

One The Emergence of a Writer, 1881–1901

Brenner was born in 1881 in Novi Mlini (new flour mills) in the province of Chernigov, northern Ukraine, on the Russia-Byelorussia border. The town is situated on the banks of the River Siem, not far from where it joins the Desna. Its population numbered approximately three thousand, ten percent of which were Jews, some seventy families. Shlomo Brenner, Yosef Haim's father, was the town's *meclamed* (teacher). His mother, Chaya-Raisa, the daughter of Yosef Haim Mintz, owned a tavern like her mother before her. Another version has it that Grandmother Hinda was a midwife. She was a good storyteller with a fertile imagination. She also knew how to read cards and tell fortunes, and Jews and Gentiles alike came to consult her. Shlomo's original family name was not Brenner but Lubanov. Grandfather Shmuel Lubanov had three sons: Haim, the eldest, kept his name and later became head of the yeshiva in Konotop. His other two sons changed their names so that they would be considered only sons and thus obtain exemption from service in the tsar's army. David changed his name to Narodsky and became a Torah scribe in Bialystok, whereas Shlomo adopted the identity of a young man who had died, whose surname was Brenner.¹ In his story "Shana ahat" (One year), Brenner expands on the ploys and stratagems invented by the Jews to avoid military service.² The protagonist's father changes his name, as Brenner's father had done, complicating life for his son, Hanina Mintz.

The origins of the Lubanov family are unknown. It may be assumed that Shlomo Brenner moved to Novi Mlini because the name of the town (or one of the neighboring towns) was listed in his papers. The mother's family was apparently local. *Baboref* (In winter), Brenner's first novel, has strong autobiographical elements. The description of

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Shalom Getzil—the fictional father who came to the town from the north, from Lithuania—has its roots in the Brenner family’s history. Getzil is the son of a family of Mitnagdim (Jews who opposed the rise and spread of Hasidic Judaism and placed emphasis on Talmud study), whereas the mother comes from a Hasidic family in the Ukraine, where Hasidism was widespread. According to one account, Shlomo Brenner was indeed a Mitnaged, but he still sent his son to study with the local rabbi, a Chabad Hasid.³ Novi Mlini was situated in an area abounding with rivers, streams, and lakes, which were interspersed with forests, cornfields, meadows, and various other beauty spots that by their very nature were well suited to children’s play.⁴ But the pranks and joyfulness of childhood were unacceptable to Jews in the Pale of Settlement. At age three, every boy attended the *heder*, where he sat all day reciting his lessons. Poor Jewish families such as the Brennens were particularly observant of this custom. Learning accorded prestige, which enabled the crossing of class lines. The scholar was given a seat by the synagogue’s Eastern Wall, mingled with the town’s who’s who, and was even invited to dine at the local rich man’s table. A true prodigy could marry a rich woman, and this was Shalom Getzil Feuerman’s dream for his son in the novel.

In the memoirs of a young man from Novi Mlini, Shlomo Brenner is described as a tall, open-faced, smiling man. He earned three rubles a week from his work as a melamed, and his family lived in poverty. His wife is described as “a refined woman from a distinguished family.”⁵ Yet in his recollections, Brenner writes of his parents: “Both are poor, simple people, workers,” adding a comment that he later crossed out, “especially my mother.”⁶ In the novel *In Winter*, the division of labor between mother and father is emphasized: the mother does the hard physical work, cleaning geese and selling the meat and fat. The father works as a melamed, a profession requiring no physical effort that might justify his being called a “worker.” In many cases the traditional Jewish family living in the Pale of Settlement was matriarchal in all matters pertaining to livelihood, and patriarchal in everything relating to prestige and authority. According to this division of labor, raising the children, keeping house, and ensuring the family’s subsistence fell to the woman. In lower-class families—those of artisans, such as cobblers, carters, and dairymen—the division of labor was fairer than

in families with pretensions to the status of Torah scholars, in which the women bore the burden. It seems that this was the situation in Brenner's family.

Very little is known about Brenner's mother. Family tradition has it that Shlomo and Chaya-Raisa married in 1880, when both were eighteen—a relatively late age for a girl, which possibly indicates that she either had no dowry or was not particularly pretty. Yosef Haim was born a year later. Over the next twenty years, the couple had another three sons and two daughters.⁷ When his mother died in May 1914, Brenner wrote a letter to his friend Yosef Aharonowitz, editor of *Hapoel Hatzair*, asking him to publish a notice on her death. “Do not add any condolences,” he added, “for I am inconsolable.”⁸ Except for this request (it is uncertain whether it was sent), there is no mention of Chaya-Raisa in either Brenner's correspondence or his contemporaries' memoirs of his childhood and youth. In the novel *In Winter*, Brenner portrays her from two points of view, that of the child who sees her as a source of gentleness and love and protection against the father's maltreatment and that of the adult who sees her as just “a poor Jewess suffering anguish.” The novel describes a mealtime conversation in the parents' house. The children are discussing why it is forbidden to place a hen to brood on goose eggs: when the chicks grow and paddle in the river, the unfortunate mother will be unable to reach them or bring them back, and that is cruelty to animals. Yirmiah notes: “My mother listens, raises her head, gazes at me sadly for a long time, and releases a sigh that poisons my guts, nods in something like despair, an after all is said and done nod . . . the poor hen!”⁹ The son has spread his wings and flown far away, distancing himself from her both geographically and emotionally.

There is a contradiction between the gloomy, depressing description of the Feuerman home in the novel and the picture that emerges from fragmentary descriptions and hints from Brenner himself and others. A childhood friend of Brenner's recounts that, in 1891, a Purim play was performed in the town with Brenner in the role of the hero, Mordechai. He also wrote “Selihot” (Penitential prayers) in which he joked about life in the town and its “politics.” This was possibly his first attempt at writing.¹⁰ From this point on, it seems that the spirit of impishness and jocularly did not leave Brenner. It is difficult to

assume that someone whose personal life was replete with sorrow and misery, with so little light in it, such as that described by Brenner in the novel, could be capable of such mischievousness.

When he was nine-and-a-half years old, Brenner embarked on his wanderings through the towns of Ukraine to find a “place of Torah.” The story “Shama” (There) describes the torment of a child exiled from his home and forced to suffer poverty and humiliation in the homes of strangers. This is an irreversible step: attempts to return home are no less disappointing and painful than life in a strange land. Meanwhile, his brother Shmuel was born in 1887. The six years separating them gives rise to the supposition that at least one more baby was born in between them who did not survive.¹¹ The trauma of a sibling’s death might perhaps explain the adult Brenner’s anxiety over the wellbeing of infants. Brenner does not mention his brother Shmuel at all, perhaps because he was considered a prodigy and was his father’s favorite. It seems that his fall from the status of an only son and his being sent away from home were experiences that planted in him the feeling that his parents had abandoned him.

We have absolutely no knowledge about the year and a half he spent in Homel. Afterward he studied for “a time” (a semester) in Hlusk and, according to one account, was dubbed “the diligent yeshiva student from Hlusk.”¹² It was in Hlusk, in the Belarus district of Bobruysk, that the boy first became aware of a world outside the Torah and was first influenced by the winds of the secular Haskalah (enlightenment) movement blowing through the Pale of Settlement, especially in the Mitnaged north. *In Winter* reveals the bad name that the Lithuanian yeshivas acquired in the south of the country, where observant young men were allegedly exposed to the Haskalah and even heresy.¹³ Brenner described how, during the six months he spent in Hlusk, he started reading Avraham Mapu—the author of “Ahavat Zion” (The love of Zion), considered to be the first Hebrew novel—and taking an interest in secular literature and the sciences. By his own account, he “soured” somewhat.¹⁴ But his father demanded that he return home and the boy obeyed. But once Brenner was infected by the Haskalah, he was unable to rid himself of it: at night he would read *bichelach*, a derisory name for novels (the term “books” was reserved for religious works).¹⁵ Now Shlomo sent his son to study at a yeshiva

headed by his brother in the nearby town of Konotop.¹⁶ Although he was a brilliant student (“I had the head of a demiprodigy when I was young,” he claimed¹⁷), for him Konotop was linked with a harsh experience of public humiliation and degradation.

He and his classmate Menachem Mendel Slutzker wrote articles in Hebrew in secret. This was a threefold sin: neglecting their Torah studies, engagement with secular matters, and writing *melitzot* (non-religious writing) in Hebrew.¹⁸ In his articles Slutzker attacked none other than the yeshiva’s *mashgiach* (religious supervisor) but did not voice heretical opinions. Brenner, however, wrote an essay attacking Hasidism that was replete with barbs and jocularly, uncomplimentary descriptions, and epigrams aimed at the obscurantist Hasidim. The inhabitants of Konotop were Chabad Hasidim, and it caused a storm that their own yeshiva had spawned such a slanderer. The beadle ordered the manuscript burned. The head of the yeshiva, Brenner’s uncle, slapped Brenner publicly.¹⁹ He never forgot the public humiliation he underwent; it was as rite of passage, which the Bar Mitzvah, having not left an impression on him, was not.²⁰ His expulsion from Konotop led to his first confrontation with his father. Following that disgrace, Brenner wanted to go to Homel, the big city, to acquire an education, but on the way from Konotop to Homel he stopped off at home. There he was exposed to the influence of his father, who did not cease preaching to him and condemning education: “Kenntschafft [knowledge] . . . Kenntschafft . . . What? What? What will it give you, this ‘Kenntschafft’ of yours?”²¹ The youth was unable to withstand his father’s moralizing and arguments, and once more he bent to his father’s will and relinquished the notion of acquiring a secular education.²²

He was sent to study at the Pochep yeshiva, where a different wind was blowing. Rabbi Yehoshua Natan Gnessin, head of the yeshiva and the town’s rabbi, was an inspirational man who loved the Torah and his fellow men. The thirteen-year-old Brenner was one of the yeshiva’s youngest students. On his arrival, the rabbi tested him and immediately put him in the most advanced class. Brenner forged a profound spiritual closeness with him. Rabbi Gnessin was blessed not only with a fine disposition, erudition, and purity but also with tolerance and an understanding of his young students’ spirits. He allowed them to read Hebrew books and even Hebrew journals such as *Hashiloah*

and *Hamclitz* were delivered to his house, and after reading them, he passed them on to his students.²³

Immediately after his arrival in the town, Brenner made friends with the rabbi's son, Uri Nissan Gnessin. Uri Nissan was two years Brenner's senior, but they both studied in the same group of advanced students. Their relationship was the kind of friendship made in adolescence that holds fast throughout life. Brenner's loneliness, the distance from home, his gradual shift away from the beliefs and opinions of his father's household, and his clear need for friendship, for human closeness, warmth, and love, all served in his forming a relationship with Gnessin. It was a friendship between opposites. Gnessin was an aristocrat in every fiber of his being: tall, distinguished-looking and graceful, restrained, cautious, and quiet. Brenner had coarse features, softened by his blue eyes, and radiated warmth. With his heavy gait, broad build, and average height, there was something plebeian in his appearance. He tended to talk volubly and loudly and to voice extreme positions. Despite their differences in appearance and temperament, they forged a friendship that played an important role in shaping their personalities and literary inclinations. They aroused in one another the desire to write, encouraged each other to try, and each was a sounding board for his friend to test his ability and talent. Their first works were published in two journals, *Hakof* and *Haperakh*, which they jointly edited and then made a fair copy. Several issues were published. They mainly engaged with yeshiva life and also literary matters. Brenner described his life at the Pochev yeshiva: "There . . . there . . . gentlemen! I began to sense . . . to feel, there I began to sing . . . and feel the lack of education in a different way."²⁴

At Pochev a circle of young people formed around Brenner and Gnessin, a group of supportive friends that included Gershon Ginsburg, Shimon Bichovsky, Shimon Hillel Kruglyakov, and others, all of whom were to play a role in Brenner's life. This group of yeshiva students had peeked into the secular world, tasted Hebrew literature, and sought to start learning Russian but without going further than that. They had taken only a very innocent peek, a first faltering step on the long road to acquiring a secular education. It was within this circle that Brenner appeared for the first time as a social leader, a literary entrepreneur, editor, and publisher.

Brenner lived in Pochep for more than two years, and during this period diligently observed the framework of yeshiva study. In spring 1897, when he was fifteen and a half, he decided to take action. In Pochep he stood no chance of acquiring a secular education, either because there was no one to help or teach him Russian or because he was caught reading bichelach by the mashgiach and came under suspicion of heresy.²⁵ Brenner wanted to learn Russian so that he could read Russian literature and speak the language of the country. He also wanted to learn Hebrew grammar and the Bible, read belles lettres in Hebrew and Yiddish, and perhaps even study history, geography, and mathematics to prepare for the matriculation examinations that enabled “external” students from the Pale of Settlement to enroll at a university. Uri Nissan, his older friend, remained living in his parents’ home in Pochep, while the bold, naïve Brenner went to the big city, Bialystok, hoping that he could fulfill his desires there. His Uncle Narodsky, the Torah scribe, lived in the city, and he was to provide lodging for the boy and supervise him. Brenner told his father that he was going to Bialystok there to study in its yeshiva.

Bialystok was a commercial and industrial city, and Brenner found the company he sought hard to come by. “There are but very few enlightened people here,” he wrote to Uri Nissan Gnessin.²⁶ A young man with no friends and acquaintances had difficulty acquiring them. Meanwhile, he tried studying by himself, employing the time-honored method of the religious school: he bought Russian-language textbooks in Yiddish. He studied the Bible. He was surprised to discover that very few people in Bialystok read Hebrew and that it was hard to find a lending library, even one that charged a fee. The letters Brenner wrote from Bialystok to his friends reveal the soul of a lonely, innocent, and honest young man facing a psychological and intellectual watershed. In contrast to the warmth and love that surrounded him in Pochep, in Bialystok he suffered loneliness. In Pochep his dear friends bolstered his self-esteem, whereas in Bialystok he did not find a single person with whom he could become close. He tried consoling himself by corresponding with his friends in Pochep and also by writing stories and articles for *Haperakh*. At the same time, he tried his hand at writing poetry. His uncle came to see what he was up to in the *kloiz* (Hasidic synagogue) where he studied and found him writing. He explained

that he was writing to his friends in Pochep. The exchange with his uncle is similar to the clash in Brenner's bildungsroman, *In Winter*, between Yirmiah and Shalom Getzil over Yirmiah's seemingly purposeless writing. The uncle persists, saying, "I do not understand what you have in common with your friends," and the boy reproves him: "And what is a man's life if not love and friendship?" His uncle mocks him in response: "Philo[sopher] . . . I detest such philosophers!"²⁷ At the kloiz it became known that Brenner was writing—and studying very little. He moved to another kloiz, where he found a pupil and with his teaching fees managed to rent a room. He ate *yamim* (daily meals), which he hated, with Jewish families that supported yeshiva students. His efforts to learn Russian were restricted to nighttime because he was closely watched at the kloiz. His living conditions did not enable him to write.

He was in a wretched state: the loneliness, the pretense and hypocrisy, his longing for his friends and his need for their psychological support, his difficult living conditions, all combined to make him feel crushed and at his wits' end. He became very sick, he wrote,²⁸ although it might have been psychosomatic, brought on by the stress of the constant pretense and loneliness. On his recovery he found a long letter from his father. His uncle had written to Shlomo Brenner telling him that his son was not studying but only writing. The letter caused "ruination" in the parents' home. He also received chastising letters from people in his hometown and his uncle in Konotop.²⁹ The emotional entreaties did their work; he was unable to withstand the pressure.³⁰ Brenner returned to religion and for eight months became an enthusiastic Hasid. He changed "from stem to stern" and "fled the world filled with doubts and nonbelief."³¹ He studied in a small kloiz in Bialystok, had set times for study and prayer. According to his own account, "I direct my heart to God and speak *a great deal* with my heavenly Father."³² His rebellion against his own father was also a denial of God, or at least a rebellion against His authority. His spiritual rediscovery constituted acceptance of the authority of both of his biological and his heavenly fathers.

His yearning for home, the cold and alienating atmosphere of Bialystok, and his father's emotional blackmail directed Brenner toward renouncing his "souring." Accepting his father's wishes and relinquish-

ing the frustrating day-to-day struggle eased tensions and raised his spirits. Matters reached the point at which he acceded when his father asked him to write to Rabbi Gnessin, denying the “libel” whereby he had ostensibly abandoned religion.³³ The very fact that he wrote the letter indicates the extent to which he was influenced by his father and, further, how easy it was to get him to change his mind, as does what happened afterward. When Uri Nissan Gnessin read his friend’s letter, he wrote back an angry missive on Brenner’s betrayal of their common ideals of aspiring to education and knowledge and their dreams of becoming Hebrew writers. Brenner’s letter in response was filled with abuse.³⁴ Gnessin replied to Brenner’s abusive letter with a long letter of his own. In it there was a blot, next to which Gnessin wrote, “Here a teardrop fell. A teardrop on the loss of a life. See how it scorches the paper.”³⁵ His emotional approach, his display of love for his friend, shattered Brenner’s resolve.³⁶ He recanted his repentance and begged his friend’s forgiveness.

Brenner’s plea for forgiveness was accompanied by a long confessional letter describing his internal conflict since he set on his path to knowledge and recounting the steps he had now taken to return to the road of secular education. He went back to learning Russian and began reading short stories in that language. He read Kalman Schulman’s *History of the World* and discovered a whole new realm.³⁷ Furthermore, for the first time in nearly a year he started writing again. He wrote several poems in the rhetorical style of the Enlightenment, naïve poetry of little literary merit. He sent one to Gnessin, along with a relatively brief letter because the cold in his room made writing difficult. He concluded the letter with a declaration of love and gratitude: “My darling, my dear, my delight, my beloved, apple of my eye . . . be well! I am everlastingly grateful to you, for without you I would now be immersed in the stinking mire of Hasidism. . . . And you, only you have saved my soul.”³⁸ When Shlomo Brenner heard that his son had abandoned religion once more, he wrote him a letter that Brenner found hard to withstand.³⁹ A titanic struggle for the young man’s mind ensued. He described to his friend the torment of his struggle with his father: “I did not win a glorious victory easily. And my heart still bleeds.”⁴⁰ The group of friends from Pochep gave Brenner the love, esteem, and self-confidence that had been undermined in the loneliness

of Bialystok. Most important for Brenner was the group's encouraging him to continue writing: "The honorable gentlemen attest that I have talent."⁴¹ Just as his father had pushed him back to the shtetl, to the traditional society, his friends pulled him back up to the big, still unfamiliar world, but one he now knew existed.

In March 1898 Brenner returned to Pochep for nine months. He found himself some pupils and eked out a living teaching. He maintained the manners and appearance of a yeshiva student: he kept his side-locks, wore a kapota (long black coat), covered his head, and diligently recited the Shema prayer every night. But at the same time, he was energetically learning Russian with the help of a local teacher and was even trying to learn German⁴²—without success, although he did evidently learn the Latin alphabet for the first time. He mainly read books published by the Tushiya publishing house, edited by Ben-Avigdor (Abraham Leib Shelkowitz), and the Hebrew journals *Hashiloah*, *Ahiasaf*, and *Ha'esbkol*.⁴³ He read Haim Nachman Bialik's poems and declared: "Our literature gives me great courage and strength."⁴⁴

When the autumn winds began to blow, he was assailed by self-pity and voiced it in his letters to Bichovsky in Vilna: his room is cold, he has no winter clothes, and most of his time is squandered on teaching. He can already read Russian but "cannot speak a word properly." He describes himself as "a lost and depressed young Jew, bent and degraded, with a painful heart and filled with a terrible bitterness," who has failed to acquire the education for which he lives a life of poverty. But at the end of this long screed of wretchedness, he adds a little self-mockery: "A terrible groan." His tendency to exaggerate and lament and moan is familiar to his friends. "I see a tiny smile on your lips," he writes to Bichovsky at the end of the letter. It is "the laugh of a friend, the laugh of a dear brother at the ramblings of one dear to him." Along with the attack of self-pity, he also feels a sense of achievement. As far as Hebrew literature is concerned he reads and learns incessantly: "My literary sense has developed to a great degree." The more he reads, however, the more aware he becomes of his need to broaden his horizons, but he also understands the character of his talent: "I am certainly no poet, but I surely possess the talent of a storyteller."⁴⁵ Thus, at the age of seventeen, Brenner defined his literary vocation: he will be a writer.