żeromski, and above all Stanisław Witkiewicz, who helped to have Asch's first dramas translated into Polish and staged in Cracow.<sup>962</sup> Thus *Z biegiem fal* (*Mitn shtrom*, With

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961 See Szolem Asz, *Nowele*, op. cit., pp. 113–123.

962 See Salomon Belis-Legis, *Wstęp*, in: Szolem Asz, *Mąż z Nazaretu*, op. cit., p. 10; Stanisław Pigoń, *Listy Szaloma Asza do Stanisława Witkiewicza i Stefana Żeromskiego (1903–1906)*, in: *Nasz Głos. Dodatek do Folks-Sztyme*, 17 (66), 19 December 1959, p. 5. Belis-Legis says the translator was Witkiewicz and this opinion is perhaps based on the information provided by Asch, whose recollections are not always accurate: in his autobiography he remembers that *Z biegiem fal* was translated, under his guidance, by Witkiewicz's wife, see Schalom Asch, *Rückblick*, op. cit., p. 64. Pigoń writes Witkiewicz was only an intermediary who commissioned the journalist and literary historian Wilhelm Feldman (1868–1919) to translate *Z biegiem fal*. Eventually, Feldman was replaced by H. Gotlieb, that is probably Heszel Gotlieb (1882–1940), one of the leading Jewish press journalists of that time, see Stanisław Pigoń, *Listy Szaloma Asza do Stanisława Witkiewicza i Stefana Żeromskiego (1903–1906)*, op. cit., 1 (67), 12 January 1960, p. 4. On the other hand, it may have been Witkiewicz's house where about 1904 the translation of the one-act play *Grzech* (*Der zindiker*, The Sinner) originated, or where the drama was only given its final stylistic shape, see Stanisław Pigoń, *Listy Szaloma Asza do Stanisława Witkiewicza i Stefana Żeromskiego (1903–1906)*, op. cit., 3 (69), 13 February 1960, p. 5. Gotlieb also authored the Polish translation of *Bóg Zemsty* (*Der Got fun nekome*, God of Vengeance), which was staged in Cracow in December 1908, see unknown author, *Ash Sholem*, in: Zalmen Zilbertsvayg (ed.), *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, op. cit., col. 106. *Czasy Mesjasza* (*Meshiyekhs tsaytm*, Times of the Messiah) was translated into Polish by Florian Sokółow, see Chone Shmeruk, *Legenda o Esterce w literaturze jidysz i polskiej*, op. cit., p. 65. Regrettably, when attempting to identify the names of the earliest translators of Asch's works, one cannot rely on the testimony of the writer, who, as his great-grandson explained, had a bad memory for dates, so the data

the Current) was performed on the Cracow stage as early as January 1905.<sup>963</sup> In the year 1959 and at the beginning of 1960, the Polish language supplement to *Folks-shtime*, *Nasz Głos*, published Asch's correspondence with Polish writers from the period 1903–1906, selected and edited by Stanisław Pigoń;<sup>964</sup> the same letters were published subsequently in *Folks-shtime*<sup>965</sup> in their Yiddish translation by Moyshe Shklar.<sup>966</sup> These documents testify to the character of the mutual relations and to the respect that the correspondents had for one another.

In his letter to Wilhelm Feldman, Stanisław Witkiewicz writes that he met a very original and talented Jewish writer and that getting acquainted with Asch's play made him discover new worlds. Later, he encourages Feldman to translate the drama into Polish and stage it for the Polish audience, who definitely should become familiar with it.<sup>967</sup> In his answers, Asch makes it clear that he misses Zakopane and conversations with Witkiewicz,<sup>968</sup> that he learned from Witkiewicz

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concerning the same events but recounted on different occasions may often diverge, see David Mazower, *Sholem Asch: Images of a Life*, op. cit., p. 4.

- 963 See unknown author, *Ash Sholem*, in: Zalmen Zilbertsvayg (ed.), *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, op. cit., col. 105.
- 964 See Stanisław Pigoń, *Listy Szaloma Asza do Stanisława Witkiewicza i Stefana Żeromskiego (1903–1906)*, op. cit., 17 (66), 19 December 1959, pp. 4–6 [introduction], 1 (67), 12 January 1960, pp. 4–5 and 8 [letters 1–9], 2 (68), 30 January 1960, pp. 4–5 [letters 10–14], 3 (69), 13 February 1960, pp. 4–5 [letters 15–21], 4 (70), 27 February 1960, p. 6 [supplements I and II].
- 965 See Stanisław Pigoń, *Briv fun Sholem Ashn tsu Stanisław Witkiewitshn un Stefan Żeromski*, in: *Folks-shtime*, 194, 12 December 1959, pp. 1 [information that the translated letters are going to be published], 4 and 7 [introduction]; 195, 15 December 1959, p. 4 [introduction, continued]; 196, 16 December 1959, p. 4 [letters 1 and 2]; 197, 17 December 1959, p. 4 [letters 3–8]; 198, 19 December 1959, p. 5 [letter 9]; 199, 22 December 1959, p. 4 [letters 10 and 11]; 200, 23 December 1959, p. 4 [letters 12 and 13]; 201, 24 December 1959, p. 5 [letter 14]; 202, 29 December 1959, p. 4 [letter 15]; 203, 30 December 1959, p. 4 [letters 16–21]; 1, 5 January 1960, p. 4 [supplement I]; 2, 6 January 1960, p. 4 [supplement II].
- סטאַנדיסלאָוו פּיגאָן, בריוו פון שלום אשן צו סטאַנדיסלאָוו וויטקיעוויטשן און סטעפאַן זשעראָמסקי, אײן: פּאָלקס־שטימע, נר. 194, 12.12.1959, ז. 1, 4 און 7, נר. 195, 15.12.1959, ז. 4, נר. 196, 16.12.1959, ז. 4, נר. 17.12.1959, 197, ז. 4, נר. 198, 19.12.1959, ז. 5, נר. 199, 22.12.1959, ז. 4, נר. 200, 23.12.1959, ז. 4, נר. 201, 24.12.1959, ז. 5, נר. 202, 29.12.1959, ז. 4, נר. 203, 30.12.1959, ז. 4, נר. 1, 05.01.1960, ז. 4, נר. 2, 06.01.1960, ז. 4.
- 966 משה שקלאר Moyshe Shklar (b. 1920) was a poet and journalist. Born in Warsaw, he left Poland in 1968.
- 967 See 1. *Stanisława Witkiewicza do Wilhelma Feldmana* (Zakopane, 9 November 1903), in: Stanisław Pigoń, *Listy Szaloma Asza do Stanisława Witkiewicza i Stefana Żeromskiego (1903–1906)*, op. cit., 1 (67), 12 January 1960, p. 4.
- 968 See 9. *Do Stanisława Witkiewicza* (Warszawa, 6 February 1904), in: *ibid.*, 1 (67), 12 January 1960, p. 5.

so much,<sup>969</sup> and that his friend, though not a Jew, understands him very well and has become extremely close to him, as great personages are close to everybody;<sup>970</sup> Asch also thanks Witkiewicz for his help.<sup>971</sup> It is not to be doubted that while Asch's Jewish mentor was Perets, Stanisław Witkiewicz played a similar role as to the young writer's knowledge of Poland's culture and language. In one of his consecutive letters, Asch attempts to articulate—using Polish better and better—his attitude towards all things Polish and writes that for him these feelings are not really connected with society, but rather with his sentiment for the homeland and its landscapes; also, he expresses his hope to arrive in Zakopane soon:

I am learning Polish, but it is not an easy task for me, because I am too much of an individualist to translate what I feel into another language and therefore I want to come over to Zakopane for the whole of winter so that I can stay close to you. In your presence, I want to think and see in Polish.<sup>972</sup>

The correspondence issued by Pigoń evinces that Asch had a kindly and amiable relationship also with Stefan Żeromski, but the published texts are mainly short postcard greetings. These contacts are presented in more detail by Asch himself in his text printed in *Nowy Dziennik*.<sup>973</sup> There, he writes, for instance, that he knew Żeromski and was his friend, admiring the honesty and candor of his literary achievements. Asch recollects that Żeromski, just like Witkiewicz, persuaded him to compose in Yiddish, stating that the language is the writer's instrument and therefore should not be changed. Apart from that, Asch admits the relations became slightly more distant after one of his visits in Nałęczów, when Żeromski voiced his conviction that there existed a Jewish sect whose members drank human blood. Asch, perturbed, quickly took his leave and afterwards was not so well-disposed towards Żeromski as he had used to be.<sup>974</sup> Perhaps it was that event that formed the basis of a similar episode in *Der man fun Natseres*,

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969 See 2. *Szalom Asz do Stanisława Witkiewicza* (Kraków, November 1903), in: *ibid.*, 1 (67), 12 January 1960, p. 4.

970 See 12. *Do Stanisława Witkiewicza* (Warszawa, ca. 25 April 1904), in: *ibid.*, 2 (68), 30 January 1960, p. 5.

971 See 15. *Do Stanisława Witkiewicza* (Płock, August /?/ 1904), in: *ibid.*, 3 (69), 13 February 1960, p. 5.

972 *Ibid.*

973 *Nowy Dziennik* was a Jewish newspaper published in Polish, in Cracow, between 1918 and 1939, on the initiative of Ozjasz Thon (1870–1936), a rabbi, Zionist movement activist and member of Polish Parliament before World War II.

974 See *Szalom Asz, Szalom Asz o Żeromskim i Reymoncie*, *op. cit.*, pp. 6–7.

where Pan Wiadomski, talking to a young Jew, claims that there obviously exists a Jewish sect whose members add human blood to matza.<sup>975</sup>

Some of Asch's letters to Polish writers were published in *Przegląd Humanistyczny* by Jan Zygmunt Jakubowski,<sup>976</sup> who also analyzed Asch's short autobiography from 1930, *Spojrzenie wstecz*, which was printed in Polish in 1958 in the journal *Twórczość*.<sup>977</sup> Jakubowski wonders what brought Witkiewicz, Żeromski and young Asch so close together and concludes that these must have been the "starvation days" of youth and the same non-conformity, the 'swell of impatience' and the inability to accept the suffering of inculpable people."<sup>978</sup>

The stay in Zakopane is remembered by Asch in an article in Yiddish which was published before World War II in Warsaw and then reprinted in 1976 in *Folks-shtime*; its Polish version appeared soon afterwards in *Polityka*.<sup>979</sup> The writer describes a scene in the house of Dąbrowska, where once, in a room that was decorated in the Zakopane folk fashion, he met Stanisław Witkiewicz, Stefan Żeromski along with his little son Adam, and Jan Stanisławski. Stanisławski was singing for the boy a song about Polish uhlans, who, to all the people present, seemed a dream which could be fulfilled only in a world of miracles, with the coming of the Messiah. Asch's next memory is that of the same song, but sung by Polish uhlans in independent Poland. At that time, however, Stanisławski was dead and so was little Adam. Asch claims that from then on he looked at the matters of life and death differently and tried to judge people also outside the context of the present moment.<sup>980</sup>

Another piece of writing where Asch describes his friendship with Witkiewicz and Żeromski is *Spojrzenie wstecz*. He writes:

Both were my great supporters and had no other motives than pure neighborly love. They did not persuade me to write in Polish, quite the contrary: encouraged me to write in the language of my own nation. Witkiewicz became my mentor and guide, and from Żeromski I learned how to treat my profession earnestly and to serve my

975 See Sholem Ash, *Der man fun Natseres*, op. cit., pp. 15–16.

976 See Jan Zygmunt Jakubowski, "... Znalazłem nauczyciela i przewodnika ..." *Listy Szaloma Asza do Stanisława Witkiewicza*, in: *Przegląd Humanistyczny*, 3, 1959, pp. 171–176.

977 See Szalom Asz, *Spojrzenie wstecz*, translated from German by Jan Koprowski, in: *Twórczość*, 5, 1958, pp. 7–23.

978 Jan Zygmunt Jakubowski, "... Znalazłem nauczyciela i przewodnika ..." *Listy Szaloma Asza do Stanisława Witkiewicza*, op. cit., p. 176. "The starvation years," or his school of life, are remembered by Asch in his autobiography; see Schalom Asch, *Rückblick*, op. cit., p. 61.

979 See Szalom Asz, *Ludzie i idee*, translated by Jan Leński, in: *Polityka*, 35, 28 August 1976, p. 8; Sholem Ash, *Mentshn un ideen*, in: *Folks-shtime*, 31 July 1976, p. 7

שלומו אש, מענטשן און אידעען, אין: פֿאָלקס־שטימע, 31.07.1976, ג. 8

980 See *ibid.*

people in every respect. At that time, when I was fortunate enough to stay close to those two men, I became much more mature.<sup>981</sup>

Asch's stay in Zakopane is recollected also by the actor Henryk Cudnowski, who worked in the traveling theater of Tadeusz Pilariski. He says that once Stefan Żeromski appeared in the wings, accompanied by a young, handsome man with Semitic features, dressed up in brand new local folk costume. The young writer was Asch, who quickly made friends with the members of the troupe. Among other things, Asch told Cudnowski how much he appreciated his classmate, Kornel Makuszyński (1884–1953, Polish author), whose literary talent he wished to emulate. Later, he invited all the guests to the premiere of his plays *Z biegiem fal* and *Grzech* to the Juliusz Słowacki Theater in Cracow. The entire group of writers and actors, including Żeromski and his admirers, traveled by train from Zakopane. Cudnowski does not know anymore if the plays were successful, admits he did not understand much of them, but he does remember that the women who were present at the first performance were impressed by Asch's handsome appearance. For unknown reasons, contradicting historical data, the conclusion to Cudnowski's text is the statement that following 1918, in America, Asch launched a campaign against the recognition of Poland's independence and, reportedly, made a solemn promise not to write a word in Polish again.<sup>982</sup>

Asch also reminisces about the premiere of *Grzech*, saying that he had to attend it wearing his yellow shoes: the only pair he owned; it was these shoes that the audience loved. After the performance, he was approached by Jan Stanisławski, who was so overwhelmed by the play that he brought the dramatist his painting as a gift.<sup>983</sup>

The collection of Asch's letters edited by Stanisław Pigoń is complemented by his correspondence with Eliza Orzeszkowa, who helped him to obtain a scholarship so that he was able to study Polish and live in Zakopane. Asch admits he would like to start writing in Polish and therefore he has to get to know it thoroughly as well as become acquainted with the soul of Poland.<sup>984</sup> The

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981 Szalom Asz, *Spojrzenie wstecz*, op. cit., p. 18. It ought to be stressed here that the autobiography was written neither for Polish readers nor for Polish Jews, but was commissioned by Paul Zsolnay, the Viennese publisher of German translations of Asch's works. Therefore very favorable remarks concerning Polish authors, contained therein, gain even more significance. Elsewhere in this book I refer to the primary German text, whereas the quote above was translated into English based on the Polish version.

982 See Henryk Cudnowski, *W sprawie Asza*, in: *Odra*, 20, 1 June 1958, p. 4.

983 See Dawid Lazer, *Dwa dni z Szalomem Aszem*, op. cit., p. 3.

984 See *Listy Szaloma Asza do Elizy Orzeszkowej 1*. (29 August 1904), in: Stanisław Pigoń, *Listy Szaloma Asza do Stanisława Witkiewicza i Stefana Żeromskiego (1903–1906)*, op.

friendship between Asch and Orzeszkowa is discussed in more detail by Edmund Jankowski in *Przegląd Humanistyczny*.<sup>985</sup> In a letter dated 6 May 1904, Wiktoria S. Huzarska of Warsaw turns to Orzeszkowa with a request to assess the literary abilities of a young Jewish writer, Sholem Asch. First she attaches Polish translations of his Yiddish and Hebrew texts, and then, in one of the subsequent letters, she encloses the firstlings of his poetic talent, in Polish:

So you—above ...  
 Above, in depths of clouds,  
 Close to the heaven's summit, at never-ending heights,  
 Where wingéd lambs can bathe in azure rainbows,  
 Where streams of light flow past and burn  
 In azure seas,  
 Amid the storm of eagles' wings,  
 Amid the wind of radiant sheets  
 That in the distance wave aglow ...  
 So you—above, by eagles borne,  
 Above, on moonlight beams,  
 And I—below!<sup>986</sup>

The poem reverberates with the sound of the Polish folk song *Ty pójdiesz górą* (You—uphill, me—downhill, we'll go our several ways), a motif in Orzeszkowa's novel *Nad Niemnem* (On the Banks of the Niemen).<sup>987</sup> It shows not only Asch's relatively good command of the Polish language, his knowledge of Polish culture and literature, and his fascination with Podhale,<sup>988</sup> but also the impetus behind and grandeur of his nascent talent.

In her letter, Huzarska also asks Orzeszkowa to rely on the influence of her friend Henryk Nusbaum and, using him as an intermediary, to intercede with the Natansons so that Asch's application should be accepted and a yearly scholarship granted to fund the writer's stay in Cracow and his further Polish studies. Indeed, Asch received the sum of 300 rubles, of which he informed Orzeszkowa in a letter, thanking her for the interposition. Jankowski touches upon the Polish short story by Asch, *Napoleońska czapka* (Napoleon's Hat), his first and last work that was written and printed in this language. Moreover, quoting Cud-

cit., 4 (70), 27 February 1960, p. 6.

985 See Edmund Jankowski, *O polskim epizodzie Szolema Asza*, op. cit.

986 Ibid., p. 167; *I wy górą ... / I wy górą, i wy w głębiach chmur, / pod szczytem niebios, w nieskończonej wysokości / Tam gdzie skrzydlate owce kąpią się w lazorowych tęczach, / Tam gdzie rzeki jasności płyną, i płoną / W lazorowych morzach, / Między burzą skrzydeł orlich, / Między wichrem jasnych płacht, / Których fali płoną w jasnej dali ... / I wy górą, na skrzydłach orłów / Górą na promieniach księżycy— / A ja—dołem!*

987 Orzeszkowa's Positivist novel, published in 1887.

988 Podhale is a sub-Tatran, culturally and ethnically distinct region of southern Poland.

nowski's aforesaid article as his only source, Jankowski speaks about Asch's anti-Polish campaign of 1918.<sup>989</sup> It is not known where this information was obtained, neither is it confirmed by other sources.

Asch's acquaintance with Polish artists bore even more fruit. Shmuel-Leyb Shnayderman<sup>990</sup> says that Witkiewicz was the first person who invited Asch to Kazimierz, a picturesque town on the Vistula which at the turn of the 19th and 20th century was an inspiration to many painters, poets and writers.<sup>991</sup> Also Asch, according to Shnayderman, found it unforgettable to have stayed in a place that was co-habited by the Polish and Jewish community, in peace and mutual respect, which was exceptional at that time;<sup>992</sup> many characters and scenes of *Miasteczko* (A Townlet) and later works were based on Asch's experience of Kazimierz and its vicinity.<sup>993</sup> Asch returned to that town many times and, as Shnayderman relates, the writer's temperament and flair were to remain in the inhabitants' memory for a long time and were usually recollected as scandalous: on one Friday evening, Asch, wearing a satin overcoat and a fur hat, was circling the synagogue on horseback, while the congregation were assembling to pray.<sup>994</sup> The writer himself mentions Kazimierz with affection in one of his 1912 letters to his wife, saying that now he is missing Poland very much and would love to sit down with Matylda in a Kazimierz orchard.<sup>995</sup> The town is commemorated in Asch's frequently quoted words: "In Kazimierz, the Vistula talked to me in Yiddish."<sup>996</sup>

989 See Edmund Jankowski, *O polskim epizodzie Szolema Asza*, op. cit., pp. 168–170. *Napoleońska czapka*, in Jankowski's opinion, was published in *Nowa Gazeta* on 9 February 1906 (No. 67); regrettably, I did not manage to obtain the text.

990 שמואל-לייב שניידערמאן Shmuel-Leyb Shnayderman (1906–1996, S.L. Shneiderman) was a writer and journalist who was born in Kazimierz. He studied Polish literature at Warsaw University, in 1933 he left for Paris. The years 1938–1939 were spent in Johannesburg, and in 1940 Shnayderman moved to New York. He wrote in Yiddish, Polish, and English.

991 See S[hmuel] L[eyb] Shneiderman, *The River Remembers*, New York: Horizon Press 1978, p. 70, where Shnayderman speaks about Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, although probably he means not the son, but the father, Stanisław Witkiewicz, befriended by Asch. At the beginning of the 20th century, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, born in 1885, was probably too young to accompany Asch, five years his senior, to Kazimierz.

992 See S[hmuel] L[eyb] Shneiderman, *The River Remembers*, op. cit., pp. 59–61.

993 See *ibid.*, p. 68.

994 See *ibid.*

995 See Asch's letters to his wife, letter No. 44, sent from Vilnius in 1912, in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., p. 46.

996 S[hmuel] L[eyb] Shneiderman, *The River Remembers*, op. cit., p. 69. It is worth noting that the original title of Shnayderman's book in Yiddish is *ווען די ווייסל האט גערעדט יידיש* (*Ven di Veysl hot geredt yidish*, When the Vistula Talked in Yiddish), which is a direct



Asch's recollections indicate that he knew and appreciated another Polish writer, Władysław Reymont. Reymont thought it would be better for Asch to write in Polish. Yet Asch stresses that this advice stemmed just from kindness, not from dislike for Yiddish. Under Reymont's influence, Asch composed his only Polish short story, *Napoleońska czapka*, which I mentioned before, and which he soon translated into Yiddish. Although Reymont had helped him to correct the Polish text and to eliminate grammar mistakes, he strove to preserve the style of the author. In his article about Polish writers, Asch concludes that—contrary to what was commonly believed—Reymont did not have any anti-Semitic views, and that his *Ziemia obiecana*<sup>997</sup> was simply true to facts. Asch remembers he once met a Stockholm rabbi who informed him he had been consulted about Reymont's rumored anti-Semitism before the Nobel Prize was granted;<sup>998</sup> as the rabbi denied the allegation, there were no obstacles to bestow the award. Asch adds he was very happy that the matter had ended so propitiously.<sup>999</sup>

A brief, but vivid and endearing reminiscence about Asch is included in *Alfabet wspomnień* (Alphabet of Memories) by Antoni Słonimski (1895–1976, Polish writer of Jewish origin). Słonimski says that Asch “liked Poland and spoke Polish, but he mispronounced the words demoniacally.”<sup>1000</sup> A similar opinion is expressed by Julian Tuwim (1894–1953, Polish poet of Jewish origin, author of the famous manifesto *My, Żydzi Polscy* (We, Polish Jews), 1944). He remembers his dinner with Asch and quotes the latter's mispronounced comment on Polish cuisine: “Żemniaki, pszakrew” (“Bloody spuds”).<sup>1001</sup>

Asch's contacts with Polish writers were not exclusively of private character. Zusman Segalovitsh describes a banquet held in Asch's honor in the Europejski Hotel, Warsaw, by the Polish PEN Club before World War II. Segalovitsh recalls that all the guests admired the writer's wife Matylda, her august appearance and exquisite dress. He also quotes Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski (1885–1944), Zofia Nałkowska (1884–1954), and Leopold Staff (1878–1957), who ap-

reference to Asch's words; See Shmuel-Leyb Shnayderman, *Ven di Veysl hot geredt yidish*, Tel-Aviv: Y.L. Perets 1970

שמואל-לייב שניידערמאן, ווען די ווייסל האָט גערעדט ייִדיש, תל-אביב: י. ל. פרץ 1970.

997 *The Promised Land* is Reymont's novel that was published in 1897–1898 and pictures the burgeoning industrial town of Łódź.

998 Władysław Reymont was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1924, when other nominees were Stefan Żeromski and the German writer Thomas Mann (1875–1955).

999 See Szalom Asz, *Szalom Asz o Żeromskim i Reymontcie*, op. cit., p. 7.

1000 Antoni Słonimski, *Asz Szalom*, in: Antoni Słonimski, *Alfabet wspomnień*, Warszawa: PIW 1975, p. 12.

1001 Julian Tuwim, Tadeusz Januszewski, *Smorgoński Savonarola*, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza* 295, waw edition, 18–19 December 1999, *Gazeta Świąteczna*, p. 24.

parently only then realized that they knew nothing or almost nothing about Asch's people and therefore asked him to talk to them about "ordinary Jews."<sup>1002</sup>

When Asch's fiftieth birthday was celebrated in Paris, one of the speeches was delivered by the secretary general of the Polish PEN Club and cultural attaché of the Polish Embassy, Jan Lechoń (1899–1956), who addressed the writer in Polish. Lechoń said Asch was one of those authors who, in the spirit of their own community, were able to portray the joys and sorrows of the country's entire population, while his great realism made him especially close to Polish writers. Lechoń expressed his admiration for Asch not only as his compatriot, but also as the citizen of the world. Asch's reply was directed mainly at the hosts and other speakers, and was interpreted from Yiddish into French; the writer referred to the Polish poet's words, saying there were frictions between the Jews and Poles which sometimes drove the former to despair, but the Jewry had retained their pro-Polish sympathies. Asch added the Poles did not know the Jews, yet the Jews did know the Poles, therefore mutual understanding could be enhanced if only Polish people would get more acquainted with their Jewish neighbors.<sup>1003</sup>

A few years later, in 1933, Asch received the Order of Polonia Restituta from the Polish government. He was so proud to be the first Polish-Jewish writer to be honored with this decoration that he did not return it when that was demanded of him as a demonstration of protest against the rise of anti-Semitism in Poland.<sup>1004</sup> Many Polish artists, not only of Jewish extraction, had a high opinion of Asch and supported him; the best proof that this support was not limited just to artistic circles was the above mentioned Polish decoration that was awarded to the writer.

Asch's love for Poland is the more remarkable that it was not a blind infatuation; he was aware that Polish Jews did not receive the same treatment as other citizens and they were often underprivileged. This is manifest in the open letter to Marshal Piłsudski,<sup>1005</sup> which will be discussed below. In an interview which followed the publication of *The Nazarene*, Asch stated that he had long wished to compose a novel about Jesus, however, it never crossed his mind to have it printed in Poland, where the book would surely be censored both by the Jews

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1002 See Zusman Segalovitsh, *Tlomatske 13*, op. cit., pp. 43–44.

1003 See X., *Imponująca uroczystość ku czci Szaloma Asza w Paryżu*, op. cit.

1004 See Salomon Belis-Legis, *Wstęp*, in: Szolem Asz, *Mąż z Nazaretu*, op. cit., pp. 17–18; Shloyme Rozenberg, *Sholem Ash fun der noent*, op. cit., pp. 125–126, Shmuel Niger, *Sholem Ash. Zayn lebn un zayne verk*, op. cit., pp. 412–414.

1005 Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935) was a Polish left-wing activist and commander of troops fighting for Poland's independence, its Head of State in 1918–1922 and Prime Minister in 1926–1928 and 1930.

and the Poles. To justify his conviction, he said that his worst childhood memory was that of un-Christian Christians running the streets on Holy Friday and bellowing: “Kill the murderers of Christ!”<sup>1006</sup>

Asch’s pragmatic approach and his sober attitudes towards Poland can be observed in those letters to his wife that come from the period when he considered emigrating with all his family to America. In 1914 he writes from New York that America is a paradise for children so they can soon complete their education and fend for themselves. In the next sentence he adds bitterly that in Warsaw they would turn Polish.<sup>1007</sup> Paradoxically, Asch’s son Nathan became an American writer; he composed in English and never learned the Hebrew alphabet so his father’s letters had to be read out to him.<sup>1008</sup> Nathan himself recalls an incident from his Polish school where he was the only Jewish student. So as not to get bored sitting in the hall alone during religious education classes, he stayed with his Catholic fellow students in the classroom, although no one forced him to. One day he communicated to the priest that he wanted to become a Catholic too. The priest replied that would break his father’s heart. As a retort, Nathan announced he did not care what his father would feel.<sup>1009</sup>

In 1932, the Warsaw *Haynt* published a long text by Asch, targeted mainly at the Poles. Extensive excerpts of it were later reprinted, in Polish translation, in *Miesięcznik Żydowski*. Asch declares that in the face of the growing number of anti-Jewish attacks he cannot remain silent any longer, although he realizes the contagion has spread from Germany. He says that in the old days in the fall, Russian youths feared conscription into the army, and now in Poland the Jews fear university students. The fact that it is chiefly young people who took part in anti-Jewish incidents is particularly painful, considering that new citizens should not grow up in such an atmosphere. According to Asch, the attackers represent the “rotten” portion of humankind, the Nazis. He stresses that the Poles and the Jews have cohabited the same country for over a millennium and that the Jews were involved in the Polish fight for independence and Polish national uprisings. Therefore they are entitled to stay in these lands. To conclude, Asch voices his hope that his words can further the brotherly co-existence of both nations, which, in his view, is necessary for his homeland to prosper.<sup>1010</sup>

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1006 See Frank Mead, *I Had to Write These Things*, in: *Christian Herald*, January 1944, pp. 13–14 and 52, here p. 14.

1007 See Asch’s letters to his wife, letter No. 92 from New York, dated 1914, in: M[ortkhe] Tsanin (ed.), *Briv fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., p. 90.

1008 See Nathan Asch, *My Father and I*, op. cit., p. 59.

1009 See *ibid.*, p. 56.

1010 See Szalom Asz, *Nie mogę dłużej milczeć*, in: *Miesięcznik Żydowski*, 9, September 1932, pp. 508–513; unknown author, *Szalom Asz o ekscesach antysemitycznych*, in: *Nasz*

## 5.2 Asch and the Polish Jewry

In Asch's opinion, the main characteristic of a Polish Jew is that he is not so much concerned about earthly life as about afterlife. In the writer's view, one of the most outstanding representatives of the Polish Jewry is a classic of Yiddish literature, I.L. Perets; Asch emphasizes his literary indebtedness to him.<sup>1011</sup> Even in those few sentences that were included in the retrospective article about Perets one can see Asch's identification with the community of Polish Jews.

Asch's bonds with Poland were not only the obvious, emotional ones, but also professional: it was there that he published his writings and articles in the Yiddish press as well as his books, and it was there where the majority of his readers lived. Asch wrote, among others, for *Haynt*, starting from January 1914, which was announced to the readers on the front page; the editors informed that from then on the famous writer and dramatist Sholem Asch was one of the contributors. Afterwards, *Haynt* printed Asch's articles and other pieces, such as sketches made on a tour to Palestine, submitted from May 1914.<sup>1012</sup>

Although Asch emigrated in 1912, he enjoyed revisiting Poland, either of his own accord or when he was invited in connection with various events. He did not manage to see his homeland right after World War I, when in the spring of 1919 he traveled from the United States to Europe, providing humanitarian aid. Asch said that, risking his life, he had only succeeded in crossing the Polish–Lithuanian front line in order to transport money from Kaunas to Vilnius.<sup>1013</sup> However, in 1921 he came over to Poland, where he enjoyed a cordial welcome of the Jewish intelligentsia. At that time *Motke Ganev* was a box-office hit in Jewish theaters in Poland.<sup>1014</sup> Johan Smertenko reports that in Polish shtetls Asch received a royal treatment; the hotels where he stayed were surrounded by crowds of people, and his plays were staged in many places.<sup>1015</sup>

In 1924 the writer stayed longer in Warsaw, where he stunned audiences with his improvised speeches at various cultural events held by the Jewish community.<sup>1016</sup> In that period *Literarische bleter* interviewed him on the condition of

*Przegląd*, 361, 28 December 1932, p. 7.

1011 See Sholem Ash, *Y.L. Perets*, in: *Di goldene keyt*, op. cit., pp. 48–49.

1012 See Khaim Finkelshtayn, *Haynt. A tsaytung ba yidn 1908–1939*, op. cit., p. 251.

1013 See Schalom Asch, *Rückblick*, op. cit., p. 74, where Asch recalls that regrettably, for some reasons, he was unable to visit Poland then, yet he does not explain what reasons these were. See *ibid.*, p. 73.

1014 See unknown author, *Ash Sholem*, in: Zalmen Zilbertsvayg (ed.), *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, op. cit., col. 107.

1015 See Johan J. Smertenko, *Sholom Asch*, in: *The Nation*, 14 February 1923, pp. 180–182, here p. 180.

1016 See Yitskhok Kharlash, *Ash Sholem*, op. cit., cols. 188–189.

Yiddish literature. In that conversation, Asch states that Yiddish literature could have many more readers if only they were not divided by political frontiers. He is right to claim that the value of literature lies not in the sum total of sold copies, but in the significance and number of printed works. Asch says Yiddish literature is closely related to Jewish life and reflects it in all its aspects. He ascribes the stagnation on the Jewish book market to the fact that some recent publications were collected works, which an ordinary reader cannot afford to purchase. Moreover, he pays attention to the development of Yiddish literature, which deals with more complex problems: a phenomenon that has to be accepted by Jewish reading audience. On the other hand, thanks to that evolution, a growing number of works in Yiddish are translated into other languages, gaining more publicity in foreign quality papers and magazines. Moreover, Asch regrets that in Poland, where appropriate Polish–Jewish relations are of special importance, Yiddish literature is purposefully ignored. Eventually, the writer underlines he is visiting Poland after fifteen years and although he has met new people in that time, his bonds with Poland have remained the strongest: he still cherishes the Polish land and landscape.<sup>1017</sup>

In *Literarische bleter*, Asch considered the status of Yiddish literature also on other occasions: on 11 July 1924 the front page presented the speech that he had delivered six days earlier, during a solemn meeting held in his honor. The writer explained he had to come to Poland because he had missed the country and its inhabitants. Quoting Wyspiański—who said during the partitions that although Poland was not shown in maps, it lived on in people’s hearts<sup>1018</sup>—Asch observed the history of the Jewish people was similar and stressed that literature was the spiritual homeland of the Jews. According to him, Yiddish literature is a native land that cannot be conquered or occupied by enemy forces.

The tasks of Yiddish literature are specified in the testament of Perets; its mission is to perpetuate what is inherent in the Jewish nation: the inner power to overcome any obstacles. Moreover, literature should reveal the humaneness of the Jewish community and be a truthful and complete representation of life. It has to be added that literature helps the Jewish people to withstand any symptoms of hostility manifested by the external environment, yet their attitude

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1017 See unknown author, *A geshprekh mit Sholem Ash*, in: *Literarische bleter*, 7, 20 June 1924, p. 1.

אויטאָר ניט באַקאַנט, אַ געשפּרעך מיט שלום אַש, אין: *ליטעראַרישע בלעטער*, 7, 20 יוני 1924, 1.

1018 See Stanisław Wyspiański, *Wesele*, in: Stanisław Wyspiański, *Dramaty wybrane. I. Warszawianka. Klątwa. Wesele. Wyzwolenie*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 1972, pp. 133–321, here pp. 286–287. Asch refers to the conversation between the Poet and the Bride at the end of Act 3, sc. 16 (*The Wedding*, translated by Noel Clark, London: Oberon Books 1999).

to that environment is not negative and they feel no hatred towards the Russians or the Poles. Also, the Jews know Poland thanks to eminent Polish artists; Asch lists here Mickiewicz, Słowacki, Wyspiański, and Prus. He deplores the fact that the Poles are not familiar with Yiddish literature. Further on, he states that literature forms the link between the inhabitants of the old homeland and new, émigré homelands, which made it possible to provide Central and East European countries with such considerable financial support after World War I. Literature was instrumental in the upbringing of those generations that promoted the cause of Poland's independence and those that shaped the Jewish communities in the Land of Israel.<sup>1019</sup>

In October 1924 the writer sent a congratulatory letter to *Literarische bleter*, which had just reached its twenty-fifth, jubilee issue (numbered 25–26). Submitting a lengthy text, which was printed on the first page, he used the opportunity to discuss again the standing of Yiddish literature and to encourage the readers to fan their passion for books so that literary volumes should become their most treasured possessions. Asch suggested more book clubs should be established that would connect members of various political convictions, and more libraries opened, but above all, more books should be bought by individuals and then be constantly and prominently present in every Jewish household.<sup>1020</sup>

During his stay in Warsaw Asch made a train trip to Cracow, where he arrived on the Saturday of 29 November at 10 p.m. Earlier, *Nowy Dziennik* gave the readers the exact arrival time, asking them to come to the station in large numbers and to greet the writer there.<sup>1021</sup> On Sunday, the Warszawa odeon was the venue of Asch's lecture on "The significance and impact of Jewish literature on the life of the Jewry." The room was packed full, hundreds of people did not get their tickets, and some of them just forced their way inside.<sup>1022</sup>

Warsaw's Yiddish writers sometimes had an ambivalent attitude towards Asch as a private person, but at the same time they admired him as a writer.

1019 See Sholem Ash, *Sholem Ash vegn der yidisher literatur*, in: *Literarische bleter*, 10, 11 July 1924, p. 1.

שלום אש, שלום אש וועגן דער יידישער ליטעראטור, אין: ליטערארישע בלעטער, נר. 10, 11 יולי 1924, ז. 1.

1020 See Sholem Ash, *Sholem Ash vegn der batsiyung tsum modernem yidishn bukh*, in: *Literarische bleter*, 25–26, 31 October 1924, p. 1.

שלום אש, שלום אש וועגן דער באציונג צום מאדערנעם יידישן בוך, אין: ליטערארישע בלעטער, נר. 25–26, 31 אקטאבער 1924, ז. 1.

1021 See M[ojżesz] Kanfer, *Szalom Asz w Krakowie*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 266, 27 November 1924, p. 3.

1022 See unknown author, *Odczyt Asza*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 267, 28 November 1924, p. 5; unknown author, *Odczyt Asza w Krakowie*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 272, 4 December 1924, p. 4.

Therefore the majority of them had great expectations when Asch settled in the capital as earlier there had appeared no important figure to fill the gap left by Perets in the Jewish community. It turned out, however, that although Asch rented an apartment in Warsaw and officially resided there, he spent much time abroad, in Berlin and elsewhere, and he neither wanted nor was able to “take the throne,” vacant after Perets’ death.<sup>1023</sup> That did not affect his status as a famous, recognized writer; his arrival in Warsaw and the express intention to live among the Polish Jewry significantly raised the spirits among the local Jews. The Association of Jewish Writers and Journalists even held a solemn meeting in his honor. On that occasion, Asch said that a Jewish writer is like a man whose family members live both in Poland and the United States. Wherever he goes, he is bound to miss somebody and to be oppressed by anxiety. Therefore the spiritual homeland of the Jews should be literature.<sup>1024</sup>

Asch also visited other Polish towns; for instance, in 1925 he arrived in Cracow on the invitation of Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Sztuki Żydowskiej (the Society of Friends of Jewish Art).<sup>1025</sup> In the same year, the Warsaw publishing house Kultur-lige issued the third edition of Asch’s complete works: the original collection of twelve volumes was supplemented by six. In the introduction, which was written in Warsaw in March 1925, Asch addressed the Polish Jews, inhabitants of shtetls, presenting himself as “the blood of your blood, the spirit of your spirit.”<sup>1026</sup> It is hard to imagine an artist could define his identity in a clearer manner.

When in 1925 Warsaw celebrated the tenth anniversary of Perets’ death, the saluters marched across the town to visit the writer’s grave. The procession was led by the widow as well as his followers, Nomberg and Asch.<sup>1027</sup> In the same year, the literary section of *Nowy Dziennik* presented an article about Asch, authored by Mojżesz Kanfer. Kanfer claims that Asch’s future writings, those that are going to be composed, can only supplement what has been said by Asch until then, as the character of his output has been firmly established. Additionally,

1023 See Melekh Ravitsh, *Mayn leksikon 1*, op. cit., pp. 30–32.

1024 See Nakhman Mayzil, *Geven amol a lebn*, Buenos Ayres: Tsentral-farband fun poylishe yidn in Argentine 1951, pp. 165–174.

נחמן מייזיל, געווען אמאל א לעבן, בוענאס איירעס: צענטראל־פארבאנד פון פוילישע יידן אין ארגענטינע, 1951, ת. 165–174.

1025 See Mirosława Bułat, *Krakowski teatr żydowski. Między szundem a sztuką*, Kraków: UJ 2006, p. 122.

1026 Sholem Ash, *A por verter fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit., p. IV; *blut fun ayer blut, gayst fun ayer gayst*

בלוט פון אייער בלוט, גייסט פון אייער גייסט.

1027 See unknown author, *Olbrzymi pochód na grób Pereca*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 90, 22 April 1925, p. 1.

Kanfer observes a very important trait of Asch's *oeuvre*, the one that attracted many young Jewish readers: Asch describes their lives, their aspirations, and their worship of new gods, yet he never rebukes the youth. His assessment and judgment are limited to parents, whose pursuit of material gains prevents them from spending enough time with children and from handing down traditions and values. In conclusion, Kanfer states Asch is the Jewish wizard of words, but even he did not manage to represent the desires of the new generation in full.<sup>1028</sup>

Although in 1925 Asch moved to France, he continued to take part in the political life of Poland and after Piłsudski's *coup d'état* in 1926 he published an open letter to the Marshal in *Haynt*. The letter was soon reprinted in the Polish language in *Nasz Przegląd*,<sup>1029</sup> and its excerpts in *Nowy Dziennik*,<sup>1030</sup> arousing conflicting opinions in Jewish communities abroad, because it opened with praise that was considered exaggerated by people who were not familiar with the situation of Poland. For instance, Asch says Piłsudski is the only living national hero, an embodiment of Polish hopes and the Polish national character. It should be noted such a tone was typical of the publications of that period, as one can observe in the texts that are quoted in the article by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska,<sup>1031</sup> while the more important part of Asch's letter is the latter one, where he appeals to the Marshal for help and understanding towards the Polish Jews, especially for the introduction of a better taxation system. Another request is to have the same legal rights for the Poles and the Jews, thanks to which Jewish citizens would gain the same civic status.<sup>1032</sup>

In 1926, in Warsaw, Nakhman Mayzil published his Yiddish study, nearly thirty pages long, concerning Asch.<sup>1033</sup> Mayzil discussed the beginnings of the

1028 See M[ojżesz] Kanfer, *Szalom Asz w 25-lecie twórczości*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 274, 7 December 1925, pp. 5 and 6.

1029 See Szalom Asz, *List otwarty do Marszałka Piłsudskiego*, in: *Nasz Przegląd*, 292, 24 October 1926, p. 5; *Nasz Przegląd* was a Jewish newspaper that was published in Warsaw in 1923–1939 in the Polish language; its editors-in-chief were Jakób Appenzlak (1894–1950) and Natan Szwalbe.

1030 See Szalom Asz, *Z listu otwartego Szaloma Asza*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 239, 27 October 1926, p. 3.

1031 See Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Marszałek Józef Piłsudski w oczach Żydów—wybór tekstów (Szalom Asz, Mojżesz Schorr, Majer Balaban, Isaac Bashevis Singer i inni)*, in: Lech Maliszewski (ed.), *Żar niepodległości. Międzynarodowe aspekty życia i działalności Józefa Piłsudskiego*, Lublin: Norbertinum 2004, pp. 186–206.

1032 See Sholem Ash, *An ofener briv tsu Marshal Piłsudski*, in: *Haynt*, 241, 22 October 1926, p. 5;

ש'לום אָשׁ, אַן אָפֿענער בריוו צו מאַרשאַל פּיִלסודסקי, אײַן: דײַטש, נר. 241, 22.10.1926.

1033 See Nakhman Mayzil, *Sholem Ash (finf un tsvantsik yor shafn)*, Varshe: Kletskin 1926; נחמן מייזיל, שלום אש (פֿינף און צוואַנציק יאָר שאַפֿן), וואַרשע: קלעצקין 1926.



writer's literary career and his memorable meeting with Perets. He mentioned Asch's first story, *Moyshele*, which was published on 2 November 1900 in *Der yud*, issue 48. He added that even the first stories and sketches by Asch had had a distinctive quality: uniquely charming, delicate and romantic. Mayzil discussed subsequent works by Asch, providing bibliographical information as well as quoting some responses of the readers and critics, and argued that, from an author of sketches and novellas, Asch turned into *the* Yiddish writer.<sup>1034</sup> Moreover, he attempted to explain that Sholem Asch was so controversial because of his mutability, which, however, did not stem from recklessness or eagerness to please, but from the richness of his creative abilities. Therefore the writer had both his critics and admirers, and each of them could instantaneously change their attitudes towards the writer.<sup>1035</sup> Mayzil noted that Asch had a special talent for depicting Jewish lifestyle and history, which came alive in his dramas, short stories and novels.<sup>1036</sup> He thought Asch's name should be added to the group of the three classics of Yiddish literature even at the point when he was writing his article.<sup>1037</sup>

To sum up, Asch was perceived by many people as the most eminent Jewish writer of the interwar period, which is corroborated by various events and documents, e.g. in 1927 in Cracow, a lecture and a discussion were held whose topic was: "Is Shalom Asch the greatest Jewish poet?"<sup>1038</sup>

Towards the end of 1927, owing chiefly to the efforts of Varsovian Yiddish writers, the Yiddish PEN Club was established with its head office in Vilnius. Although Polish writers favored the idea of setting its headquarters in Warsaw, the International PEN did not permit that, because the rule was one city could not host two PEN Clubs. This is why before the 1928 Oslo congress, the bulletin of the International PEN listed the Yiddish PEN Club among the national ones, with Vilnius, Warsaw and New York as its main cities and Sholem Asch, a citizen of "Yiddish-land," as its honorary member. During the next congress in Vienna in 1929 Yiddish writers were represented by a large group led by Sholem Asch.<sup>1039</sup>

That Asch was deeply involved in the life of the Polish Jewry is seen in his polemical article that was published in 1929 in a Parisian newspaper פאַריזער פאַרזען (Parizer Haynt). Asch protested against a demonstration that was staged in

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1034 See *ibid.*, p. 11.

1035 See *ibid.*, p. 12.

1036 See *ibid.*, p. 15.

1037 See *ibid.*, p. 24.

1038 See Mirosława Bułat, *Krakowski teatr żydowski. Między szundem a sztuką*, op. cit., p. 44.

1039 See Nakhman Mayzil, *Geven amol a leben*, op. cit., pp. 278–291.

Paris in connection with the social unrest in Lvov; he argued the organizers of the event acted in the interest of the Soviet Union, hindering the Polish–Jewish rapprochement.<sup>1040</sup>

In 1930 in Warsaw Asch held a double jubilee: his fiftieth birthday and the thirtieth anniversary of the onset of his literary work. Towards the end of the year, various celebrations took place all over Poland, but even earlier the newspapers and magazines published more articles and notes about Asch than normally. Some news was extremely sensational, e.g. it was said that Asch's son Nathan, having published his new novel *Pay Day*, had to flee to Canada to avoid arrest.<sup>1041</sup> Later the information was denied by Matylda Asch, Nathan's mother, when she and her husband were visiting Cracow. She admitted the copies had been confiscated and the editor faced a court trial, but as according to the law it was the editor who bore the responsibility, Nathan was never at risk. After the trial, the editor was acquitted and *Pay Day* reappeared in bookshops.<sup>1042</sup>

On Asch's jubilee, a special issue of *Literarische bleter*<sup>1043</sup> was printed in which almost all the material concerned the writer. The articles were commissioned from the contemporary Jewish celebrities, academics, artists, and cultural activists living not only in Poland, but also in Great Britain, Austria or Germany. Among the excellent contributions, many of which contain biographical information that is unavailable elsewhere, one can find also Asch's text. Some of the recollections and opinions are but scraps of the writer's rich biography, but they make it possible at least partly to recreate both his artistic and personal characteristics as well as to get some insight into what Asch's contemporaries thought about him.

In his long article, exceeding two pages, Nakhman Mayzil calls Asch “the center of a planetary system” of contemporary Yiddish literature. He compares Asch's jubilee to Perets' jubilee of 1901, remarking that in the meantime Yiddish literature managed to attain the same status as other literatures and one of the authors of this success was Sholem Asch. Mayzil quotes the words of Stefan Zweig, an Austrian writer of Jewish descent,<sup>1044</sup> who said it is difficult to write

1040 See Antony Polonsky, *A Failed Pogrom: The Demonstrations in Lwow, June 1929*, in: Yisrael Gutman, Ezra Mendelsohn, Jehuda Reinharz, Chone Shmeruk (eds.), *The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars*, Hanover / London: University Press of New England 1989, pp. 109–125, here p. 123.

1041 See unknown author, *Syn Szaloma Asza—bohaterem sensacji*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 171, 7 July 1930, p. 11.

1042 See Dawid Lazer, *Dwa dni z Szalomem Aszem*, op. cit., p. 3.

1043 See 1930 דעצעמבער 19, 51, בר. לישעראישע בלעטער, *Literarische bleter*, 51, 19 December 1930.

1044 Stefan Zweig (1881–1942) emigrated to Great Britain (1934) and then to Brazil. Unable to come to terms with the fact that the Germans destroyed his spiritual homeland,

in a minor language; the greater the merit of such a writer when his work is included in the world canon thanks to translations, because then it is not only his personal testimony, but also a testimony of all his generation and nation. Zweig stated that it was Asch who had such merit for the Jewish people. In the latter part of the article, Mayzil describes Asch's services for Yiddish literature, referring to the statement by the great writer Perets, who stressed Asch would never betray Yiddish literature and was bound to remain a Jewish author for ever.<sup>1045</sup>

The next, fascinating article, which abounds in new data, was penned by Avrom Gliksman<sup>1046</sup> of Warsaw, who knew Asch during his childhood and youth spent in Kutno. Gliksman left for Germany and Switzerland to study there, while Asch stayed among his people. In retrospect, Gliksman thinks that Asch's choice, though dictated by his financial standing, proved a better one. He says his memories of the university years are nothing in comparison with those of his native town, Kutno. Gliksman describes his and Asch's childhood years; the town and its visitors, arriving from remote regions; and the teacher who used to beat his pupils. He remembers his friendship with Asch. Gliksman came from a well-off family, his father made sure the son was brought up in the traditional Jewish way, but the daughters had French and German governesses, conversed in Polish, and read books in German. Sholem and Avrom spent hours, looking at the pictures in German magazines, and later found Gliksman's father's Jewish Enlightenment books in Hebrew. Then young Asch delved into German classics, he read the works by Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832) and Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), and memorized long passages from the writings of Heinrich Heine (1797–1856). Both youths decided to learn German and concluded they should do it in the same way they had learned Hebrew: by reading the Bible. Thus they discovered the translation by Mendelssohn.

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Europe, he committed suicide in 1942. Zweig wrote the introduction to the German translation of Asch's *Peterburg*, published in Vienna.

1045 See Nakhman Mayzil, *Der groyser yontev fun der yidisher literatur*, in: *Literarische bleter*, 51, 19 December 1930, pp. 957–959; Y[itskhok] L[eyb] Perets, *Sholem Ash*, in: Y[itskhok] L[eyb] Perets, *Ale verk, 7, literatur un leben*, Nyu-York: Tsiko 1947, pp. 240–243, here p. 243

נחמן מייזיל, דער גרויסער יום-טוב פון דער יידישער ליטעראַטור, אין: ליטעראַרישע בלעטער, נר. 51, 19 דעצעמבער 1930, ז. 957–959; י.ל. פערעץ, שלום אַש, אין: י.ל. פערעץ, אַלע ווערק, 7, ליטעראַטור און לעבן, ניריאָרק: ציקאָ, 1947, ז. 240–243, דאָ ז. 243.

1046 Avrom Gliksman (1883–1943) was a writer and journalist. He studied political economy, philosophy, and social sciences in Leipzig, Zurich, and Jena; wrote newspaper articles in Hebrew, Yiddish, and German. Gliksman traveled around Poland, offering popular science lectures in Yiddish. When the war broke out, he fled from Warsaw to Vilnius. From the Vilnius ghetto, he was deported by the Germans to the camp in Treblinka and killed there.

With time, there arrived in Kutno more Jewish Enlightenment books as well as non-religious writings in Hebrew, Polish, and German. Among the authors, Gliksman lists Perets, whose works were read in Hebrew; Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949), whose output was available in Polish translations; and Sienkiewicz. Sholem got acquainted with these books in secret, reading in the hayloft of the barn: they were not a welcome acquisition in a pious Jewish household. Initially, the family were happy to see Asch's friendship with a better-off boy, but then Avrom was labeled as a "heretic" and asked by Sholem not to visit the Asches' house any more. Soon the Gliksman family decided it was Sholem who was responsible for Avrom's following the godless path of evil. When Zionist postulates spread to Kutno, Sholem and Avrom were fascinated by them, although, as Gliksman recalls, they treated them rather as national than political ideas. At that time Asch began to write in Hebrew (making grammar mistakes) and to submit his texts to *הצפירה* (*Hatsefira*). Unfortunately, there was no reply. Therefore he tried to send his manuscript to Vienna, to the Zionist magazine *Die Welt*, published in German. Asch's German smacked of Mendelssohn's translation of the Bible, and as Gliksman states, of the novels by Nokhem-Meyer Shaykevitch,<sup>1047</sup> which he furtively studied. The magazine editors did not accept Asch's text, but they did send an answer, which was enough to make Asch more popular in Kutno, although the inhabitants needed much more time to believe in his talent. Gliksman also says that even in his youth Asch was very fond of nature, and that they frequently walked the fields, read books in the orchard for days, or sometimes—which was not customary—went to bathe in the river. Gliksman boasts it was thanks to him that Sholem met the Szpiro family and his future wife, Matylda (Madzia).<sup>1048</sup>

The same period is discussed by Asch in his autobiography.<sup>1049</sup> He reminisces about Avrom and the books that they got from his friend's father, the works of Heine, Schiller, and Goethe. Asch says he liked ironic Heine, but especially admired Goethe's *Faust* as well as Schiller's *The Robbers* and *The Maid of Orleans*. Contrariwise, he was not attracted by *Nathan the Wise* by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) and he considered the protagonist an artificial figure. Among the interesting authors, Asch enumerates Heinrich Kleist (1777–

1047 Nokhem-Meyer Shaykevitch (1849–1905) was a Yiddish writer, very popular at the end of the 19th century. His pen name was Shomer. Gliksman suggests then that Asch's German bore clear traces of the interference of Yiddish.

1048 See Avrom Gliksman, *Sholem Ash in der yugnt*, in: *Literarische bleter*, 51, 19 December 1930, pp. 959–961 and 52, 26 December 1930, pp. 978–981

אברהם גליקסמאן, שלום אש אין דער יוגנט, אין: ליטערארישע בלעטער, נר. 51, 19 דעצעמבער 1930, ז. 978–981. נר. 52, 26 דעצעמבער 1930, ז. 959–961

1049 See Schalom Asch, *Rückblick*, op. cit.

1811) and Friedrich Hebbel (1813–1863). He also describes the finale of his adventure with German classics, absent from Glikzman's report. Sholem's elder brothers, who looked after him, discovered that the youngster did not study the Talmud, but altogether different books; what is more, he tried to write dramas in German, using the Hebrew alphabet. The prospective writer's pockets were searched and the findings, both the borrowed books and his own creations, got burned in the stove.<sup>1050</sup>

Asch composed one of the jubilee articles in *Literarische bleter*, in which he remembers his first meeting with the great Perets. Yet first he reports that although he read Goethe and Schiller in the original version and William Shakespeare in German translations, although he learned the grammar of German, Hebrew and Polish, he had a constant feeling that this path led to another, more significant goal. Only when he managed to buy, in his home town, Perets' Yiddish stories, whose characters were simple people, did he realize what future objectives he ought to choose. From then on it was his dream to meet Perets in person. When the happy day came, Asch sailed from Włocławek to Warsaw and soon stood in front of the door of Perets' apartment at Ceglana No. 1. Before he took courage to ring the bell, he walked up- and downstairs several times. At last he faced his master and tried to talk to him in Hebrew, considering it improper to speak Yiddish. It was Perets who suggested that perhaps they could talk more comfortably in Yiddish. Asch had brought his story in Hebrew and wanted Perets to assess its worth. The latter read the text and announced the author should go back home and write the same in Yiddish, because he was not able to express his thoughts fully in Hebrew. Following the visit, Asch went for tea with Hersh-Dovid Nomberg, whom he met at Perets'. Soon they were joined by Avrom Reyzen, Nomberg's roommate. Also Reyzen was persuading Asch to compose in Yiddish. The young writer returned home and promptly sent Perets the story *מאָטעלע* (*Motele*). A long time passed but there arrived no reply, so Asch decided to go to Warsaw, taking two Yiddish stories, *Motele* and *Moyshеле*. It turned out Perets had been unable to decipher Asch's longhand so he could not answer, and besides, Asch had not included his address ... Perets was having a few guests, such as Yosef Luria, editor of the weekly *Der yud*. The host asked Asch to read out both stories and then immediately said Luria could have them printed. The writer-to-be could hardly believe his luck.<sup>1051</sup>

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1050 See *ibid.* 49–54.

1051 See Sholem Ash, *Mayn ershte bakantshaft mit Peretsn*, in: *Literarische bleter*, 51, 19 December 1930, pp. 962–963

ש'לום אש, מיין ערשטע באקאנטשאפט מיט פרעצן, אין: ליטערארישע בלעטער, גר. 51, 19 דעצעמבער 1930, ת. 962–963.

An amiable recollective text was written by a popular Jewish painter Leopold Pilichowski, who was Asch's neighbor in Châtillon near Paris. Pilichowski describes the meetings at the Asches' when Sholem read excerpts of his writings, and Matylda cooked delicious meals. The painter jokingly comments she tried to recompense for the offense caused by her husband's impulsivity. Pilichowski painted the couple and mentions that the lady's portrait was purchased by the Polish Ministry of Art.<sup>1052</sup>

The short address to Asch, written by the actor Aleksander Granach (1890–1945), focuses on the vital aspects of Asch's work, above all, his engagement in social issues. At that time Granach lived in Berlin, but in 1930 he visited Warsaw. He expressed his hope the writer would continue to take joy in telling stories and listening to them, in giving and receiving.<sup>1053</sup>

The historian Yitskhok Shiper<sup>1054</sup> says Asch is elemental; he compares him to a river that gradually grows in power, turning from a tiny rivulet trickling from the spring into a mass of water which flows into the sea of world literature. Thanks to Asch, Jewish truths become the truths of mankind. The Jewish nation is like a volcano and the writer is its crater. When he speaks in the name of his nation, he soars as an eagle. According to Shiper, Asch's writings are an attempt to build a bridge between the past and the present. He wants to find Jewish roots, whether they are the shtetl, the family, Messianic expectations or laying down one's life for the faith; in his trilogy *Farn mabl* such roots are the foundations of the world's existence. Shiper observes that as to the artistic form, Asch follows a clear path from lyric to epic writing. In his opinion, the writer's literary achievement and his social and political involvement prove his deep attachment to the Jewish people.<sup>1055</sup>

1052 See Leopold Pilichowski, *Sholem Ash (a portret)*, in: *Literarische bleter*, 51, 19 December 1930, pp. 964–965

לעפאלד פיליכאווסקי, שלום אש (א פארטרעט), אין: ליטערארישע בלעטער, נר. 51, 19 דעצעמבער 1930, ז. 964–965.

1053 See Aleksander Granach, *Bagrisung tsu Sholem Ash*, in: *Literarische bleter*, 51, 19 December 1930, p. 965

אלעקסאנדער גראנאך, באגריסונג צו שלום אש, אין: ליטערארישע בלעטער, נר. 51, 19 דעצעמבער 1930, ז. 965.

1054 Yitskhok Shiper (1884–1943, in Polish Ignacy Schiper) was a historian who wrote in Polish, German, Yiddish, and Russian. He studied law and philosophy in Cracow and Vienna. Shiper became a member of Polish Parliament. During the war, he lived in the Warsaw ghetto, from which he was deported to the camp in Majdanek and killed.

1055 See Yitskhok Shiper, *Di stikhye Sholem Ash*, in: *Literarische bleter*, 51, 19 December 1930, p. 966

יצחק שיפער, די סטיכיע שלום אש, אין: ליטערארישע בלעטער, נר. 51, 19 דעצעמבער 1930, ז. 966.

The writer and journalist Avrom-Moyshe Fuks<sup>1056</sup> of Vienna thinks that Asch's task is to demonstrate to the world that Yiddish is no jargon but a language with its own, valuable literature. Moreover, Fuks claims Asch is the only Yiddish writer who can meet the challenge, because his works are open to Europe. His books are epic in form and romantic in content and thus enable us to grasp what is essential; additionally they show the European reader a broad panorama of Jewish life. Sholem Asch is the first person who opened the door for Yiddish literature to enter Europe. As if to support Fuks's thesis about the European rank of the writer, the article is accompanied by a photo of Sholem Asch and Maxim Gorky.<sup>1057</sup>

The famous theater director from Warsaw, Dovid Herman,<sup>1058</sup> remembers Asch as an actor in the drama *Mitn shtrom*. It all began in 1904–1905, when the Yiddish theater was so mediocre that Perets himself appealed to the spectators not to attend performances. At that time Herman decided to establish a professional Yiddish theater and, to do that, he opened a school of acting in Warsaw. For two years, young actors rehearsed various plays, both by Jewish and non-Jewish authors, but during the first night only Yiddish dramas, including *Mitn shtrom*, were to be staged. A few days earlier, Asch came from Berlin as he was extremely interested in this Varsovian enterprise and immediately announced that he wanted to play the protagonist in his one-act play. Herman did not intend to dismiss the actor who had been cast in the role and learned it well; also, he feared Asch would not manage to get prepared, but the writer was insistent. During the rehearsals, Asch got carried away and did not play but revised and modified his drama. The majority of the changes were introduced in his own lines. During the premiere, which took place in the open-air theater in the Saski Public Garden, the actors had to rely on the help of the prompter as no one could memorize the altered text so quickly: Asch worked on it even at the last moment, during the final rehearsal. Then the writer did not want any make-up, later he gave in, but then again decided he should not perform. As a result, Herman virtually

1056 אַװרױם־מױשׂע פּױקס Avrom-Moyshe Fuks (1890–1974) was a Yiddish writer and journalist. He managed to flee from Vienna to Great Britain, from where he went to Israel in 1950.

1057 See A[vrom] M[oyshe] Fuks, *Sholem Ashs shlikhes*, in: *Literarische bleter*, 51, 19 December 1930, p. 967

א. מ. פּױקס, שׁלױם אַשׁס שׁלױחות, אײן: לײטעראַרײשע בלעטער, נר. 51, 19 דעצעמבער 1930, ז. 967.  
1058 Dovid Herman (1876–1937) was a director and supporter of the Yiddish theater. He was born in Warsaw, where he studied the dramatic art. Initially he wrote in Hebrew and Polish, but when he joined the Bund, he took up writing in Yiddish. In 1931 Herman emigrated to the United States.

pushed the terror-struck author onto the stage. Standing in the wings, he could hear him distorting every line, ignoring the prompts.

In the next scene, the actor was Herman, who was to be joined by Asch after a while. Herman said his lines, added some improvised ones, trod the boards, but Asch did not enter. Suddenly he came onto the stage and huddled in the corner. Apparently, Herman could hear his teeth chattering. He forced Asch to step into the middle and inquired what the problem was. Asch whispered into his ear he was not going to utter a word. Herman tried to rescue the performance and went on to his further lines, but then Asch produced a magnificent impromptu speech, enchanting the audience. Consequently, Herman did not know how to reply so he waited a second and used the first opportunity to conclude the scene as it had been intended, that is by removing Asch.<sup>1059</sup> Obviously, these events were deeply etched in the director's memory so he related them to journalists also on other occasions, for instance in his interview for *Nowy Dziennik*.<sup>1060</sup>

The writer Arn Tseytlin, who was living in Warsaw at that time, succinctly presented Asch's profile, saying that his talent made him a herald of Yiddish literature in Europe and that he was a symbol of Yiddish literature in the world. According to Tseytlin, the latter was to be ascribed not only to Asch's gift of writing, but also to the fact that he chose to be the harbinger, disregarding criticism, advice and warning; he was able to rebel and, unlike his peers, to abandon his stifling environment. Even more pungent remarks concern those Yiddish writers who criticized Asch: Tseytlin writes about the paper ghetto, the envy of the homunculi, and the penurious, provincial masochism.<sup>1061</sup> His analysis should be well noted as it at least partly explains why Asch was so disliked by some fellow writers.

On Asch's jubilee, Yosef Tunkel,<sup>1062</sup> a satirist and journalist living in Warsaw, wrote a humorous text in which he asks the editors to be relieved of the

1059 See Dovid Herman, *Ash als aktyor in zayn "Mitn shtrom,"* in: *Literarische bleter*, 51, 19 December 1930, pp. 968–969

דוד הערמאַן, אש אלס אקטיאר אין זיין „מיטן שטראם“, אין: ליטערארישע בלעטער, נר. 51, 19 דעצעמבער 1930, ז. 968–969.

1060 See M[o]jżesz K[anfer], *Dawid Herman o starym i nowym Teatrze żydowskim*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 59, 1 March 1931, pp. 3 and 60, 2 March 1931, p. 4, here 59, p. 3.

1061 See Arn Tseytlin, *Di figur Ash*, in: *Literarische bleter*, 51, 19 December 1930, p. 969

אהרן צייטלין, די פיגור אש, אין: ליטערארישע בלעטער, נר. 51, 19 דעצעמבער 1930, ז. 969.

1062 Yosef Tunkel, der Tunkeler (1881–1949), was a writer, journalist, satirist and caricaturist. As an extremely myopic person, he could not become a painter, so he addressed himself to literature. He was born in Belarus, in 1906 he left for the United States, from where he came to Warsaw in 1910. At the outbreak of World War II he was on a tour in Belgium; afterwards, he managed to move to France and in 1941 reached America.



duty to worship Asch. Why should a writer be worshiped for his books? He is talented, he can write, so he writes—there is nothing special about it. It is no wonder that a person who is driven by a force of several hundred “poetpower” and whose spiritual wheels rotate at the speed of 3 thousand revolutions per minute can produce world-class works. Tunkel keeps asking whether he should idolize Asch because the writer’s works bring him so much joy. He answers in the positive just to add that Asch should read his writings too, experiencing even a greater joy when realizing the difference between his and Tunkel’s outputs. Or maybe Asch should be extolled for opening a window to the world? Jocularly, Tunkel states that this cannot be counted as Asch’s merit as he did all that exclusively for his own satisfaction, just to spite other Yiddish writers. They, as described by Tunkel, are overpowered by blind envy and hostility when one of their fellows gains recognition in non-Jewish circles and his works are translated into foreign languages.<sup>1063</sup> The message of this text resembles that of Arn Tseytlin’s: Asch is an excellent writer, while the comments of other writers are marked by envy.

This series of articles about Asch is closed by the speech that was delivered by the then chairman of the Yiddish PEN Club, Arn Tseytlin, at the great banquet that was held in Asch’s honor on 15 December 1930 in the Nowości theater in Warsaw. Tseytlin said that Asch’s jubilee was a special event for Jewish writers not because Asch was the honorary chairman of the Yiddish PEN Club, but primarily because his jubilee was a festival of the Yiddish language and Yiddish literature. Tseytlin stressed that Asch had managed to produce works that were at the same time essentially Jewish and universal, and thus to attain the objective that formed the basis of the establishment of the Yiddish PEN Club: the idea was that Yiddish literature should gain a status of a world-known literature. This is how Asch’s jubilee became the celebration of the leitmotif of his work: the Jewish dream about the world. Asch could say about himself what the Jewish seller says in the final scene of *Kidush hashem*: that he is a pedlar of confidence and trust.<sup>1064</sup>

Asch’s jubilee was also mentioned by the Jewish press that was published in Polish. In November 1930, *Nasz Przegląd* included a poetical description of his

1063 See Der Tunkeler [Yosef Tunkel], *Koved zol yid em gebn!*, in: *Literarische bleter*, 51, 19 December 1930, p. 970

דער טונקלער, כבוד זאל איד אים געבן!, אין: ליטערארישע בלעטער, נר. 51, 19 דעצעמבער 1930, ז. 970

1064 See Arn Tseytlin, *Bagrisung fun varshever yidishn Pen-klub tsum Ash yubiley*, in: *Literarische bleter*, 51, 19 December 1930, p. 971

אהרן צייטלין, באגריסונג פון ווארשעווער יידישן פענקלוב צום אש יוביליי, אין: ליטערארישע בלעטער, נר. 51, 19 דעצעמבער 1930, ז. 971

*oeuvre* and stressed that Asch's fiftieth birthday was celebrated not only by the Jews, but by the whole civilized world as well.<sup>1065</sup> In December the paper first announced the forthcoming events connected with the jubilee,<sup>1066</sup> then reported them.<sup>1067</sup> The issue of *Nasz Przegląd* dated 21 December contains a full page dedicated to Asch, with an article by Nahum Sokołow, giving a poetical and very favorable outline of Asch's literary career;<sup>1068</sup> it also includes a reference to the speech by Arn Tseytlin<sup>1069</sup> and finally Asch's address, in which he expressed gratitude to his mentors, Jewish writers, especially to Perets, and also thanked the Poles, Witkiewicz and Żeromski. Asch concluded his speech by saying that all his hitherto achievements as well as his will to live on and continue writing were inspired only by his love for the people of Israel.<sup>1070</sup>

In the same period, Asch's novel *Dos shtetl* was analyzed by Arn Mark, whose book was published in 1930, in Yiddish, in Świąciany.<sup>1071</sup> The analysis was preceded by an introduction including Asch's biography based on the entry in Reyzen's lexicon.

Another event connected with Asch's fiftieth birthday was the somewhat belated meeting that was held in Asch's honor by Teater Gezelshaft in 1931 in Cracow. The first speaker was the chairman of Towarzystwo Krakowskiego Teatru Żydowskiego (the Society for the Cracow Jewish Theater), Fryderyk Freund, who considered Asch's impact on Jewish culture. Then, Asch's play *Der Got fun nekome* was shown.<sup>1072</sup> A review of this spectacle was used by Mojżesz Kanfer as a pretext to complain that Asch's jubilee was celebrated in Cracow in too modest a way and to suggest that the theater event should be consid-

1065 See unknown author, *Szalom Asz. Z powodu 50-tej rocznicy jego urodzin*, in: *Nasz Przegląd*, 323, 23 November 1930, p. 10.

1066 See unknown author, *Uroczystości jubileuszowe ku czci Szaloma Asza*, in: *Nasz Przegląd*, 342, 12 December 1930, p. 7; unknown author, *Wielki poranek literacki ku czci Szaloma Asza*, in: *Nasz Przegląd*, 349, 19 December 1930, p. 7.

1067 See unknown author, *Akademja ku czci Asza*, in: *Nasz Przegląd*, 349, 19 December 1930, p. 7.

1068 See Nahum Sokołow, *Szalom Asz. Z powodu 50-tej rocznicy urodzin*, in: *Nasz Przegląd*, 351, 21 December 1930, p. 11.

1069 See unknown author, *Z akademji ku czci Szaloma Asza*, in: *Nasz Przegląd*, 351, 21 December 1930, p. 11.

1070 See unknown author, *Przemówienie wygłoszone przez Szaloma Asza*, in: *Nasz Przegląd*, 351, 21 December 1930, p. 11.

1071 See Arn Mark, *Sholem Ash a shtetl*, Svetsyan: Levin 1930

אהרן מארק, שלום אש א שטעטל, סוועניציאן: לעווין 1930.

1072 See unknown author, *Dziś Akademja ku czci Sz. Asza*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 30, 30 January 1931, p. 9; Mirosława Bułat, *Krakowski teatr żydowski. Między szundem a sztuką*, op. cit., p. 169.

ered inadequate. Kanfer paid attention to an important aspect of Asch's drama which, from the start, had been criticized for its subject-matter. He pointed out that this "play, whose content is immoral, becomes a *par excellence* moral work, as it is saturated with the noblest, lofty compassion."<sup>1073</sup>

Also the city of Łódź, which had a large Jewish population, held a special event for the writer in 1931; Asch had to travel there especially for the occasion. The first speech was delivered by Yitskhok Katsenelson; he called Asch the pillar of Jewish literature, for whom party divisions, national and class differences were immaterial, as the only important things were the truth, equality, and justice.<sup>1074</sup> Answering all the welcoming speakers, Asch replied that literature was a science like medicine; so his object of investigation was human hearts, no matter whether they beat in the bodies of rulers, scholars, Jews or Christians, decent women or prostitutes: all of them were given the same treatment, as dictated to him by his conscience. The writer also alluded to his friendship with Witkiewicz and Żeromski and stressed that he was very grateful to Poland, where he had been born and where he wrote.<sup>1075</sup>

Understandably, the discussed jubilee texts do not offer any critical remarks concerning the author, who is mostly praised for his immense talent and his contribution to giving Yiddish literature its international significance. Yet the trenchant responses contained in the articles by Tseytlin and Tunkel demonstrate that formerly Asch had been criticized, also in literary circles, precisely for his dealings with the outside world and his excessive closeness to "others," and that he had even been accused of betraying his own nation.

Undoubtedly, Asch was a controversial figure, which sometimes impacted the reception of his works in Poland. Leyb Olitski<sup>1076</sup> recalls that in the 1930s he traveled from the provinces to the capital especially to attend Asch's jubilee, for which the writer arrived in Poland from the United States. Olitski forgets the reason why Asch fell into disfavor again and was boycotted by the Communists and the members of the General Jewish Labor Bund alike; anyway, his audience filled only half of the meeting hall.<sup>1077</sup>

1073 M[o]j[esz] K[anfer], *Teatr Żydowski "Bóg Zemsty,"* in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 32, 1 February 1931, p. 14.

1074 See unknown author, *Łódź w hołdzie Szalomowi Aszowi*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 43, 13 February 1931, pp. 6–7, here p. 6.

1075 See *ibid.*, p. 7.

1076 לייב אָליצקי Leyb Olitski (1897–1975) was a Yiddish writer and poet. He survived World War II in the Soviet Union to return to Poland in 1946. In 1959 he emigrated to Israel.

1077 See Leyb Olitski, "... *S'iz geven a mentsh ...*," in: *Folks-shtime*, 112, 20 July 1957, p. 4. לייב אָליצקי, "...ס'איז געווען א מענטש...", אין: פאלקס־שטימע, גר. 112, 20 יולי 1957, ז. 4.

One should consider why Asch was not unanimously regarded as a positive figure. Some light is shed by the above mentioned articles by Tseytlin and Tunkel, as well as the cited study by Mayzil. A relatively negative portrayal of Asch was offered, for instance, by Zusman Segalovitsh in his book *Tlomatske 13*. He writes that Asch did not care to achieve success among his own people, but among strangers, and he traveled the world, finally to reach the Christian God. Although, in Segalovitsh's opinion, it is impossible to claim that Asch hated Jews, one of the aspects of his soul was that he tried to endear himself to non-Jews. According to Segalovitsh, German press reviews were more important for Asch than Jewish ones. Apparently, following his new path, the writer became more and more distant from the Jewish people, yearning for the applause of Christians, having his plays staged and his books printed in translated versions, living outside Poland and returning there only from time to time, just in order to find some new ideas for his work. Segalovitsh thinks that no fellow writer would even consider such a career: all of them remained loyal to the community in which they were raised. At the same time, he frankly admits *Dos shtetl* saved his life in 1918 in Moscow, when he had to spend the night in an unheated room, with the outdoor temperature as low as -50 centigrades; Segalovitsh did not give in to despair only because he killed the time reading.<sup>1078</sup>

Next Segalovitsh explains that Asch's priority was being popular with fellow writers, yet they did not like him. They thought him a haughty parvenu who wanted to bear himself like an aristocrat. Segalovitsh says it was Asch's behavior that corroborated such opinions: once he entered the lecture hall of the Association of Jewish Writers and Journalists, rested his foot on a chair and told the bootblack, who he asked to be fetched, to polish his shoes. The Yiddish writers in Poland kept this slight in mind for a very long time; they thought Asch, who at that time was just a visitor in Warsaw, desecrated the seat of their organization. Because of Asch's conduct, perceived as impudent, other writers did not want to shake hands with him.<sup>1079</sup>

Other memories concerning Asch show that it was not only Warsaw Yiddish writers who disliked him. Moyshe Dluzhnovski recalls that during his stay in Nice Asch intermittently quarreled with Zalmen Shneyer<sup>1080</sup> and then made

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1078 See Zusman Segalovitsh, *Tlomatske 13*, op. cit., pp. 128–130.

1079 See *ibid.*, pp. 136–140.

1080 זאלקינד-זלמן שניאור Zalkind-Zalmen Shneyer/Shneur (1886–1959) was born in Szklów (now Shklou, Belarus). He was a famous Hebrew and Yiddish writer. Before World War II he lived in Paris and in 1941 he managed to escape to the United States. After the war, he settled in Israel.

friends again, so the writer was surrounded by controversies not only in Poland.<sup>1081</sup>

The year 1931 saw the publication of Asch's autobiography, mentioned above. When describing his acquaintance with Witkiewicz and Żeromski, Asch provides a crucial declaration: he claims to be well aware of how much his people suffered—all over the world—because of anti-Semitism, but on the other hand Christian writers had only warm feelings and brotherly love for him.<sup>1082</sup> This testifies to Asch's tendency to stay objective, which is reinforced by his positive personal experience. It was probably these two factors: knowing history and the contemporary world as well as innate optimism and personal experience that accounted for the literary formation of Sholem Asch.

At the end of 1931 Asch came to Warsaw again. On that occasion, *Nowy Dziennik* published his statement concerning anti-Jewish incidents instigated by armed groups of national democrats. Asch says:

I can perfectly well understand, because I feel them, the pain and anger that stirred the entire Jewish population due to the riotous incidents sparked by one political party. But we have to remain fair even when affected by strong emotions. So in no case are we entitled to blame all the nation for the iniquity of some of its representatives.<sup>1083</sup>

It is to be noted that the writer's words were printed in the Polish-language Jewish press not only on special occasions such as jubilees, but also when he voiced his political opinions, e.g. in 1933, *Literarische bleter* filled the first pages with two articles about Asch's speech at the congress of the International PEN.

Asch's constant engagement in the affairs of the Polish Jewry is evidenced both by his own words and by references in press texts on various topics. In a 1936 article on the emigration of Jews from Poland, which was published in Germany, Asch is mentioned<sup>1084</sup> as one of those who protested against the Zionist propaganda of Vladimir Zhabotinsky,<sup>1085</sup> who was blamed for his fascist bias.

1081 See *Moysh Dluzhnovski, Sholem Ash un Zalmen Shneyer—a bagegenish in beyzn un in gutn*, in: *Tsukunft*, 1975, No. 81, pp. 95–99

משה דלוזשנאווסקי, שלום אש און זלמן שניאור - א באגעגעניש אין בייון און אין גוט, אײן: צוקונפט, 1975, נר. 81, ז. 95–99.

1082 See Schalom Asch, *Rückblick*, op. cit., p. 65.

1083 Szalom Asz, *Szalom Asz o ostatnich wypadkach*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 313, 22 November 1931, p. 8.

1084 It is only one of the many press articles which mention, in various contexts, Shalom Asch and no other Yiddish writers. On the one hand, this proves his social and political involvement, which was readily noticed by correspondents, journalists, and readers. On the other hand, he must have been perceived as a representative writer whose name was recognized worldwide, both by Jewish and other communities.

Yet another issue is the relations between the writer and his home town Kutno. It was the background of his childhood and youth memories as well as later reminiscences of his visits to his mother. It is not surprising then that this former inhabitant of Kutno is described in several articles of *Sefer Kutne vehasvive*, the town's commemorative book.<sup>1086</sup>

There, the editors decided to reprint Y.M. Nayman's article from a prewar issue of *Haynt*. Its author says that some inhabitants of Kutno were prototypes of Asch's characters and regrets no local street is named in his honor. At that point Nayman stresses Kutno is a unique town because the relations between the Poles and the Jews are tolerably good so the only obstacle to pay tribute to the writer in such a way is the rule obeyed by the mayor that the streets should not be named after living people.<sup>1087</sup> On the other hand, the Jewish qahal awarded the writer the honorary citizenship of the town and hung his portrait on the premises.<sup>1088</sup>

Many characters in Asch's works were modeled on the inhabitants of Kutno. Avrom Lustigman describes several amusing incidents related to this. In his article, he writes that a carter called Berel Wojtek the Strong, who had been portrayed in Asch's book, wanted therefore to give the writer a sound beating and he almost succeeded when they once met in Łęczyca. Motke the Thief was even more angry with Asch: when an acting troupe from Warsaw planned to perform the play of which he was the protagonist, he walked the town and removed all the bills. The actors managed to prevent a conflict by paying Motke and giving him and his wife Khanele two free tickets for the spectacle.<sup>1089</sup>

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1085 See Eva Reichmann-Jungmann, *Eine Million zuviel*, in: *Der Morgen*, year 12, 8, 1936, pp. 337–343, here p. 342. Vladimir Zhabotinsky (Ze'ev Jabotinsky, 1880–1940) was a Zionist leader, writer, journalist, and lawyer of Ukrainian origin. He founded the Jewish Legion, which during World War I supported the British military effort. Zhabotinsky's goal was to conquer Palestine from the Ottoman Empire and to establish the Israeli state. In the 1930s, fearing the invasion of the Third Reich, Zhabotinsky suggested Polish Jews should be evacuated to Palestine. At the beginning of World War II he went to the United States, where he died of a heart attack.

1086 See Dovid Shtokfish (ed.), *Sefer Kutne vehasvive*, op. cit.

1087 Following Asch's death, a Kutno street was named after him. It is a small lane in the center (an extension of a street named after Perets), off Podrzeczna, where the family home of the writer was situated.

1088 See Y.M. Nayman, *A grus fun Sholem Ashs shtetl*, in: Dovid Shtokfish (ed.), *Sefer Kutne vehasvive*, op. cit., pp. 82–84, here pp. 82–83.

י. מ. ניימאן, א גרוס פון שלום אשס שטעטל, אין: דוד שטוקפיש (רעד.), ספר קוטנה והסביבה, שוין צייטרט, ז. 82–84, דאָ ז. 82–83.

1089 See Avrom Lustigman, *Sholem Ashs heldn*, in: Dovid Shtokfish (ed.), *Sefer Kutne vehasvive*, op. cit., pp. 258–259

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During World War II, in 1943, the *New York Times* published Asch's article in which he described the tragedy of Polish and European Jews. The writer presented some figures to show the scale of the genocide and then focused on three institutions he used to visit before the war: the orphanage run by Janusz Korczak,<sup>1090</sup> the Otwock sanatorium, and a school for Jewish girls. He said that Korczak had not abandoned his wards at the moment of death, the medical staff in Otwock were killed along with the three hundred children patients, and the ninety-three Jewish schoolgirls as well as their teachers poisoned themselves. The article included an excerpt of the farewell letter of one of the girls. It is clear Asch was unable to find words that could describe what he wanted the American reader to be confronted with. Hence the accuracy in the presentation of the subject-matter and the dry statement of facts. To conclude, the writer said that Hitler, notwithstanding, was one of the humans and that, had it not been for the support he received and the earlier anti-Semitic trends, Europe would never have witnessed such events. Therefore the tragedy of European Jews was not only the responsibility of the Nazis, but also of all those people whose conduct facilitated the implementation of Hitler's plans.<sup>1091</sup>

In 1993 *Słowo Żydowskie* reprinted a collection of short comments on the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943. One of them was by Sholem Asch, who emphasized that Warsaw's Jews had formed a new front, fighting the enemy, and appealed to everybody to continue the military effort wherever it was necessary.<sup>1092</sup>

In 1945 *One Destiny: An Epistle to the Christians* was printed. The chapter that describes the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto contains the following words:

Whole detachments of Nazi soldiery, reinforced by Finnish, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian elements (the Lord be praised for saving the Polish people from the fatal stigma which others impressed upon the memory of their nations for the remainder of human history), began to drive together the Jewish population ...<sup>1093</sup>

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אברהם לוסיגמאן, שלום אשם העלדן, אין: דוד שטוקפיש (רעד), ספר קוטנה והסביבה, שוין ציטירט, ז. 258–259.

1090 Janusz Korczak (1878/1879–1942, real name: Henryk Goldszmit) was a Polish doctor, teacher, writer, journalist, and social activist of Jewish origin. He was killed by the Germans in Treblinka.

1091 See Sholem Asch, *In the Valley of Death*, in: *The New York Times Magazine*, 7 February 1943, pp. 16 and 36.

1092 See Sholem Ash, *Yidn fun Varshe*, in: *Dos yidishe vort*, 7, 9 April 1993, p. 43.

שלום אש, יידן פון ווארשע, אין: דאס יידישע וואָרט, בר. 7, 9 אפריל 1993, ז. 43.

1093 Sholem Asch, *One Destiny: An Epistle to the Christians*, op. cit., p. 22.

At some other points Asch mentions the infrequent cases of Poles collaborating with the Nazis as well as describes the dedication of those who wanted to save the Jews. One can see he is not only careful to present facts objectively, but also very favorably disposed towards the Poles, which is expressed in just four words: “the Lord be praised,” which I quoted above. In the latter part of the book, however, the writer pronounces his disappointment with the realities of interwar Poland. He is happy to see it independent again but blames it for becoming a prison for the ethnic minorities, the most underprivileged of which were the Jews. According to Asch, the factors contributing to the injustice were the unfair taxation system, the laws that discriminated against the Jews, and especially the propaganda of the Catholic clergy, as it was easily absorbed by the high proportion of the poorest and uneducated Poles.<sup>1094</sup> Nonetheless, Asch appreciates the fact that in Poland even simple peasants risked their lives to provide shelter to Jewish children during the war and that thousands of Jews were saved thanks to the assistance of Polish and Christian institutions and individuals.<sup>1095</sup>

Asch was involved in the affairs of the Polish Jewry also after World War II. For instance, he wrote an introduction<sup>1096</sup> to a novel by Janusz Korczak which was published in 1950 in Buenos Aires.<sup>1097</sup> Its first Polish edition appeared in 1922 in Warsaw and was translated into Yiddish by Yeshue Perle,<sup>1098</sup> a famous Yiddish writer and an eye-witness of the deportation of Korczak and the orphans to Treblinka. This Yiddish translation was the basis of the postwar edition that was issued in Buenos Aires. The book was the sixty-third volume in the series *דאָס פּוילישע יידנטום* (*Dos poylishe yidntum*), which was published in Argentina. Asch’s introduction is a moving three-page miniature whose central motif is the depiction of a group of joyful, smiling children wearing their best clothes and going with Korczak on a trip outside Warsaw. Asch focuses on the uniqueness of the smiles, which were so seldom to be seen on the faces of the miserable youngsters, and praises Korczak for his ability to arrange such festive events for

1094 See *ibid.*, pp. 63–64.

1095 See *ibid.*, pp. 78–79.

1096 See Sholem Ash, *Der heyliker doktor*, in: Yanush Kortshak, *Moyshlekh, Yoselekh, Yisroliklekh*, Buenos-Ayres: Tsentral-farband fun poylishe yidn in Argentine 1950, pp. 7–9

שלום אַש, דער הייליקער דאָקטאָר, אין: יאַנוש קאָרטשאַק, משהלעך, יאסעלעך, ישראלִיקלעך, בוענאָס־אײרעס: צענטראַל־פאַרבאַנד פון פּוילישע יידן אין אַרגענטינע, 1950, ז. 7–9.

1097 One should note an interesting concurrence or perhaps a coincidence: both Korczak and Asch received their Polonia Restituta decoration in the same year (1933).

1098 Yeshue Perle (1888–1943) was killed in Auschwitz in 1943. His articles and notes about the Warsaw ghetto, which were found after the war, are part of Ringelblum’s Archive.



the poorest of the poor. The introduction, however, was written after the war; the two sentences that frame the text reflect the burden of Asch's knowledge. At the beginning the readers learn that the station where the children waited for their train lay on the route of transports heading for gas chambers,<sup>1099</sup> while at the end one can find a statement that we should hallow the memory of those who hallowed the Name of God not only in their death, but also in their life.<sup>1100</sup>

### 5.3 Facets of the reception of Asch's works in Poland

The number of Asch's works that were printed in Poland can be assessed on the basis of bibliographical data and it must be remembered that I included here only the first editions and no re-issues, which were numerous too. From among the eighty-six works by Asch in Yiddish, nearly a half had their first editions in Polish territories. The majority of them were printed before World War II. Here one should mention, first of all, the twenty-nine volumes of *Gezamlte shriftn*, published by Kultur Lige, a Warsaw publishing house. Many works were also printed as separate volumes. After World War II, only Asch's *Noveln* were issued in Yiddish in 1958, by Yidish vort, another Warsaw-based publisher. Moreover, many works were printed in installments in Yiddish newspapers; in *Haynt*, issue 123, dated 29 May 1919, the first page gave the readers the information that from that day on, Asch was going to be one of the contributors again. Afterwards, *Haynt* serialized his novels before they were published in book form. Usually, there were about twenty installments which were published in the Friday issue and sometimes additionally on Sunday. Moreover, the paper published Asch's short stories. In 1938 Asch was in conflict with *Haynt*, when they refused to print *Der man fun Natseres*. Disregarding the explanations, protests, and threats of the author, the editors did not change their stance: only one chapter of the novel was printed.<sup>1101</sup>

Considering the immense public interest in Asch's writings in Yiddish, the number of translations into Polish is surprisingly low.<sup>1102</sup> Before World War II, there appeared only nine of them: *Ameryka*, *Matka*, *Miasteczko*, *Motke ganew*, *Nowele*, the trilogy *Potop: trylogja (Petersburg, Warszawa, and Moskwa)*, the

1099 See Sholem Ash, *Der heyliker doktor*, op. cit., p. 7.

1100 See *ibid.* p. 9. Here, Asch does not use the term *Kidush hashem*, a Hebrew phrase to denote martyrdom for one's faith, but replaces it with a literal translation into Yiddish, which accentuates the bond between Korczak and poor, simple people.

1101 See Khaim Finkelshtayn, *Haynt. A tsaytung ba yidn. 1908–1939*, op. cit., p. 252.

1102 More information can be found in my paper *Zapomniane powieści Szolema Asza*, in: Daniel Kalinowski (ed.), *Szalom Asz. Polskie i żydowskie konteksty twórczości*, Kutno: Miejska i Powiatowa Biblioteka Publiczna im. Stefana Żeromskiego w Kutnie 2011, pp. 11–28.

story *Wenus Szwarzwaldu*. After the war, there were just five: *Czarodziejka z Kastylii*, *Kidusz ha-szem*, *Mąż z Nazaretu*, *Miasteczko*, and *Opowiadania*. The prewar situation can be explained on the basis of the reflection by Michael C. Steinlauf. In one of his articles he discusses the low number of Polish translations of Yiddish theater plays. Among the reasons of such a state of affairs, Steinlauf names the consideration that Yiddish dramas should not lose their Jewish spectators. He analyzes the activities of Mark Arnshteyn,<sup>1103</sup> whose aim was to introduce Yiddish spectacles to the Polish stage. His effort definitely contributed to a better understanding of Jewish problems among the Poles, and Arnshteyn's initiatives were strongly supported by, among others, Tadeusz Boy Țeleński. At the same time, Arnshteyn was fiercely attacked by some Jewish circles who observed that the Jews were a majority of spectators in Polish theaters, so they should not be discouraged from participating in the homebred, young, still developing culture of Yiddish.<sup>1104</sup>

If we take into account the books that were written in Yiddish, the situation was a similar one. Chone Shmeruk says that when one examines prewar Yiddish texts, one may notice the authors knew Polish and assumed that their readers knew it well too. That can be inferred from the large number of correct quotations in Polish, sometimes even in the Latin alphabet. It was only in postwar American editions that the quotations were translated into Yiddish in the footnotes; the editors of prewar Polish editions obviously did not see such a need.<sup>1105</sup> All these factors probably account for the low number of Polish translations of Asch's works as some groups of the Jewry did not want Polish versions to compete for readership with Yiddish literature: many young Jewish readers, who quickly became assimilated, would perhaps tend to reach for Polish texts. Only to a limited extent were such efforts countered by other groups who attempted to propagate Jewish culture in the Polish environment and to make it accessible to the Poles, or by Polish publishing houses and their various initiatives. An example of the latter is described in the excerpt from the preface to the Polish edition of *Miasteczko*. The text was written in 1910 by a modernist poet and literary critic Zdzisław Dębicki (1871–1931):<sup>1106</sup>

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1103 He lived in the years 1880–1943 and in the Polish milieu used the pseudonym Andrzej Marek. He was murdered in the Warsaw ghetto.

1104 See Michael C. Steinlauf, *Mark Arnshteyn and Polish-Jewish Theater*, in: Yisrael Gutman, Ezra Mendelsohn, Jehuda Reinharz, Chone Shmeruk (eds.), *The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars*, op. cit., pp. 399–411, here pp. 404–410.

1105 See Chone Shmeruk, *Jews and Poles in Yiddish Literature in Poland between the Two World Wars*, op. cit., pp. 187–190.

1106 The book does not name the author of the preface, but he is mentioned in an introduction by Stanisław Pigoń, see Stanisław Pigoń, *Słowo wstępne*, in: *Listy Szaloma Asza*

So we are completely unaware of what is going on—not across the street, but even next door, in our own society, whose significant part is the Jewry, ever more openly defying our national ideals and fundamental goals. [...] In such a period it is not only a necessity, but also an obligation to gain a comprehensive knowledge about the opposing forces.

And this is why we publish a Polish translation of a work that was written in the jargon. We want the Polish reader to get a glimpse of what is hidden behind the curtain that conceals the Jewish spirit and thought.<sup>1107</sup>

Probably, the reader of the above excerpt will not be surprised that the publisher could not find a person to translate *Miasteczko* directly from Yiddish: the Polish version was based on a German relay translation. To be fair to the author of the preface to *Miasteczko*, one has to admit that not all the text is as anti-Semitic as the above quoted passage. For instance, Dębicki says that Asch is talented and popular, that he is a good representative of Yiddish literature and, on the other hand, an author who follows his own path and shuns all bias. The reader is encouraged to get familiar with Yiddish literature and its truth because in order to either reject or accept that truth one has, first of all, to know it.<sup>1108</sup> Having examined this part of the preface, we may have doubts about the actual purpose of its author: whether it really was, as explicitly stated, gaining “knowledge about the opposing forces,” or rather presenting to the reader the work of a popular and gifted Yiddish writer, and thus propagating Jewish culture, especially that *Miasteczko* was published in the series of “excellent books” (*Biblioteka Dziel Wyborowych*). Regardless of Zdzisław Dębicki’s intentions, the fact that the preface contained such strongly anti-Semitic elements implies the profile of the potential reader at whom the translation was targeted.<sup>1109</sup>

The first Polish edition of *Miasteczko* appeared in 1910. In that year, Bolesław Leśmian (1877–1937, a Polish poet of Jewish origin) published his critical essay on the novel. It was printed in issue 28 of *Nowa Gazeta*, and reprinted in Warsaw in 1959 in a volume of Leśmian’s literary essays from 1909–1915, edited by Jacek Trznadel. Leśmian, who frequently castigated literary works, is full of kindness and praise for Asch and his *Miasteczko*. Although

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*do Stanisława Witkiewicza i Stefana Żeromskiego (1903–1906)*, op. cit. 17 (66), 19 December 1959, pp. 4–6, here p. 6. Interestingly, Pigoń cites only the passages that praise Asch and completely disregards the anti-Semitic tone of the beginning of the preface.

1107 [Zdzisław Dębicki], *Przedmowa*, in: Szolem Asz, *Miasteczko*, Warszawa: Nicz i S-ka 1910, pp. 5–8, here p. 6.

1108 See *ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

1109 The preface to the prewar edition of *Miasteczko* is discussed also by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Kazimierz czy Kutno? Zagadki powieści i przekładu*, op. cit., pp. 232–233; Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Odcienie tożsamości. Literatura żydowska jako zjawisko wielojęzyczne*, op. cit., p. 33.

he objects to its hasty and sketchy composition (thus rightly noticing in this early novel the typical drawback of Asch's works, including later ones), he also admits the book arouses keen interest because of its impetus, unexpected episodes, and setting, and because the "colorful Asian mirage"—as Leśmian calls the shtetl and the life of its inhabitants—is presented against the backdrop of Polish landscape.<sup>1110</sup>

Besides book versions of Asch's works, the translations of his shorter and longer writings, and even novels, appeared in Jewish papers that were published in Polish. Some of them, e.g. *Powrót Chaima Lederera* and *Psalmista*, were later re-issued in book form in Polish. The Polish-language Jewish press included also short ads and longer notes advertising Asch's books. Moreover, translated parts of his works were printed, e.g. as early as 1907 *Izraelita* gave the readers an opportunity to get acquainted with one chapter of *Miasteczko*.<sup>1111</sup>

When Asch's sketches from his travels in Spain, entitled *Mayn rayze iber Shpanyen*, were published in Yiddish (they were not translated into other languages), *Nowy Dziennik* included an article that recommended the book. The author wrote it was extremely interesting for the Jews, because the country it described had been their home for centuries. The book was full of Jewish patriotism and although description prevailed over action, one could read it as the best of novels.<sup>1112</sup>

At the turn of 1929 and 1930 *Nowy Dziennik* printed 122 installments of the Polish translation of *Matka*.<sup>1113</sup> The year 1930, when Asch celebrated his fiftieth birthday and the thirtieth anniversary of the beginning of his literary career, witnessed more translations of his writings, which were published by the Polish-Jewish press. When all the parts of *Matka* had been published, *Nowy Dziennik*, starting in February, printed the translation of Asch's debut, *Mojszele*,<sup>1114</sup> and from July to September, it offered forty-five episodes of *Powrót Chaima Lederera* in Polish translation.<sup>1115</sup>

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1110 See Bolesław Leśmian, *Szalom Asz: "Miasteczko,"* in: Bolesław Leśmian, *Szkice literackie*, Warszawa: PIW 1959, pp. 371–372.

1111 *Notatnik Janowiecki* reprinted passages of the chapter *Noce letnie*, which was published in *Izraelita* 10/1907, pp. 110–112, see Szalom Asz, *Noce letnie*, in: *Notatnik Janowiecki*, 13/2003–2004, pp. 278–279. *Izraelita* was a Polish-language Jewish weekly, issued in 1866–1915.

1112 See B. Rosenzweig, *Szalom Asz, "Moja podróż przez Hiszpanię,"* in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 167, 26 July 1926, p. 6.

1113 See Szalom Asz, *Matka*, translated by Mojżesz Kanfer, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, starting from No. 249, 15 September 1929, p. 4, up to No. 21, 26 January 1930, p. 8.

1114 See Szalom Asz, *Mojszele*, translated by Leon Herbst, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 34, 8 February 1930, pp. 11 and 12.

Even before the Polish translations of *Potop: trylogja* were published, *Nowy Dziennik* and then *Nasz Przegląd* interviewed the writer on this trilogy. Asch said it was to serve as a warning to the rulers of Russia: they should realize their atrocities would not go unpunished. He had been working on the book for eight years, trying to discover the truth about that time of change. For instance, he had spent three months in Moscow, talking to the oppressors and the oppressed. Finally Asch added that such a huge social experiment could be successful only if everybody cooperated to the same end, as in Palestine.<sup>1116</sup>

In 1931 *Nasz Przegląd* printed the Polish translation of *Moskwa*, starting from issue 127 dated 10 May, up to issue 265 dated 27 September; there appeared 131 installments altogether. Perhaps this is why the newspaper had also Shmuel Niger's article about Asch. The text was laudatory and, which is rare with Niger, poetical.<sup>1117</sup> At that time an exceptionally positive review of *Wujek Mozes* was written by Jakób Appenzlak<sup>1118</sup> when its theater adaptation was staged by Ida Kamińska (1899–1980).<sup>1119</sup> At the same time, *Nasz Przegląd* advertised the Polish edition of *Petersburg*; each ad occupied nearly one-third of the first page in issues 157, 158, 159, and 161, respectively dated 9, 10, 11, and 13 June 1931. The readers of the newspaper could take advantage of special discount prices and the book was recommended as featuring the same characters as *Moskwa*. However, it was not specified that the books should be read in the reverse order—because *Petersburg* was the first, and *Moskwa* the third volume of the trilogy—and that it would be worthwhile to read the second volume, *Warszawa*, too.

Asch's trilogy *Farn mabl*, translated into Polish as *Potop: trylogja*, was also advertised by *Nowy Dziennik*: in July 1931 its last page included the information that the first part, *Petersburg*, had already come out. The subscribers to the paper could buy it for 6.50 zlotys, and not 12. Moreover, it was announced that soon one would be able to get a subscription for the next two volumes.<sup>1120</sup> Indeed, in September the rates were kept and the readers could subscribe to

1115 See Szalom Asz, *Powrót Chaima Lederera*, translated by Leon Templer, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, starting from No. 196, 27 July 1930, p. 5, up to No. 240, 9 September 1930, p. 3.

1116 See unknown author, *Szalom Asz o bolszewizmie i Palestynie*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 276, 19 October 1930, p. 6; unknown author, *Szalom Asz o bolszewizmie i Palestynie*, in: *Nasz Przegląd*, 291, 23 October 1930, p. 5.

1117 See Sz[rael] Niger, *Szalom Asz*, in: *Nasz Przegląd*, 148, 31 May 1931, p. 5.

1118 Jakób Appenzlak (1894–1950) was a translator, writer, and theater critic. He translated Asch's *Motke Ganew* into Polish.

1119 See J[akób] Appenzlak, *Scena żydowska*, in: *Nasz Przegląd*, 127, 10 May 1931, p. 5.

1120 See unknown author, "Petersburg" *Asza ukazał się już w całości*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 193, 30 July 1931, p. 16.

*Warszawa* (translated by Waclaw Rogowicz), while a new offer said the third volume, *Moskwa*, could be ordered in the same way;<sup>1121</sup> the installments of *Warszawa* started to be printed a few days earlier.<sup>1122</sup>

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After World War II, five translations of Asch's books were published in Poland. The number is small, but one has to keep in mind that because of the political circumstances, between 1968 and the early 1980s only selected publications on Jewish matters could appear. Now, for over two decades, Jewish culture has been immensely popular in Poland again, which is reflected in new publishing initiatives,<sup>1123</sup> press publications,<sup>1124</sup> and other cultural, educational,<sup>1125</sup> and academic ventures.

The first postwar Polish edition of Asch's novel was *Mąż z Nazaretu* (1990), translated by Michał Friedman. When the book appeared, the excerpts were read on the Polish radio by Aleksander Bardini.<sup>1126</sup> The publication was followed by a wave of favorable press comments. Among others, *Gazeta Wyborcza* had an article by Mirosław Ratajczak which tells very little about the novel as such but identifies *Mąż z Nazaretu* as an outstanding literary work, definitely worth studying and deserving its portion of the new interest in Jewish culture. This interest, reborn in Poland after so many years, is actually the chief topic of that text.<sup>1127</sup> *Gazeta Wyborcza* printed also a review by Ryszard Wasita, who approvingly described both the writer and his attainment.<sup>1128</sup>

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1121 See *Nowy Dziennik*, 241, 7 September 1931, p. 11; 246, 12 September 1931, p. 9.

1122 See Szalom Asz, *Warszawa*, chapter 1, translated by Waclaw Rogowicz, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, starting from No. 233, 30 August 1931, p. 8, up to No. 238, 4 September 1931, p. 4.

1123 The publishing house Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie issued a series of Polish translations from Yiddish, as described in an article by Jerzy Tomaszewski, *Polish Translations of Yiddish Literature Published in Wrocław*, in: *Polin*, Vol. 15, 2002, pp. 475–478.

1124 I managed to access nearly a hundred of short notes and long press publications referring to Sholem Asch and his works. These journalistic texts were printed in Poland after the war both in Yiddish and Polish, in various periods, especially following the writer's death in 1957 and the publication of Polish translations of his books. The list is to be found in the bibliography.

1125 The Polish universities that offer Yiddish studies are enumerated in my article *Warum die Jiddistik ein wichtiger Bestandteil der polnischen Germanistik sein sollte*, in: *Convivium* 2005, pp. 49–73, here pp. 60–63.

1126 See unknown author, *Mąż z Nazaretu*, in: *Gazeta Telewizyjna*, 291, waw edition, 14 December 1991, p. 14.

1127 See Mirosław Ratajczak, *Powieść ponad podziałami*, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 1, 1991, p. 9.

1128 See Ryszard Wasita, *Obsesja pojednania*, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 19, waw edition, 23–24 January 1993, p. 19.

An extremely interesting article was written by Avrom Kvaterko; it was published in 1991 in *Folks-shtime*. At the beginning the author says that, following the publication of the book edition of *Mqz z Nazaretu*, which was earlier published in installments in *Folks-shtime*, the readers want to learn more about Sholem Asch. Therefore Kvaterko decided to present another description of his 1961 visit at Asch's widow's in London. The lady, although she had been sick and paralyzed for eight months, was very glad to meet a Jewish journalist from Poland. Matylda, eager to hear the news, listened to Kvaterko's report on the situation in Poland and in Warsaw; on the decision of the Kutno municipal authorities to name a street after Sholem Asch; and on Stanisław Pigoń's edition of Asch's correspondence with Polish writers. The widow wished new issues of Asch's writings, including a recent collection of short stories, could be sent to her.

Afterwards, Kvaterko talked also to Asch's daughter Ruth, who showed him her father's desk, four fountain pens he used for writing, his Yiddish dictionary and little psalter. The room looked like a museum interior, with bookshelves all around and pictures hanging on the walls. The books were mainly Asch's own writings in the original and translated versions, lexicons and encyclopedias, historical studies, art albums, old Jewish books (such as old prints, 18th-century psalters and prayer books), as well as an 18th-century edition of the historical work *Yosippon*.<sup>1129</sup> Apart from the paintings, the room held other objects of art, old crockery, and candlesticks. The daughter owned the manuscripts of Asch's books and a rich collection of photos showing her father with Yiddish and Polish writers, with Maxim Gorky in the Kremlin in 1929, or with Soviet writers in Moscow in 1906. Asch did not like collecting photographs and threw them all away: only those are extant that were preserved by his wife. Ruth told Kvaterko that Asch had shown keen interest in the period of Nazi occupation and gleaned all pieces of information about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising; he also wrote an introduction for the book about how the Danish Jewry had been saved and made sure its English translation was published.<sup>1130</sup>

1129 *Yosippon* is an anonymous historical work in Hebrew that was written in the 10th century in southern Italy. It describes the Second Temple period (6th century BC–1st century AD). As the author proved his considerable literary talent, the work had many later editions and translations.

1130 See Avrom Kvaterko, *In hoyz bay Sholem Ashn in London*, in: *Folks-shtime*, 16, 17 May 1991, p. 5

אברהם קוואטערקא, אין הויז ביי שלום אשן אין לאנדאן, אין: פאלקס־שטימע, גר. 16, 17.05.1991, ז. 5. The said translation is Aage Bertelsen, *October 43*, translated by Molly Lindholm and Willy Agtby, London: Museum Press 1955. In his article, Kvaterko misspells the name of the author as Age Bekhtelson.

Another interesting article in *Folks-shtime* was written by Bogdan Wojdowski, who remembered Asch's affiliations with Polish literature and Polish writers, presented an outline of his literary career, and then *Mąż z Nazaretu*. Wojdowski wrote that as to the literary standard, Asch's novel could be compared to Roman Brandstaetter's similar novel,<sup>1131</sup> better known to the Polish reader, but no postwar writer could match Asch's intricate analysis of the Gospel.<sup>1132</sup>

*Mąż z Nazaretu* was discussed by Zbigniew Bieńkowski in *Wokanda* and *Nowe Książki*.<sup>1133</sup> Both articles consider the content and composition of the novel as well as its significance for the contemporary Poles. Equally inquisitive is the review by Waldemar Chrostowski in *Przegląd Powszechny*: the author analyzes the book and recommends it to Christians and Jews alike.<sup>1134</sup> A short review was printed in *Wprost*: an impartial one but too dry to inspire anybody to reach for the book.<sup>1135</sup> *Mąż z Nazaretu* was mentioned in *Express Wieczorny* by Krzysztof Mętrak, who encouraged readers to have a look at the series of works by Jewish writers (Biblioteka Pisarzy Żydowskich) and other valuable publications of Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie.<sup>1136</sup> Moreover, *Mąż z Nazaretu* was discussed in a few academic articles and popularizing texts.<sup>1137</sup>

*Czarodziejka z Kastylii* was reviewed in *Nowe Książki* by Jan Koprowski. The book, issued by Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, was favorably commented upon, but the critic did not avoid an error: he thought Asch wrote also in Polish, German, and English. Koprowski stressed that the writer and his family had been always loyal to Poland, his parents wanted to be buried in their native land and in their old age they returned from the United States to their home town,

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1131 *Jezus z Nazarethu*, 4 vols., 1967–1973.

1132 See Bogdan Voydovski, *Epos fun Yishu Hanoytsri*, op. cit.

1133 See Zbigniew Bieńkowski, *Charyzma zdrady*, in: *Wokanda*, 16, 21 April 1991, p. 12; Zbigniew Bieńkowski, *Dygresje*, in: *Nowe Książki*, 5, 1991, pp. 24–25.

1134 See Waldemar Chrostowski, *Jezus—Brat i Pan*, in: *Przegląd Powszechny*, 3, 1992, pp. 481–484.

1135 See Wiesław Kot, *Żyd*, in: *Wprost*, 4, 1991, p. 53.

1136 See Krzysztof Mętrak, *Cacka*, in: *Express Wieczorny*, 8, 1991, p. 5.

1137 See Józef Dużyk, *Szalom Asz*, "Mąż z Nazaretu," in: *Filomata*, 404, 1991, pp. 349–354; Justyna Domasłowska-Szulc, *Mąż z Nazaretu*, in: *Znak*, issue 3, 1996, pp. 104–119; Michał Friedman, "Mąż z Nazaretu" *Szaloma Asza*, in: *Collectanea Theologica*, 2, 1993, pp. 61–69; Stanisław Pisarek, *Jezus w powieści Szaloma Asza "Mąż z Nazaretu"*, in: *Collectanea Theologica*, 2, 1993, pp. 71–78.



Kutno.<sup>1138</sup> In Koprowski's opinion, other writings by Asch should be translated into Polish too as they might help to overcome prejudice and stereotypes.<sup>1139</sup>

*Gazeta Krakowska* published a review by Józef Dużyk, entitled *Pisarze czarodziejscy*, meaning "wizard writers." Dużyk wants to apply this term to all Yiddish writers and to any authors that deserve attention. He is highly appreciative of the initiative of Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, whose series of works by Jewish authors broadened the knowledge of Polish readers about Yiddish literary classics thanks to excellent translations, mostly by Michał Friedman. According to Dużyk, one of the masters of Yiddish literature is Sholem Asch. Besides *Czarodziejka z Kastylii*, he briefly discusses *Mąż z Nazaretu*, recommending the writer's biography that was included in the introduction to the latter novel.<sup>1140</sup>

In 2003 Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie issued Michał Friedman's translation of *Kidusz ha-szem*. Many years before, excerpts of the novel were printed in the press and sometimes they were preceded by a biographical note on the author.<sup>1141</sup> The Polish translation was reviewed by Marek Mikos, who sketched the content and stressed Sholem Asch was one of the most eminent Yiddish writers of the 20th century.<sup>1142</sup> A similarly positive review was written by Małgorzata Matuszewska.<sup>1143</sup>

A special initiative was undertaken in 2003 by Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Janowca nad Wisłą (the Association of Friends of Janowiec nad Wisłą): a revised version of the Polish translation of *Miasteczko*, based on the Yiddish original and edited by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, was published. The promotion of the book was accompanied by a number of cultural events.<sup>1144</sup> This new Polish version of *Miasteczko* provoked many press and Internet comments. The

1138 This is confirmed in Asch's autobiography, where the writer states that shortly before death, his father returned to Poland, because he wanted to die in the country where he had been born, and wanted to be buried where his parents had been interred. Later, Asch brought also his mother to Kutno, see Schalom Asch, *Rückblick*, op. cit., p. 71.

1139 See Jan Koprowski, *Opowiadania Szaloma Asza*, in: *Nowe Książki*, 12, 1993, p. 57.

1140 See Józef Dużyk, *Pisarze czarodziejscy*, in: *Gazeta Krakowska*, 156, 1993, p. 5.

1141 See Szalom Asz, *Kidusz Haszem*, translation and introduction by Michał Friedman, in: *Regiony*, 2, 1996, pp. 58–81; Szalom Asz, *Daleko w stepie*, translated by Michał Friedman, in: *Słowo Żydowskie*, 24, 1993, pp. 16–17.

1142 See Marek Mikos, *Sklep z wiarą i ufnością*, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 230, waw edition, 2 October 2003, Kultura, p. 16.

1143 See Małgorzata Matuszewska, *Czarno na białym*, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 199, wrw edition, 27 August 2003, Kultura, p. 6.

1144 See e.g. [Grzegorz Józefczuk] GRJ, *Asz w Bramie Grodzkiej*, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 54, lul edition, 4 March 2004, Od drugiej strony, p. 2; Grzegorz Józefczuk, *Nowe "A sztetl"* Szaloma Asza, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 182, lul edition, 6 August 2003, Kultura, p. 5.

latter include a 2004 article by Anna Ewa Soria, as presented on the Internet site of Kazimierz Dolny. It recommends the book, contains many kind words about the author and his links with Polish culture, as well as presents a short bibliography.<sup>1145</sup> The year 2002 brought a text signed by J.S., who—on the basis of a paper by Katarzyna Więclawska<sup>1146</sup>—compares the presentations of the town by Asch and Singer.<sup>1147</sup>

So within nearly two decades, since 1990, as many as four translations of Asch's book have been published. Noting that Jewish culture arouses ever more interest in present-day Poland, and that more and more people know Yiddish well and are able to translate from it, one can hope for new editions of Asch's works. That would be a fulfillment of Asch's desires, as expressed in a much later sonnet by Artur Fryz:

[...] he wished books may  
become the heart's key to the treasury of faith  
become a meeting place for the nations' prayers

he looked at the town's estranged halves  
searching for a language to unite them, not divide<sup>1148</sup>

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Additionally, one should mention those Polish translations of Asch's plays that never got printed, but were staged in Polish theaters before World War II. These spectacles are remembered by Michael Steinlauf in his articles, and more data on them can be found in abundant source materials in Mirosława Bułat's book

1145 See Anna Ewa Soria, *W Kazimierzu Wisła mówi do mnie po żydowsku...*  
<http://www.kazimierzdolny.pl/pisarze/?id=148&t=43> (14 November 2006).

1146 See Katarzyna Więclawska, "... tajemnicze wnętrze ludnego miasteczka ..." *Obraz szteti w prozie Szaloma Asza i Izaaka Baszewisa Singera*, in: *Obyczaje. Magazyn Międzynarodowy*, 8, Winter 2002, pp. 6–9. Katarzyna Więclawska, who died a tragic death in 2004, discussed Asch's *oeuvre* also in other studies, such as Katarzyna Więclawska, *Miasteczko Szaloma Asza jako archetyp literackiego obrazu szteti*, in: Konrad Zieliński, Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska (eds.), *Ortodoksja—Emancypacja—Asymilacja*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS 2003, pp. 191–201; Katarzyna Więclawska, *Shtetl Codes: Fantasy in the Fiction of Asch, Schulz, and I.B. Singer*, in: *Polin*, 17, 2004, pp. 260–265; and in the book Katarzyna Więclawska, *Zmartwychwstałe miasteczko*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS 2005.

1147 See J.S., *Sztetl w twórczości Asza i Singera*,  
<http://www.znak.com.pl/forum/index.php?t=przeгляд&id=1317> (14 November 2006).

1148 Artur Fryz, *Szalom Asz*, in: Artur Fryz, *Miasto nad bitwą 24 sonety municypalne*, op. cit., pp. 32–33, here p. 33.

on the Cracow Jewish theater as well as in Stanisław Pigoń's commentary on Asch's letters, which he edited.<sup>1149</sup> The Polish staging of *Czasy Mesjasza* is described by Henryk Cudnowski; he was, however, wrong to believe that this play and also previous ones had been originally written by Asch in Polish.<sup>1150</sup>

When on 21 January 1905 the first Polish versions of Asch's plays, *Z biegiem fal* and *Grzech*, had their debut, the Polish press published many reviews, mostly favorable. The longest of them, by Konrad Rakowski, appeared on 23 January in *Czas*. The author praised the talent and subtlety of Asch, but regretted that the depicted community is too hermetic and thus the play could not be well understood by the Poles. In Rakowski's view, that should not be blamed on the playwright, but on the situation in Poland. The reviewer was right to observe that Asch's plays lacked the features of drama and that a different genre, the novelette, would have been better suited to discuss the same topics.<sup>1151</sup>

Also the Yiddish original versions of Asch's plays were frequently performed in Polish theaters, which is corroborated by newspaper advertisements, e.g. the one in *Nowy Dziennik* dated 1 January 1930: the audience are invited to a matinee performance by Teatr Żydowski (the Jewish Theater) and the tickets for *Kidush hashem* are offered at reduced prices.<sup>1152</sup> Some plays were shown several times in one town, as stated on many occasions by Steinlauf and Bułat;<sup>1153</sup> the latter researcher also mentions a film adaptation, *Wujek Mozes*, based on Asch's book.<sup>1154</sup>

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Following Shalom Asch's death on 10 July 1957 in London, both Polish- and Yiddish-language press in Poland—mainly *Folks-shtime*<sup>1155</sup> and its Polish sup-

1149 See Michael C. Steinlauf, *Jewish Theatre in Poland*, in: *Polin*, Vol. 16, 2003, pp. 71–91, here p. 87; Michael C. Steinlauf, *Mark Arnshteyn and Polish-Jewish Theater*, op. cit., p. 402, Mirosława Bułat, *Krakowski teatr żydowski. Między szundem a sztuką*, op. cit., p. 20, 118; Stanisław Pigoń, *Listy Szaloma Asza do Stanisława Witkiewicza i Stefana Żeromskiego (1903–1906)*, op. cit., 3 (69), 13 February 1960, p. 5.

1150 See Henryk Cudnowski, *W sprawie Asza*, op. cit., p. 4.

1151 See Stanisław Pigoń, *Listy Szaloma Asza do Stanisława Witkiewicza i Stefana Żeromskiego (1903–1906)*, op. cit., 27 February 1960, p. 6.

1152 See unknown author, *Kidusz haszem Szaloma Asza*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 1, 1 January 1930, p. 7.

1153 See. Michael C. Steinlauf, *Jewish Theatre in Poland*, op. cit.; Michael C. Steinlauf, *Mark Arnshteyn and Polish-Jewish Theater*, op.cit.; Mirosława Bułat, *Krakowski teatr żydowski. Między szundem a sztuką*, op. cit., pp. 95, 105–106, 192, 199, 241, 251, and 264.

1154 See *ibid.*, p. 48.

1155 See unknown author, *Geshtorbn Sholem Ash*, in: *Folks-shtime*, 108, 13 July 1957, p. 1. אויטער ניט באקאנט, געשטארבן שלום אש, אין: פאלקס־שטימע, נר. 108, 13 יולי 1957, פ. 1.

plement<sup>1156</sup>—featured obituaries and commemorative articles. Asch was called the greatest contemporary Jewish writer of fiction and put on a par with the most eminent, world-famous authors. An interesting article was written by Leyb Olitski, who, stressing the literary qualities of Asch's works, commented upon critical opinions they had received and regretted that not all writings by Asch had met with as much respect as they deserved.<sup>1157</sup>

Another text describes a solemn meeting that was held to honor the dead writer on 20 July 1957 in Towarzystwo Społeczno-Kulturalne Żydów (the Jewish Social and Cultural Association) in Warsaw. One of the participants was the then Israeli ambassador in Poland, Katriel Kac. Hersh Smoliar<sup>1158</sup> delivered the opening speech, stating that the news about Asch's death was particularly painful to the Polish Jews, because, throughout his literary career, Asch had been strongly attached to the Polish lands and the history of the Jews in Poland. A notable opinion—and a typical one in that period—was expressed by another Yiddish writer, Dovid Sfar.<sup>1159</sup> Although he praised Asch's works, even during that solemn meeting he was unable to restrain himself and suggested that his fellow writer's books often lacked a deep analysis and a portrayal of that social power on which the contemporary Jewish community could rely and thanks to which it could develop in the future. Ber Mark<sup>1160</sup> discussed Asch's *oeuvre* in its entirety, providing short analyses of the most significant works and stressing the importance of each of them; he compared the writer to an oak tree that can survive any storm and withstand any adversity.<sup>1161</sup> Also in Kutno, a commemora-

1156 See unknown author, *Po bolesnej stracie*, in: *Folks-sztyme dodatek tygodniowy*, 6, 3 August 1957, p. 2.

1157 See Leyb Olitski, "... *S'iz geven a mentsh ...*," op. cit.

1158 הערש סמאליאר Hersh Smoliar (Hersz Smolar, 1905–1993) was a Communist activist and writer. In 1920–1928 he lived in the Soviet Union and studied in Moscow. During the war he joined the Soviet resistance troops. In 1946 he returned to Poland and became an editor with *Folks-shtime*. In April 1956 he was the first to inform the general public worldwide that under the Stalinist regime Yiddish writers were imprisoned and executed between 1948 and 1952. In 1971 he emigrated to Israel.

1159 דוד ספארד Dovid Sfar (Dawid Sfar, 1903–1981) was a writer, poet, and editor. Before World War II he studied philosophy in Warsaw and Paris. He spent the war in the Soviet Union, to return to Poland in 1946 and start working as an editor for the Yidish bukh publishing house. In 1969 he moved to Israel.

1160 בער מאַרק Ber Mark (Bernard Mark, 1908–1966) received a lawyer's education, but worked as a historian and journalist. In September 1939 he took part in the defense of Warsaw against the Germans. He survived the war in the Soviet Union and there he organized help for Jewish refugees. In 1946 Ber Mark returned to Poland and in 1949 became Head of the Jewish Historical Institute. From 1954 he was professor of history at Warsaw University.

1161 See M.S., *Tsum ondenk fun Sholem Ash*, op. cit.

tive celebration was held and the decision was made to put up a plaque at the place where Asch had been born.<sup>1162</sup>

The Polish-language weekly supplement of *Folks-sztyme* rightly objected to an obituary note in *Życie Warszawy*<sup>1163</sup> that said Asch had written in the “jargon.”<sup>1164</sup> *Folks-sztyme* defines such an approach as ignorant and spiteful towards the writer and millions of his readers while in 1957 everybody should know the difference between a jargon and a language.<sup>1165</sup>

Another note in the same supplement gives a resume of an article by Shloyme Lastik,<sup>1166</sup> printed in *Sztandar Ludu*, and reiterates Lastik’s statement that Sholem Asch was a writer who loved the Polish soil and described it beautifully in his works; therefore publishers should be persuaded to make Asch’s books available to the Polish reader as the author’s “life and literary biography were very closely connected with Poland and its spirit.”<sup>1167</sup> A similar note was written by Lastik after Asch’s death for *Nowa Kultura*, where he discussed *Po-top: trylogja*, using the popular term “rotten tzarist rule;” Lastik defended Asch, explaining that his negative attitude towards the revolution stemmed from a humanist’s response to bloodshed.<sup>1168</sup> The texts and speeches concerning Asch that were printed or delivered under the Communist rule in Poland must be viewed

1162 See Jan Koprowski, *Odkrycia i pamiątki*, in: *Dziennik Polski*, 288, 4 December 1957, p. 4.

1163 See S. Litauer, *Zgon Szaloma Asza*, in: *Życie Warszawy*, 165, 1957, p. 3.

1164 The Yiddish language, particularly in the interwar period, used to be called in Poland “the Jewish language” or “the jargon.”

1165 See unknown author, *W jakim języku pisał Szolem Asz?*, in: *Folks-sztyme dodatek tygodniowy*, 6, 3 August 1957, p. 2.

1166 שלמה לאַסטיק Shloyme Lastik (Salomon Lastik, 1907–1977) was a journalist and critic of Yiddish literature. He also translated literature from Yiddish into Polish, edited literary anthologies for Jewish schools, and authored a monograph on the Jewish Enlightenment, *Z dziejów Oświecenia żydowskiego: ludzie i fakty* (1961). Collaborating with Arnold Ślucki (1920–1972), he edited an anthology of Jewish poetry, *Antologia poezji żydowskiej*. It was published in 1983, sixteen years after it was prepared for printing.

1167 See unknown author, *O Szalomie Aszu epitafium*, in: *Folks-sztyme dodatek tygodniowy*, 11, 14 September 1957, p. 2.

1168 See Salomon Lastik, *Szalom Asz*, in: *Nowa Kultura*, 30, 1957, p. 8. Lastik lists there the hitherto translations of Asch’s books into Polish such as *Wujek Mozes* in Grabowska’s translation of 1918. In 1918 the Yiddish original was published and no other sources or library catalogues confirm that a Polish version appeared in book form. Perhaps Lastik means a translation that was published in *Nowe Życie* and that is mentioned in Reyzen’s lexicon, see unknown author, *Ash Sholem*, in: Zalmen Reyzen (ed.), *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese un filologje*, Vilne: B. Kletskin 1926–1929, Vol. 1, cols. 173–186, here col. 185

with much caution, considering the operation of censorship. This group of publications includes another article by Shloyme Lastik, dated 1957, which is an entry in *Encyklopedia Współczesna*. A major portion of the analysis is a thorough presentation of Asch's achievement, but in one paragraph Lastik says that Marxist critics were right to accuse Asch of an inimical attitude towards the revolution and that one would find it hard to agree with Asch's assessment of Russia's condition following 1917, as presented in *Potop: trylogia*.<sup>1169</sup>

Another obituary was published on 4 August 1957 in *Przemiany*. It included a short discussion of *Bóg zemsty*, *Krajan*, and *Mąż z Nazaretu*, as well as a statement that Asch was one of the eminent representatives of 20th-century literature.<sup>1170</sup>

After Asch's death, Ber Mark wrote an essay about him; the English translation of that text was reprinted in 1980, on the hundredth anniversary of the writer's birthday, by the *Jewish Quarterly*. Mark stressed Asch's Polish affiliations and said that in Asch's works the Polish goy was the epitome of a Christian. Mark claims that this is the case not only in those books which deal with East European Jews, and that the best illustration of his thesis is *Der man fun Natseres*, whose scene is interwar Warsaw. Similarly, in *Grosman un zun*, an American novel, when the author wants to introduce a Christian, it is an inhabitant of a Polish village on the Vistula. Mark concludes his analysis with a statement that it is, first of all, the Polish Jews who should appreciate Asch as he was "blood of their blood and flesh of their flesh;" he depicted both their past and the tragedy of the Shoah and, by writing, he wanted to fight Nazi Germany.<sup>1171</sup>

In 1986 the London paper *Dziennik Polski* published an article by Adam Adler. It discusses *Mąż z Nazaretu*, but the most interesting part is Adler's recollection of Asch's funeral at the Hoop Lane cemetery in London.<sup>1172</sup> Only few of almost 300 thousand Jewish inhabitants arrived at the cemetery on that cloudy

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אויטאָר ניט באַקאַנט, אַש שלום, אין: זלמן רייזען (רעד.), לעקסיקאָן פֿון דער ייִדישער ליטעראַטור פֿרעסע און פֿילאָלאָגיע, ווילנע: ב. קלעצקין 1926–1929, ב.ד. 1, שפ. 173–186, דאָ שפ. 185.

The same source mentions the Polish translation of *Meri* (perhaps the reference is to volume 2, whose title in Yiddish is *Der veg tsu zikh*), which was printed in *Nasz Przegląd* under the title *Droga do duszy*; regrettably, no specific bibliographical data are available here either.

1169 See Salomon Lastik, *Szalom Asz*, in: *Encyklopedia Współczesna*, 10, 1957, pp. 10–11.

1170 See b.j., *Podzwonne dla Szaloma Asza*, in: *Przemiany*, 31, 1957, p. 8.

1171 See Ber Mark, *Sholem Asch (1880–1957)*, in: *Jewish Quarterly*, 28, 2/3, 1980, pp. 17–19.

1172 The register of funerals provides the following data: Asch, Sholem, place of death: 18 Loudoun Road, NW8, age: 76, date of funeral: 12 July 1957, cemetery: Hoop Lane Cemetery, Hoop Lane, Golders Green, London NW11, site: row 90, number 15, <http://data.jewishgen.org/> (10 July 2007).

Friday morning. Representatives of many important Jewish organizations and of the Polish literary world were absent too. However, among the attendants were the Israeli ambassador Eliahu Elath with his wife, a representative of the International PEN Joseph Leftwich,<sup>1173</sup> and Richard Barnett of the British Museum. The funeral was celebrated by a London rabbi Reinhart. Passages from the poem about the heroes of the Warsaw ghetto (*O męczeństwie rapsod pozgonny* by Tadeusz Jerzy Sarnecki aka Jan Wajdelota) were read. At the end of the ceremony there fell a sudden, torrential rain and the attendants had to seek shelter in the chapel.<sup>1174</sup>

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Sholem Asch is a constant presence in Polish culture, not only thanks to the translations of his works, but also due to various initiatives that are described in the press and on Internet sites. Undoubtedly, the place that cherishes the memory of the author the most is his home town, Kutno. His house in Podrzeczna was preserved many years after the war.<sup>1175</sup> However, quite a long time ago, the building was pulled down. Earlier, during the war, the Germans destroyed the cemetery where the writer's parents had been buried. Towards the end of the 1960s there appeared an initiative to name the town library after Asch, but finally it was Stefan Żeromski who was commemorated in this way. Asch was remembered in Kutno in 1975, when an exhibition was held that presented all the writers who had been connected with the town. At the end of 1986 a commemorative medal, eleventh in the series, was prepared by Towarzystwo Ziemi Kutnowskiej (the Association for the Kutno Region). Its obverse side shows Asch's face and the circumscription "Szalom Asz 1880–1957. Pamięci wielkiego pisarza—Kutno—miasto rodzinne" (Shalom Asch 1880–1957. In memory of the great writer—Kutno, his home town). The reverse shows the same words in Yiddish as well as a bilingual quotation: "Wisła mówi do mnie po żydowsku" ("The Vistula speaks to me in Yiddish"). 1150 specimens of the medal, either patinated or silver-coated, were produced by the Warsaw Mint and they cost respectively, 600 and 650 zlotys.<sup>1176</sup> Among other commemorative events, one should mention the literary contest named Ogólnopolski Konkurs Literacki im. Szaloma Asza, which is held biannually by the Kutno municipal authorities, the town li-

1173 Joseph Leftwich (1892–1984) was a literary critic and a translator of Yiddish literature into English.

1174 See Adam Adler, *Nazaretanin*, in: *Dziennik Polski i Dziennik Żołnierza (Londyn)*, 127, 1986, pp. 3 and 6.

1175 See Artur Fryz, *Szalom Asz*, op. cit., p. 32.

1176 See Jan B[olesław] Nycek, *Aszowi—miasto rodzinne*, in: *Tygodnik Płocki*, 2, 11 January 1987, p. 4. The same article includes the writer's profile and enumerates some of his writings.

brary and community center. A special dimension of the event is the fact that it is co-organized by Kutno's partner town in Israel, Bat Yam, where the writer spent the final years of his life. In 2007, when the contest was held for the eighth time, the fiftieth anniversary of Asch's death was also celebrated. In 2011 a conference was organized in the writer's honor and the proceedings were published.<sup>1177</sup> Another initiative in Kutno that is aimed at preserving the memory of Asch is the festival that accompanies the literary contest; the events take place in Kutno and Łódź and the writer's relatives from London are among the invited guests.<sup>1178</sup> In 2001 a volume of poetry by Artur Fryz, an inhabitant of Kutno, was published (*Miasto nad bitwą 24 sonety municypalne*); some poems deal with Asch.<sup>1179</sup> Also a TV documentary about Sholem Asch was made by Agnieszka Arnold (*Widziałem rękę Sary*),<sup>1180</sup> which is screened on various occasions.

In Poland, Asch is still perceived as the representative of Jewish literature: it was his story, and not for instance a passage from a book by Singer, a Nobel Prize winner, that was included as the only purely literary text in the book *Tematy żydowskie*, which is a collection of articles edited by Elżbieta Traba and Robert Traba and treating mainly of the Polish–Jewish relations.<sup>1181</sup> When trans-

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1177 See Daniel Kalinowski (ed.), *Szalom Asz. Polskie i żydowskie konteksty twórczości*, op. cit.

1178 See Joanna Podolska, KWM, *Pisarz pojednania*, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 278, lol edition, 29 November 1999, p. 4; unknown author, *Festiwal*, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 275, lol edition, 24–25 November 2001, p. 4; jp [Jan Pleszczyński], *rz*, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 272, lol edition, 21 November 2001, p. 6; <http://www.bibliokutno.pl/?pd=asz> (11 February 2012); pp, *Pisarz dwóch narodów*, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 152, waw edition, 2 July 1997, *Kultura*, p. 11; Piotr Pilch, *Asz w Kutnie*, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 237, waw edition, 11 October 1995, *Kultura*, p. 13, p, *Konkurs Literacki im. Szaloma Asza*, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 93, waw edition, 20 April 1995, *Kultura*, p. 10; kwm, *Modny Asz*, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 229, lol edition, 30 September 1999, *Aktualności*, p. 2; Ewa Sławińska, Joanna Podolska, *Dziedzictwo*, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 277, lol edition, 27 November 2001, p. 5; jp [Jan Pleszczyński], *Z żydowskiego miasteczka*, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 275, lol edition, 24–25 November 2001, p. 6; jp [Jan Pleszczyński], kwm, *Nie ma już tych Miasteczek ...*, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 275, lol edition, 25 November 1999, *Aktualności*, p. 5.

1179 See jp [Jan Pleszczyński], *Co się wydaje*, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 44, lol edition, 21 February 2002, p. 2.

1180 See jp [Jan Pleszczyński], kwm, *Nie ma już tych Miasteczek ...*, op. cit.; <http://www.kazimierz-dolny.net.pl/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=87> (11 June 2007); MR, NO, *Miasteczko Kutno*, in: *Supermarket*, 0, *Gazeta Stołeczna* supplement, 115, waw edition, 19 May 1999, p. 7.

1181 See Szalom Asz, *Chrystus w getcie*, translated by Michał Friedman in: Elżbieta Traba, Robert Traba (eds.), *Tematy żydowskie*, Olsztyn: Borussia 1999, pp. 191–200.



lations of Asch's works were published, in connection with other cultural events or for no obvious reason, Asch was mentioned by Polish newspapers and magazines. This category of publications include an article by Jan Przedpeński, who briefly described Asch's life and *oeuvre* and informed about an exhibition dedicated to Asch that was presented in Kutno.<sup>1182</sup> Another captivating article, which preceded a more general interest in Asch's books, was written by Jacek Słowiński and published in 1988 in *Życie Warszawy*. Słowiński offers a detailed discussion of Asch's biography and literary output as well as many interesting biographical data, and regrets the lack of new translations of Asch's works.<sup>1183</sup> He also includes photos of the medal commemorating Asch, which was commissioned by Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Ziemi Kutnowskiej.<sup>1184</sup> Moreover, the Yiddish press mentioned the writer, sometimes many years after his death, e.g. in 1991 in a note informing about the staging of *Der Got fun nekome* in Paris.<sup>1185</sup>

An especially praiseworthy idea was to publish an occasional issue of *Słowo Żydowskie*, dedicated almost entirely to Asch, on the fiftieth anniversary of his death in 2007.<sup>1186</sup> It included several popularizing articles in Yiddish, among them memories of Asch's great-grandson David Mazower.

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1182 See Jan Przedpeński, *Szalom Asz—klasyk żydowski z Kutna*, in: *Słowo Żydowskie*, 6, 24 March 1995, p. 15.

1183 Since then, in Poland, only *Opowiadania* was published in 1964 as translated by Stanisław Wygodzki.

1184 See Jacek Słowiński, *Asz wieczny tulacz*, in: *Życie Warszawy*, 60, 1988, p. 5.

1185 See unknown author, *Yiddish teater in frantsoyzish*, in: *Folks-shtime*, 11–12, 15–22 March 1991, p. 7

אויטאָר גיט באַקאַנט, ייִדיש טעאָטער אין פֿראַנצויזיש, אין: פֿאלקס-שטימע, נר. 11–12, 15–22 מערץ 1991, 7.

1186 See *Słowo Żydowskie*, 25–26 (415–416), 17–31 December 2008.



## 6. Sholem Asch as a chronicler of memory

Yiddish literature was not hermetic—it could not be. That is evident if one considers the impact of world literature, the intertextuality, the references Yiddish authors (for instance Asch) made to other authors of literary works, and the endeavors of Yiddish writers to reach non-Jewish audiences and to become part of the literary mainstream. The topics of Yiddish literature, although it was generally targeted at the Jewish reader, were not limited to those relevant to the Jewish community. The Jews lived among people of various nationalities and religions, so Yiddish literature was naturally involved in topics concerning them.

Can one attempt to generalize on the ways in which Yiddish writers represented the Jewish and the Christian world, their convergent and divergent points? Obviously it would be a daunting task if we remember how many texts were written, especially in the interwar period, and how few studies and anthologies are available.

Such a generalization was assayed by Chone Shmeruk. Having analyzed selected writings of the interwar period, e.g. by Efroim Kaganovski, Moyshe Kulbak, Yisroel Rabon, Zusman Segalovitsh, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Israel Joshua Singer, and Oyzer Varshavski, Shmeruk concludes that their portrayal of Jewish–Christian relations is in fact stereotypical, superficial, and mostly pejorative. The Poles are shown either as peasants and simpletons who are presented to the Jewish boys, students of Cheders, as negative models, or as riotous youths throwing stones at the Jews, or as hunters, hungry for animal blood. Other negative protagonists are often Polish nobles who oppress serfs and Jews, and squander their property. A frequent motif is an infatuation of the daughter of a Jewish innkeeper with a goy from a nearby town, a butcher or pig-seller, and then the birth of their baby; the child only appears to be Jewish, but actually feels no spiritual bond with the mother’s nation. The borderline between the two communities can become occasionally obliterated among the lowest social classes, the demimonde, smugglers and prostitutes, and, understandably, Communists.

Investigating Yiddish interwar literary works, Shmeruk observes yet another feature that they have in common: although they are composed in Yiddish, it was clearly assumed their readers would also know Polish. Many assimilated Jewish characters speak Polish and passages written in Polish are left untranslated. Simultaneously, it seems that this treatment of Polish as self-explanatory even deepens the gap between the two communities: they cannot communicate although they share a medium of discourse.<sup>1187</sup>

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1187 See Chone Shmeruk, *Jews and Poles in Yiddish Literature in Poland between the Two World Wars*, op. cit., pp. 187–188.

How are Shalom Asch's novels to be perceived against this troubling background? It is important how one tries to answer this question as Asch's positive attitude towards Christianity is definitely unique in his literary achievement, as compared to that of other Yiddish writers. So a crucial aspect of his writing is the rather positive representation of Poland and the Poles which is to be found in the discussed novels. Among the causes one can surely name the fact that an individual's memory, and thus also a writer's memory, is shaped chiefly by direct experience that has much bearing on that person's image of the world and, successively, on the represented world of his or her writings. What Asch gathered in his native country was, first of all, good memories; he was a friend of Polish writers and gained recognition in the Polish community. Therefore, probably, the memory of Poland that is mediated by his novels sheds exceptionally bright light on that country.

This is why it can certainly be stated that Asch's world is not entirely stereotypical: Polish peasants are no fools, they appreciate the wisdom and religiousness of their Jewish neighbors whom they help in need. Also priests are portrayed as predominantly positive figures and deeply pious men. Contrariwise, Polish landowners tend to be presented conventionally. Yet if we take into account the rich Jewish factory owner of the town of Łódź, shown in the novel *Varshe*, gradually a different division line becomes apparent, reflecting the convictions of the author. In his works, the borderline between good and evil, or wisdom and foolishness is not the borderline between Jews and Christians, but between the rich and the poor, between those who take pride in their sagacity and religious devoutness and those whose faith is simple and trustful. The separateness of these groups is further stressed by the fact that the poor characters, both Jewish and Christian, are depicted in a fuller and more careful way, whereas the rich are usually just sketched, rather schematically.

Asch's novels present relatively few Christians, and none of them is a keenly characterized, distinct figure; the reader may find a fuller characterization only in a handful of cases. On the other hand, Asch describes a multitude of representatives of his own nation. For instance, in *Farn mabl* the author does not provide Christian counterparts of his best Jewish characters: Borekh Khomski and the Hurvits couple. Significantly, all novels by Asch focus on the Jews, whereas Christians are introduced only when they are required in the plot and are to influence the fate of the Jewish characters.

One cannot find true dialogue, either, as the comprehensive discussion of Judaism is not accompanied by a profound analysis of Christianity. This asymmetry as well as the frequent artificiality of Christian characters should perhaps be ascribed to the author's lack of competence. Writing his novels, Asch drew

upon his own life, experience, and reading and it must have been easier for him to describe the milieu he knew well.

When analyzing Asch novels, one can notice the attempts to approach other religions objectively, but the author's primary endeavor is to express his deep understanding of and attachment to Judaism and Jewish tradition. Christianity receives superficial treatment, e.g. *Farn mabl* shows red lights in front of icons, characters who attend Orthodox services and burn their candles, and the initials of the Three Magi that are yearly inscribed on the door, but these external signs of religiousness are not complemented by any remarks about the essence of the Christian faith, its beliefs, objectives or emotions. No wonder then that those Jewish characters of Asch's trilogy who decide to convert are not driven by religious motives, but sheer opportunism, so the conversion does not pose a serious problem to them. Similarly, some Jewish characters were not baptized, but their outward religious life does not differ from that of the Christians. The Russian Jews go to the Orthodox church rather than to their synagogue, not because the decision was preceded by religious reflection, but because they want to conform and adapt to their environment.

Nonetheless, it is the effort to bring Judaism and Christianity together that ought to be considered the hallmark of Asch's writing; otherwise, it does not stand apart from other Yiddish literary works of that period as to their topics or artistic quality. The novels by Asch, who continued to write for over fifty years, touch upon problems which are discussed also by other authors. However, thanks to the scope of Jewish history that he covers—from biblical times to the 20th century—as well as to the variety of places where the action takes place, Asch's literary achievement is unique. His works, presenting familiar issues and intelligible images, are accessible to everybody. Owing to that, Asch can consistently elucidate his convictions and imprint a cohesive world image upon the memory of the reader. Therefore his novels can be regarded as a medium for memory, consciously shaping the memory of the recipients and, in consequence, collective memory. In Asch's novels, one can distinguish several figures of memory, both concrete and abstract. These include images of nature, episodes from the shtetl and the city, typical personages, scenes of family life and religious life, as well as the faith, culture, ideas, biblical and historical events. Using such memory crystallization centers, Asch ensures first that familiar images are faithfully reproduced in his reader's memory and second that they are modified in accordance with his views and supplemented with new images. Thus, a new world vision is created and the crucial factors responsible for the process are related to memory; they are: time, space, and subjectivity, which, in Asch's judgment, is positive.

Asch's works have to be noted also for his attempt to incorporate historical events into a broad philosophy of life and to identify the place of an individual in the divine creation. That can be inferred from the conversations of the protagonists and from the references to the Scripture. As a result, the reader is better equipped to understand the characters and to accept historical facts, which are often harsh. Moreover, it may be observed that the writer's works are somewhat didactic: the majority of concepts, symbols and festivals that are typical of Jewish culture are purposefully explicated in the text so that they are comprehensible practically to any readership. Another characteristic tendency is to show all characters simply as human beings regardless of their religious convictions. This is why Asch's novels present both good and bad Christian characters alongside good and bad Jews. We may conjecture that the author hoped his desire for objectivity might bring about concord and atonement worldwide.

As I mentioned before, Christian characters appear and, in a sense, are allowed to exist only in juxtaposition to the Jewish world. Asch's works rarely offer instances of good or bad conduct of Christians towards other Christians, so their "good" or "evil" is manifest exclusively in the relations with the Jewry. This means the memory that is mediated by Asch's writings is the memory of his own people, the memory of the world as perceived by a Jewish observer.

Finally, two fundamental questions have to be asked: if Asch's works are a medium for memory, who did the author want to share it with and who is it shared with today? It seems one can find an answer: Asch was perfectly well aware that many of his books were read in translated versions and many of his readers were not Jewish. Hence he wished to present Jewish religion and tradition to non-Jewish audiences as well as to show the Christian world—with much affection—to the Jews. The writer, however, appears to be quite simple-hearted in his attempts to bridge the gap, which have received so much praise from some critics.<sup>1188</sup> These efforts create the impression that he persists in persuading the Christians they should love their Jewish neighbors who also believe in God, while he wants to show mostly good Christians to the Jews. Consequently, his Christian characters and their behavior may be rather unrealistic at times. Interestingly, these qualities of the represented world are common both in the novels that were composed before the Shoah and afterwards.

To sum up, it can be stated that in his novels, Asch tried to comprise both exclusively Jewish memory as well as common memory viewed from the Jewish perspective, and that the target readers of his works are Jews and Christians alike. In this manner, via his writings, the author wanted to enrich the common memory of his own nation as well as the treasury of the memory of mankind.

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1188 See Salomon Belis-Legis, *Wstep*, op. cit., p. 11.

# Appendix: First editions of Asch's works in Yiddish and their translations in English, French, German, and Polish<sup>1189</sup>

## 1. Asch's works and their translations

1. תמר און אמנון *Amnon un Tamar* [Amnon and Tamar] (Varshe: Progres, 1900).
2. אין א שלעכטער צייט *In a shlekhter tsayt* [In Evil Times] (Varshe: Progres, 1900).
3. צוריקגעקומען *Tsurikgekumen* [The Return] (Kroke, 1904), new edition as: מיטן שטראם *Mitn shtrom* [With the Current of the River] (Varshe: Progres, 1909).
  - English translation Jacob Robbins, *With the Current* (New York, 193?).
4. א שטעדטל *(A shtetl [A Townlet])* (Minsk: Kultur, 1905).
  - German translation *Städtchen* (Berlin: Fischer 1909).
  - Polish translation from the German version *Miasteczko*, Introduction Zdzisław Dębicki (Warszawa: Biblioteka Dzieł Wyborowych, 1910, 2 parts), translation corrected on the basis of the Yiddish text by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Miasteczko*, Afterword Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska (Janowiec nad Wisłą: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Janowca nad Wisłą 2003).
5. מאטעלע: א טרויעריקע מעשה *Motele: A troyerike mayse* [Motele: a Tragic Story] (Minsk: Kultur, 1905/1906).

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1189 The list, arranged in chronological order according to the first known edition, is compiled on the basis of the copies I examined, catalog cards and on-line catalogs. Asch wrote in Yiddish only, but in some cases an English or a German edition preceded or—in rare cases—replaced the Yiddish version. The title in Yiddish (set in the Hebrew alphabet and in the form identical to that which appears on the title page or in the catalog) is followed by its transcription and its literal translation, no matter whether the work has been published in English or not and what its title was. English translations (if available) are quoted under the Yiddish version, just like the French, German and Polish ones. If it is known that any of the quoted translations was done on the basis of another translation rather than the Yiddish original, it is said so. British and American translations are invariably treated as English ones. Subsequent editions of the same work or of its translation are included only when the new edition was published under a new title or when the translation was done by a different translator. I strove to make the list as exhaustive as possible but in some cases I was not able to identify all bibliographical data. Translations of novels and isolated shorter texts, which were serialized in everyday papers or in collections published as books along with works by different authors, are not included, because such a compilation would be too selective and accidental due to serious difficulties with collecting all relevant data.

6. וועקסעלע צאהלען; א שמועס *Veksele tsoln; A shmues* [To Buy Out a Promissory Note; A Conversation] (Minsk: Kultur, 1905/1906).
7. דער גובערנאטאר קומט; א יודישער נגיד; *A yudisher noked; Der gubernator kumt* [A Jewish Rich Man, The Governor Is to Come] (Minsk: Kultur, 1905/1906).
8. משיח'ס צייטן *Meshiyekhs tsaytn* [The Messiah's Times] (Vilne: Tsukunft, 1906).
9. שמחת תורה אין דער קצבישער חברה; א טרויריגער שמחת תורה *Simkhes Toyre in der katsevisher khevre; A troyriger Simkhes Toyre* [Simkhes Toyre at the Butchers; The Sad Simkhes Toyre] (Minsk: Kultur, 1906).
10. דער גאט פון נקמה *Der Got fun nekome* [The God of Vengeance] (Vilne: Tsukunft, 1907).  
 - English translation Isaac Goldberg, *The God of Vengeance* (Boston: Stratford, 1918).  
 - German translation *Der Gott der Rache* (Berlin: Fischer, 1907).
11. יחוס *Yikhes* [Origin] (1907).
12. מאמענטן פון די פרייהייטסצעג *Momentn fun di frayhaytsteg* [Moments in the Days of Freedom] (Varshe: Progres, 1908).
13. יוגנט *Yugnt* [The Young] (Varshe: Shimin, 1908).
14. דער גובערנאטאר פארט; א בערגל ערד; באנקראט *Der gubernator fort; A bergl erd; Bankrot* [The Governor Goes Away; A Hill of Soil; The Bankrupt] (Varshe: Shimin, 1908/1909).
15. אן אפענער בריוו צו דער יידישער אינטעליגענץ *An ofener briv tsu der yidisher inteligents* [An Open Letter to the Jewish Intelligentsia] (Varshe: Edelshteyn, 1909).
16. דראמען *Dramen* [Dramas] (Varshe: Progres, 1909).
17. [Family Großglück].  
 - German translation *Die Familie Großglück* (Berlin: Fischer, 1909).
18. ערצעהלונגען *Ertselungen* [Short Stories] (Varshe: Shimin, 1909).
19. אום ווינטער *Um vinter* [In the Winter] (Varshe: Progres, 1909).  
 - English translation Isaac Goldberg, *Winter*, in: *Six Plays of the Yiddish Theatre* (Boston: Luce, 1916).
20. די מאמע מיט דער טאכטער *Di mame mit der tokhter* [The Mother with the Daughter] (Minsk: Kultur, 1910).
21. דער זעלנער; די מאמע; א אויך *Oykh a mame; Der zelner* [The Mother Too; The Soldier] (Varshe: Algemeyner farlag, 1910).
22. ערד *Erd* [The Earth] (Varshe: Progres, 1910).  
 - German translation *Erde* (Berlin: Juncker, 1913).
23. מאטיוון *Motivn* [The Motifs] (Varshe: Shimin, 1910).
24. שבתאי צבי *Shapse Tsvi* [Sabbatai Zevi] (Vilne, 1910).



- Authorized English translation from the Russian version Florence Whyte and George Rapall Noyes, *Sabbatai Zevi* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1930).
- German translation *Sabbatai Zewi* (Berlin: Fischer, 1908).
- 25. *Yiftahs tokhter* [Yefte's Daughter] (Vilne: Kletskin, 1910).
- 26. *Der zindiker* [The Sinner] (Varshe: Progres, 1910).
  - English translation Isaac Goldberg, *The Sinner*, in: *Six Plays of the Yiddish Theatre* (Boston: Luce, 1916).
- 27. *Drames* [Dramas], 2 volumes (Vilne: Kletskin, 1911), the titles unpublished before are contained in volumes:
  - 2, *Di yorshim* [Heirs].
- 28. *Erets Yisroel* [The Land of Israel] (Vilne: Kletskin, 1911), another shortened edition as: *In Erets Yisroel: historishe bilder* [In the Land of Israel: Historical Images] (Varshe: Bikher far ale, 1911), also a more comprehensive edition as: *Erets Yisroel: ertselungen fun der alter heym* [The Land of Israel: Stories from the Old Homeland] (Nyu York: Forverts, 1918).
  - German translation Mathias Acher, *Im Lande der Väter: Bilder und Dichtungen aus Palästina* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1912).
- 29. *Ertselungen* [Short Stories] (Nyu York: Forverts, 1911).
- 30. *Der landsman* [The Countryman] (Varshe / Nyu York: Progres, 1911).
- 31. *Amerika* [America] (Varshe: Progres, 1911), different title: *Kin Amerike* [To America] (Nyu York: Forverts, 1911), shortened version: *Yosele. fun bukh "Amerika" farkirtst far kinder* [Yosele. From the book "America" short version for children] (Varshe: Kultur-lige, 1921).
  - English translation James Fuchs, *America* (New York: Alpha Omega, 1918).
  - German translation *Amerika* (Berlin: Neues Leben, 1911).
  - Polish translation M. Szpiro, *Ameryka: powieść z życia Żydów polskich na emigracji* (Warszawa: Orient, 1926).
- 32. *Fun shtot un dorf* [From the Town and the Countryside] (Varshe / Nyu York: Progres, 1911).
- 33. *Reb Shloyme Noged: a poeme fun yidishn lebn* [Shloyme the Richman: a Poem About the Jewish Life] (Vilne: Kletskin, 1911).
- 34. *Der bund fun di shvakhe* [The Union of the Weak] (Peterburg: Di yidishe velt, 1912).
  - German translation *Der Bund der Schwachen* (Berlin: Fischer, 1913).

35. ממשעלהעך פון חומש *Mayselekh fun Khumesh* [Stories from the Pentateuch] (Vilne: Kletskin, 1913).  
 - English translation from the German version Caroline Cunningham, *In the Beginning* (New York: Putnam, 1935).  
 - German translation Helene Sokolow, *Kleine Geschichten aus der Bibel* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1914).
36. מערי *Meri* [Meri] (St Petersburg: Yoysef Luria, 1913).  
 - German translation *Die Jüngsten. Roman* (Berlin: Fischer, 1912).
37. אונזער גלויבען *Undzer gloybn* [Our Faith] (Nyu York: Pinski-Mazl, 1914).
38. מאטקע גנב *Motke Ganev* [Motke the Thief] (Nyu York: Forverts, 1916).  
 - English translation and edition Isaac Goldberg, *Mottke the Vagabond* (Boston: Luce, 1917), new edition: Willa and Edwin Muir, *Mottke the Thief* (New York & London: Putnam 1935).  
 - German translation Georg Richter and Siegfried Schmitz, *Mottke der Dieb* (Berlin: Ladyschnikow, 1925).  
 - Polish translation Jakób Appenzlak, *Motke ganew* (Warszawa: Sarfus, 1925).
39. א שנירל פערל אדער א שנירל פערל *Dos heylike meydln oder a shnirl perl* [A Saintly Girl and a Pearl Necklace] (1916).
40. דער וועג צו זיך *Der veg tsu zikh* [The Road to Oneself] (Nyu York: Forverts, 1917).<sup>1190</sup>
41. אנקל מאזעס *Onkl Mozes* [Uncle Mozes] (Nyu York: Forverts, 1918), another edition: אנקל מאזעס, געקירצט און פארטייטשט פון יודל מארק *Onkl Mozes, gekirtst un fartaytsht fun Yudl Mark* [Uncle Mozes, shortened and explained by Yudl Mark] (Nyu York: Nyu-Yorker arbeter-ring mitlshul, 1940).  
 - English translation Isaac Goldberg, *Uncle Moses* (New York: Dutton, 1920).  
 - German translation *Onkel Moses* (Berlin: Ladyschnikow, 1926).
42. יונגע יאהרן און אנדערע ערצעהלונגען *Yunge yorn un andere ertselungen* [The Years of the Youth and Other Stories] (Nyu York: Forverts, 1918).
43. דער יידישער סאלדאט און אנדערע ערצעהלונגען *Bleter: der yidisher soldat un andere ertselungen* [Sheets: a Jewish Soldier and Other Stories] (Nyu York: Forverts, 1918).  
 - French translation *Der yidisher soldat* Lupus Blumfeld, *Le soldat juif* (Paris: la Renaissance du livre, ca. 1920).

1190 I was able to find this edition only, whereas Yiddish critical works quote the year 1914, which makes sense in so far as the novel is a direct continuation, a second volume really, of *Meri*, published in 1913. In 1914 *Der veg tsu zikh* was serialized in the dailies, see Yitskhok Kharlash, *Ash Sholem*, op. cit., col. 187, whereas the first book edition seems to be that of 1917.

44. חורבן פוילן *Khurbn Poyln* [The Destruction of Poland] (1918).
45. אמעריקאנער דערציילונגען *Amerikaner dertseylungen* [American Short Stories] (Nyu York, 1918).
46. רב שלמה נגיד און אנדערע ערצעהלונגען *Reb Shloyme Noged un andere ertselungen* [Shloyme the Richman and Other Stories] (Nyu York: Forverts, 1918).
47. ווער איז דער פאטער? *Ver iz der foter?* [Who is the Father?] (1918).
48. קידוש השם און אנדערע ערצעהלונגען *Kidush hashem un andere ertselungen* [The Sanctification of the Name of God and Other Stories] (Nyu York: Forverts, 1919).
- English translation *Kidush hashem* Israel Goldberg under the pseudonym of Rufus Learsi, *Kiddush Ha-Shem* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1926).
  - French translation *Kidush hashem* Aby Wiewiorka, *La sanctification du Nom*, Introduction Iitzhok Niborski (Lausanne / Paris: L'Age du Homme, 1985).
  - German translation *Kidush hashem* Elias Hurvitz, *Ein Glaubensmartyrium* (Berlin: Ladyschnikow, 1920).
  - Polish translation *Kidush hashem* Michał Friedman, *Kidusz ha-szem*, Introduction Michał Friedman (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 2003).
49. צוריקקומען *Khaim Lederers tsurikkumen* [The Return of Khaim Lederer] (1919).
- English translation Elsa Krauch, *Khaim Lederer's Return*, in: *Three Novels* (New York: Putnam, 1938).
  - Authorized German translation Siegfried Schmitz, *Khaim Lederers Rückkehr* (Wien: Löwit, 1928).
50. אהיים *Aheym* [At Home] (Minsk: Kultur, 1920).
51. דערציילונגען *Dertseylungen* [Short Stories] (Vilne: Kletskin, 1920).
52. פרייהלינג; א הלל; דער גרענעץ; איבער דער גרענעץ; א קהל; פרייהלינג *Iber der grenets; A khalel; Friling* [Across the Border; The Song of Glory; The Spring] (Varshe: Algemeyner farlag, 1920).
53. מענטשן און געטער *Mentshn un geter* [People and Gods] (Varshe: Algemeyner farlag, 1920).
54. דער טויטער מענטש *Der toyter mentsh* [The Dead Man] (1920).
55. געזאמלטע שריפטן *Gezamlte shriftn* [Collected Works], 12 volumes, 1st edition 1921, 2nd edition 1923, 3rd edition 1938 (Nyu York: Sholem Ash Komite), the titles unpublished before are contained in volumes:
- 2, בילדער און הומארעסקען *Bilder un humoresken* [Pictures and Humorous Tales].
  - 3, הימעל און ערד *Himel un erd* [The Sky and the Earth].
  - 5, צוויי וועלטן *Tsvey veltn* [Two Worlds].

- 6, *דאס בוך פון צער* *Dos bukh fun tsar* [The Book of Concern].
  - 12.1, *די כישופמאכערין פון קאסטיליען* *Di kishefmakherin fun Kastilyen* [The Sorceress of Castile ].
  - German translation Elias Hurvitz, *Die Zauberin von Kastilien* (Berlin: Ladschnikow, 1921).
  - Polish translation Michał Friedman, *Czarodziejka z Kastylii i inne opowiadania*, Introduction Eugenia Prokop-Janiec (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie 1993).
56. *געזאמלטע שריפטן* *Gezamlte shriftn* [Dzieła zebrane], 29 volumes (Varshe: Kultur-lige, 1921–1938, 1st edition 1921: 12 volumes, 2nd edition 1923: 12 volumes, 3rd edition 1925: 18 volumes, subsequent volumes were printed concurrently and some time later), the titles unpublished before are contained in volumes:
- 13 (1924), *נייע ערציילונגען* *Naye ertseylungen* [New Short Stories].
  - 14 (1924), *די מוטער* *Di muter* [The Mother].
  - English translation Nathan Ausübel, *The Mother* (New York: Liveright, 1930), authorized translation by Elsa Krauch, *The Mother* (New York: Putnam, 1937).
  - Authorized German translation Siegfried Schmitz *Die Mutter* (Wien: Löwit, 1928).
  - Polish translation Mojżesz Kanfer, *Matka* (Warszawa: Rój, 1933).
  - 19.1 (1926), *טויט אורטייל* *Toyt urteyl* [The Death Sentence].
  - English translation Elsa Krauch, *Judge Not*, in: *Three Novels* (New York: Putnam, 1938).
  - French translation Alzir Hella and Isa Altkaufer, *La chaise électrique*, Introduction: Stefan Zweig (Paris: Delamain et Boutelleau, 1931).
  - German translation Georg Richter, *Der elektrische Stuhl* (Berlin / Wien / Leipzig: Zsolnay 1929).
  - 19.2 (1926), *מיינ רייזע איבער שפאניען* *Mayn rayze iber Shpanyen* [My Journey Through Spain].
  - 20 (1927), *פון איין קוואל* *Fun eyn kval* [From One Source].
  - 21 (1924), *אש פאר יוגנט: דערצייילונגען און בילדער* *Ash far yugent: dertseylungen un bilder* [Ash for the Young: Short Stories and Sketches].
  - 22.2 (1928), *דער מזבח* *Der mizbeyekh* [The Altar].
  - 23.1 (1930), *נייע דראמען* *Naye dramen* [New Dramas].
  - 23.2 (1929) and 24 (1930), *פּעטערבורג* *Peterburg* [St Petersburg], the 1st volume of the trilogy *פארן מבל* *Farn mabl* [Before the Deluge], a new edition of the trilogy: *דריי שטאט* *Dray shtot* [Three Towns] (Nyu York: Shklarski, 1952).

- English translation of the entire trilogy (*Peterburg, Varshe, Moskve*) Edwin and Willa Muir, *Three Cities: A Trilogy* (New York: Putnam, 1933).
- French translation from the German version Alexandre Vialatte, *Pétersbourg*, Introduction Stefan Zweig (Paris: Bernard Grasset 1933, French translation of the entire trilogy, *Avant le déluge*).
- Authorized German translation Siegfried Schmitz, *Petersburg* (Berlin / Wien: Zsolnay 1931, German translation of the entire trilogy, *Die Sintflut: Romantrilogie*), new edition: *Petersburg: Roman der Jahrhundertwende* (Zürich: Diana, 1989).
- Polish translation Marcei Tarnowski, *Petersburg: powieść* (Warszawa: Rój 1931, Polish translation of the entire trilogy, *Potop: trylogja*).
- 25 (1930), ווארשע *Varshe* [Warsaw], the second volume of the trilogy פארן מבויל *Farn mabl* [Before the Deluge], a new edition of the trilogy: שטאט דריי *Dray shtot* [Three Cities] (Nyu York: Shklarski, 1952).
- English translation of the entire trilogy (*Peterburg, Varshe, Moskve*) Edwin and Willa Muir, *Three Cities: A Trilogy* (New York: Putnam, 1933).
- French translation Aby Wieviorka and Henri Raczymow, *Varsovie*, Introduction Henri Raczymow (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1987).
- Authorized German translation Siegfried Schmitz, *Warschau* (Berlin: Zsolnay 1930, German translation of the entire trilogy, *Die Sintflut: Romantrilogie*).
- Polish translation Waclaw Rogowicz, *Warszawa: powieść* (Warszawa: Rój 1931, Polish translation of the entire trilogy, *Potop: trylogja*).
- 26.1 (1931), מאסקווע *Moskve* [Moscow], the third volume of the trilogy פארן מבויל *Farn mabl* [Before the Deluge], a new edition of the trilogy: שטאט דריי *Dray shtot* [Three Cities] (Nyu York: Shklarski, 1952).
- English translation of the entire trilogy (*Peterburg, Varshe, Moskve*) Edwin and Willa Muir, *Three Cities: A Trilogy* (New York: Putnam, 1933).
- French translation and introduction Rachel Ertel, *Moscou* (Paris: Pierre Belfond 1988).
- Authorized German translation Siegfried Schmitz, *Moskau* (Berlin: Zsolnay 1930, German translation of the entire trilogy, *Die Sintflut: Romantrilogie*).
- Polish translation Marcei Tarnowski, *Moskwa: powieść* (Warszawa: Rój 1932, Polish translation of the entire trilogy, *Potop: trylogja*).
- 26.2 (1933), גאטס געפאנגענע *Gots gefangene* [Prisoner of God].
- German translation Siegfried Schmitz, *Die Gefangene Gottes*, (Berlin / Wien / Leipzig: Zsolnay 1932).
- 27 (1934), דער תהילים ייד *Der tilim yid* [The Psalmist].

- English translation Willa and Edwin Muir, *Salvation* (shortened version: New York: Putnam, 1934, full version: New York: Putnam, 1951).
  - French translation Juliette Pary and Isaac Pougatch, *Le Juif aux psaumes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1939).
  - German translation Siegfried Schmitz, *Der Trost des Volkes* (Zürich: Zsolnay, 1934).
  - 28 (1936), ביים אפגרונט *Bam opgrunt* [At the Abyss].
  - English translation from the German version Willa and Edwin Muir, *The War Goes On* (New York: Putnam 1936), new edition: *The Calf of Paper* (London: Gollancz, 1936).
  - German translation Siegfried Schmitz, *Der Krieg geht weiter* (Amsterdam: Allert de Lange, 1936).
  - 29 (1938), דאס געזאנג פון טאל *Dos gezang fun tol* [The Singing of the Valley].
  - English translation Elsa Krauch, *The Song of the Valley* (New York: Putnam, 1939).
  - German translation Siegfried Schmitz, *Gesang des Tales* (Amsterdam: Allert de Lange, 1938).
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1191 Most likely this is a Yiddish version of the German text of the autobiography, published two years before, see Schalom Asch, *Rückblick*, op. cit. Unfortunately, I was not able to find any outstanding copy in Yiddish to verify the assumption. It is also known that Asch's autobiography was published in Yiddish in installments by the Warsaw-based *Haynt* at the beginning of 1931, see unknown author, *Autobiografia Asza*, in: *Nowy Dziennik*, 28, 28 January 1931, p. 9.

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  - English translation Arthur Saul Super, *The Prophet* (New York: Putnam, 1955).
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  - German translation from the English version Richard Jordan, *Der Prophet. Roman* (Stuttgart / Konstanz: Diana, 1956).
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## 2. Collections of selected short stories in translation

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- 87. *Children of Abraham: The Short Stories of Sholem Asch*, translated by Maurice Samuel (New York: Putnam, 1942).
- 88. *Tales of My People*, translated by Meyer Levin (New York: Putnam, 1948).
- 89. *From Many Countries: The Collected Short Stories of Sholem Asch*, translated by Maurice Samuel and Meyer Levin (London: Macdonald, 1958).
- 90. *A Union for Shabbos and Other Stories of Jewish Life in America*, translated by Max Rosenfeld (Philadelphia: Sholom Aleichem Club, 1967).
- 91. *Pushcarts and Dreamers: Stories of Jewish Life in America*, translated by Max Rosenfeld (South Brunswick, N.J.: Yoseloff, 1969).

### 2.2 German-language editions

- 92. *Kinder in der Fremde*, translated by Siegfried Schmitz (Amsterdam: Allert de Lange, 1935).
- 93. *Bilder aus dem Ghetto*, translated by Stefania Goldenring (Berlin: Fischer, 1907).
- 94. *Die Kinder Abrahams: Novellen aus Amerika*, authorized translation Siegfried Schmitz (Berlin: Zsolnay, 1931).
- 95. *Von den Vätern*, translated by Siegfried Schmitz, (Berlin: Zsolnay, 1931).
- 96. *Zwischen den Wänden. Jüdische Erzählungen zwischen Liebe und Glaube*, translated by Angelika Glau (Kassel: Aquinate, 2002).

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1192 Editor: מרתכי צאנין Morkhe Tsanin.

## 2.3 Polish-language editions

97. *Nowele*, probably translated by Z. Majorczyk and Wiktoria Stanisławowa Huzarska / Husarska<sup>1193</sup> (Warszawa: Księgarnia Powszechna, 1906).
98. *Wenus Szwarcwaldu: opowiadanie*, translated by M. Holcblatt (Warszawa: Orient, 1925).
99. *Opowiadania*, translated by Stanisław Wygodzki (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1964).

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1193 Stanisław Pigoń quotes Majorczyk as the translator of the short stories published in *Izraelita* in 1903 and 1904, which later were included in a collection published in 1906, see Stanisław Pigoń, *Listy Szaloma Asza do Stanisława Witkiewicza i Stefana Żeromskiego (1903–1906)*. op. cit., 19 December 1959, p. 4, also Pigoń mentions the fact that Huzarska translated the sketches from Cracow, which are included in the book, see *ibid.*, 30 January 1960, p. 5.

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# Index

- Ahad Ha'am 221  
*Amerika* 35, 40, 41, 65, 69, 94, 95,  
109, 110, 125, 132, 140, 141, 142,  
144, 158, 214, 215, 219, 220, 297  
*Amerikaner dertseylungen* 43  
An-sky 209, 239, 257  
Appenzlak, Jakób 280, 301  
Arnshteyn, Mark 298  
Bal Makhshoves 36  
Bal Shem Tov 178  
*Bam opgrunt* 50, 66, 69, 92, 93, 107,  
131, 139, 148, 152, 159, 168, 180,  
193, 199, 211, 224, 226, 231, 237,  
241, 251  
Berendsohn, Walter Arthur 48  
Bergelson, Dovid 143  
Bergson, Henri 32  
Bertelsen, Aage 60, 61  
Bialik, Khaim Nakhman 55  
Biblioteka Dzieł Wyborowych 299  
Biblioteka Pisarzy Żydowskich 15,  
304  
Birnbaum, Nathan 40  
Boy Żeleński, Tadeusz 298  
Brenner, Yosef Khaim 235  
Bund 239, 287, 291  
Cahan, Abraham 51  
Canetti, Elias 259  
Chagall, Marc 32  
*Chwila* 263  
*Czas* 307  
Dębicki, Zdzisław 298, 299  
*Der brenendiker dorn* 58  
*Der bund fun di shvakhe* 42  
*Der fraynd* 35  
*Der Got fun nekome* 37, 38, 39, 266,  
290, 310, 313  
*Der landsman* 40, 310  
*Der man fun Natseres* 14, 31, 39, 45,  
51, 53, 54, 58, 61, 62, 66, 67, 68,  
72, 73, 74, 76, 107, 110, 128, 134,  
147, 243, 262, 268, 274, 297, 298,  
302, 303, 304, 305, 310  
*Der mizbeyekh* 45  
*Der Morgen* 84  
Der Nister 154  
*Der novi* 61, 68, 71, 72, 77, 109, 110,  
253  
*Der tilim yid* 50, 67, 68, 82, 84, 107,  
112, 117, 121, 127, 154, 155, 160,  
163, 184, 185, 192, 193, 200, 201,  
262, 300  
*Der toyter mentsh* 44  
*Der veg tsu zikh* 42, 66, 68, 69, 88,  
131, 133, 143, 146, 150, 172, 205,  
220, 221, 222, 224, 225, 227, 228,  
229, 233, 234, 237, 238, 240, 310  
*Der yidisher soldat* 43  
*Der yud* 34, 281, 285  
*Der yung mitn kind* 40  
*Der zindiker* 266, 270, 307  
*Di goldene keyt* 61, 361  
*Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen* 14,  
16, 44, 67, 68, 78, 79, 82, 105,  
109, 146, 156, 163, 173, 199, 200,  
224, 244, 298, 304, 305  
*Di muter* 32, 44, 65, 69, 97, 136, 137,  
139, 141, 143, 144, 146, 198, 199,  
205, 214, 216, 225, 232, 297, 300  
*Di yorshim* 41  
*Die Welt* 284  
Długosz, Jan 149  
*Dos gezang fun tol* 50, 66, 69, 94,  
108, 139, 188, 205, 224

- Dos heylike meydl oder a shnirl perl* 43  
*Dos poylishe yidntum* 296  
*Dos shtetl* 14, 35, 39, 46, 61, 67, 68, 75, 85, 86, 109, 112, 113, 114, 116, 117, 118, 123, 124, 125, 126, 129, 135, 137, 145, 148, 153, 154, 161, 164, 170, 175, 183, 184, 190, 194, 202, 204, 207, 210, 212, 220, 262, 272, 290, 292, 297, 298, 299, 300, 305  
 Dostoyevsky, Fyodor 105, 224, 230  
 Dov Ber of Międzyrzec 178  
 Dziennik Polski 310  
 Dzierżyński, Feliks 248  
 Einstein, Albert 32  
 Elath, Eliahu 11, 311  
*Encyklopedia Współczesna* 310  
*Erd* 40  
*Erets-Yisroel* 39  
 Esterka 36, 37, 149, 150, 199  
 Express Wieczorny 304  
*Farn mabl* 42, 45, 68, 88, 89, 91, 92, 99, 105, 106, 107, 110, 111, 113, 130, 131, 138, 140, 145, 146, 147, 160, 166, 167, 170, 171, 177, 179, 186, 193, 195, 196, 197, 222, 225, 226, 228, 229, 230, 239, 240, 245, 246, 248, 249, 262, 286, 297, 301, 302, 309, 310, 316, 317  
 Feldman, Wilhelm 267  
*Folks-shtime* 267, 269, 303, 304, 307, 308, 309, 334  
 Forverts 11, 51  
 Frank, Jacob 80  
 Freud, Sigmund 32  
 Friedman, Michał 14, 261, 302, 305  
 Fuks, Avrom-Moyshe 287  
*Gazeta Krakowska* 305  
*Gazeta Wyborecza* 302  
*Gezamlte shriftn* 297  
 Gide, André 59  
 Ginsburg, Shaul 35  
 Gliksman, Avrom 283, 284, 285  
 Goethe, Johann Wolfgang 33, 56, 181, 283, 284, 285  
 Gogol, Nikolai 230  
 Goldfaden, Avrom 209, 245  
 Gordin, Yankev 136, 216  
 Gorky, Maxim 39, 287, 303  
*Gots gefangene* 47, 69, 99, 100, 136, 147, 158, 170, 186, 211, 223, 236  
 Gottlieb, Maurycy 32  
 Grade, Khaim 107  
 Graetz, Heinrich 79  
 Granach, Aleksander 286  
*Grosman un zun* 61, 69, 101, 111, 126, 133, 146, 151, 152, 153, 156, 157, 162, 196, 237, 253, 310  
 Halbwachs, Maurice 20, 21, 22, 23  
 Halpern, Leyvik 80, 138  
*Hatsefira* 284  
 Haynt 45, 275, 276, 280, 294, 297, 327  
 Hebbel, Friedrich 285  
 Heine, Heinrich 33, 216, 283, 284  
 Hemingway, Ernest 44  
 Herman, Dovid 44, 287, 288  
 Hesse, Herman 59  
 Hirshbeyn, Perets 209, 210, 257  
 Hitler, Adolf 56, 61, 93, 224, 251, 252, 295  
 Imber, Shmuel-Yankev 150  
*In a shlekhter tsayt* 35  
*Ist river* 58, 67, 69, 100, 118, 121, 122, 125, 126, 140, 146, 151, 152, 156, 157, 159, 163, 171, 187, 197, 217, 219, 232, 249, 250  
*Izraelita* 300, 330  
*Jewish Quarterly* 310



- Kaden-Bandrowski, Juliusz 273  
 Kaganovski, Efroim 13, 315  
 Kamińska, Ester Rachel 136  
 Kamińska, Ida 301  
 Kanfer, Mojżesz 32, 45, 65, 82, 104,  
 279, 280, 290, 291  
 Katsenelson, Yitskhok 55, 291  
 Kazimierz the Great 149, 150, 199  
*Khaim Lederers tsurikkumen* 44, 69,  
 96, 98, 109, 210, 216, 217, 223,  
 233, 300  
 Khmelnytsky, Bohdan 60, 68, 79, 80,  
 81, 124, 175, 176, 235, 244, 245,  
 253, 256, 262  
*Khurbn Poyln* 43  
*Kidush hashem* 14, 43, 44, 68, 78, 79,  
 80, 82, 109, 125, 126, 128, 153,  
 155, 159, 172, 173, 174, 176, 177,  
 186, 189, 191, 192, 200, 202, 212,  
 235, 244, 256, 261, 262, 289, 298,  
 305, 307  
 Kipling, Rudyard 188  
 Kleist, Heinrich 284  
 Kletskin, Boris 36, 89  
 Konopnicka, Maria 264  
 Korczak, Janusz 295, 296  
*Koyln* 45  
 Kraszewski, Józef Ignacy 149  
 Kulbak, Moyshe 80, 94, 131, 180, 315  
 Lastik, Shloyme 309, 310  
 Lechoń, Jan 47, 274  
 Lekert, Hirsh 138  
 Lenin, Vladimir 241, 247, 248  
 Leśmian, Bolesław 299, 300  
 Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim 284  
 Levitan, Isaac 199  
 Lipshits, Yekhiel-Meyer 82, 117  
*Literarische bleter* 48, 49, 276, 277,  
 278, 282, 285, 293  
 Luria, Yosef 34, 285  
 Lustigman, Avrom 294  
 Maeterlinck, Maurice 284  
 Magnes, Judah Leon 44  
 Makuszyński, Kornel 270  
 Manger, Itsik 149, 256  
 Mann, Thomas 225, 226, 273  
*Maranen* 44  
 Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso 50  
 Mark, Ber 308, 310  
 Markish, Perets 48  
*Mary* 45, 51, 68, 73, 74, 75, 110, 114,  
 137, 146, 158, 172, 202, 211, 242,  
 243  
*Mayn rayze iber Shpanyen* 44, 300  
*Mayslekh fun Khumesh* 42  
 Mayzil, Nakhman 48, 53, 54, 280,  
 281, 282, 283, 292  
 Mendele Moykher Sforim 53, 106  
 Mendelssohn, Moses 33, 34, 283, 284  
*Meri* 42, 67, 68, 87, 88, 109, 111, 117,  
 129, 130, 146, 164, 166, 175, 181,  
 196, 198, 200, 206, 207, 212, 213,  
 221, 222, 224, 233, 236, 246, 310  
*Meshiyekhs tsaytn* 36, 38, 41, 149,  
 307  
 Mickiewicz, Adam 150, 225, 228,  
 264, 265, 266, 278  
*Miesięcznik Żydowski* 275  
*Mitn shtrom* 36, 266, 270, 287, 307  
 Molodovski, Kadye 79, 141, 234  
*Momentn* 37  
*Motele* 285  
*Motke Ganev* 43, 68, 86, 87, 106, 111,  
 124, 126, 127, 128, 130, 131, 142,  
 144, 145, 163, 182, 188, 190, 208,  
 262, 276, 297  
*Moyshe* 60, 61, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 77,  
 110, 224, 242  
 Moyshe Markuze of Słonim 154  
*Moyshele* 34, 53, 281, 285, 300

- Nachman of Bratslav 154  
 Nadir, Moyshe 80  
 Nałkowska, Zofia 273  
*Napoleońska czapka* 271, 273  
*Nasz Głos* 267  
*Nasz Przegląd* 280, 289, 290, 301  
 Naydus, Leyb 116  
 Neuman, Abraham 32  
*New York Times* 295  
 Niger, Shmuel 13, 44, 46, 57, 61, 62, 83, 84, 88, 96, 98, 103, 109, 114, 301  
 Nobel Prize 11, 48, 58, 59, 80, 259, 260, 273, 312  
 Nomberg, Hersh-Dovid 40, 279, 285  
 Nora, Pierre 22, 23, 24  
*Noveln* 264, 265, 297  
*Nowa Kultura* 309  
*Nowe Książki* 304  
*Nowy Dziennik* 45, 235, 268, 278, 279, 280, 288, 293, 300, 301, 307  
 Olitski, Leyb 291, 308  
*One Destiny: An Epistle to the Christians* 52, 55, 57, 295  
*Onkel Mozes* 43, 69, 95, 98, 100, 128, 132, 141, 145, 160, 207, 208, 210, 218, 223, 232, 249, 301, 307  
 Opatoshu, Yosef 83, 150, 227  
*Opowiadania* 298  
 Orzeszkowa, Eliza 266, 270, 271  
*Ost und West* 95  
*Parizer Haynt* 281  
 PEN Club 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 263, 264, 273, 274, 281, 289, 293, 311  
 Perets, Yitskhok Leyb 34, 37, 40, 42, 54, 62, 150, 154, 175, 256, 268, 276, 277, 279, 282, 284, 285, 287, 290  
 Perle, Yeshue 296  
 Petliura, Symon 43  
 Pigoń, Stanisław 267, 268, 270, 307  
 Pilichowski, Leopold 47, 286  
 Piłsudski, Józef 274, 280  
 Pinski, Dovid 77, 79, 136, 141  
*Polityka* 269  
 Prus, Bolesław 263, 264, 278  
*Przegląd Humanistyczny* 269, 271  
*Przegląd Powszechny* 304  
*Przemiany* 310  
 Rabon, Yisroel 123, 315  
 Rapoport, Shapse 35  
 Ravitsh, Melekh 35, 48, 104  
 Reb Mendele Kotsker 83  
*Reb Shloyme Noked* 41, 68, 75, 86, 109, 110, 111, 114, 145, 158, 161, 162, 163, 171, 175, 181, 184, 190, 191, 194, 203, 204, 206, 262  
 Reinhardt, Max 37  
*Reverend doktor Silver* 45  
 Reymont, Władysław 263, 264, 273  
 Reyzen, Avrom 40, 123, 285  
 Roosevelt, Franklin 251  
 Rozenberg, Shloyme 13, 108  
 Rozenfarb, Khavé 123  
 Rozenfeld, Moris 216  
 Rozenfeld, Shmuel 35  
 Rydel, Lucjan 151  
*Sabbatai Zevi* 39, 40, 80, 185  
 Sachs, Nelly 259, 260  
 Samuel, Maurice 51  
 Schildkraut, Rudolf 37  
 Schiller, Friedrich 33, 56, 283, 284, 285  
 Schwartz, Maurice 84  
 Segalovitsh, Zusman 150, 273, 292, 315  
 Sfard, Dovid 308  
 Shakespeare, William 285  
*Shapse Tsvi* 39, 40  
 Shaykevitch, Nokhem-Meyer 284

- Shiper, Yitskhok 286  
 Shklar, Moyshe 267  
 Shmeruk, Chone 36, 149, 150, 254, 260, 261, 298, 315  
 Shnayderman, Shmuel-Leyb 272  
 Shneyer, Zalmen 292  
 Sholem Aleykhem 53, 55, 59, 92, 106, 124, 150  
 Sienkiewicz, Henryk 92, 264, 284  
 Singer, Isaac Bashevis 11, 59, 60, 80, 97, 123, 193, 256, 315  
 Singer, Israel Joshua 11, 48, 116, 123, 154, 315  
 Słomimski, Antoni 273  
 Słowacki, Juliusz 264, 278  
*Słowo Żydowskie* 295, 313  
 Smoliar, Hersh 308  
 Sokolow, Nahum 290  
*Spojrzenie wstecz* 269  
 Staff, Leopold 273  
 Stanisławski, Jan 32, 269, 270  
 Sutskever, Avrom 62, 116, 234, 256  
*Sztandar Ludu* 309  
 Szwalbe, Natan 280  
*The Apostle* 45, 51, 58, 68, 72, 74, 77, 78, 109, 110, 133, 146, 244  
 Thon, Ozjasz 268  
 Toller, Ernst 48  
 Tolstoy, Leo 91, 96, 224, 230  
*Toyt urteyl* 44, 69, 98, 109, 111, 113, 180  
 Trotsky, Leon 43, 248  
 Trunk, Yekhiel-Yeshaye 80, 123, 172  
 Tseytlin, Arn 80, 150, 235, 288, 289, 290, 291, 292  
 Tunkel, Yosef 288, 289, 291, 292  
 Tuwim, Julian 273  
*Twórczość* 269  
*Undzer gloybn* 43  
 Varshavski, Oyzer 190, 315  
 Vaysenberg, Yitskhok-Meyer 123, 124  
*Ver iz der foter?* 43  
 Verdi, Giuseppe 98  
 Warburg, Aby 21, 22  
 Weizmann, Chaim 32, 50  
 Wells, Herbert George 49  
*Wenus Szwarzwaldu* 298  
 Werfel, Franz 46  
*What I Believe* 52, 57  
 Witkiewicz, Stanisław 263, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 272, 290, 291, 293  
 Witkiewicz, Stanisław Ignacy 272  
*Wokanda* 304  
*Woran ich glaube* 52, 57  
*Wprost* 304  
 Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie 304, 305  
 Wyspiański, Stanisław 151, 225, 264, 277, 278  
 Yehoyesh 40  
 Yerushalmi, Yosef Hayim 22  
*Yidish vort* 297  
*Yiftahs tokhter* 40  
*Yikhes* 39  
 YIVO 103  
 Yosef Perl of Tarnopol 154  
*Yoysef* 44  
*Yugnt* 40  
 Zhabotinsky, Vladimir 293  
 Zsolnay, Paul 47, 270  
 Zweig, Stefan 46, 282, 283  
 Żeromski, Stefan 65, 228, 263, 264, 266, 268, 269, 270, 273, 290, 291, 293  
*Życie Warszawy* 309, 313