

Introduction

Hebrew Fiction as a “Literary Passport”

In the summer of 1913, Gershon Shofman (1880–1972), a young but fairly well established Hebrew writer, embarked on a train journey from Lvov—the capital of Eastern Galicia, then part of Austro-Hungary—to Vienna, the famed capital of the empire.¹ When he arrived at the *Nordbahnhof* railway station in the *Leopoldstadt* quarter—a common point of entry for many Eastern European immigrants (including many Jews)—he was stopped by Austrian officials and asked to present a passport or some other traveling document. Like many other Jewish émigrés and exiles from Eastern Europe at the time, Shofman had nothing to present.² This could have made for a dangerous situation. Shofman was not merely an immigrant, but had been a fugitive from the Russian army since 1904, when he deserted his unit in the midst of the Russo-Japanese War. Shofman had to think fast. He rummaged through his suitcase, searching for any papers or documents that might help him to establish his identity and affiliation. After a few tense moments, he found a small postcard that showed his photograph with accompanying Hebrew text.

This postcard was part of a series of portraits of Hebrew and Yiddish writers published by Avraham Chaim Robinson, the owner of a Jewish bookstore, Ha-techiya, in Stanislawow, Galicia, which also operated a small publishing house under the same name.³ Designed in the Art Nouveau style that flourished in the *fin de siècle*, the postcard featured the author’s name and photographic portrait, encased in a drawn gilt frame, surrounded by a lyre and rose vines. Alongside these flourishes



Figure 1. A postcard of Gershon Shofman.
(Source: Robinson Bookstore Collection, Tel Aviv)

were a few details about the writer and his published works, printed in a scroll design.

Shofman showed the Viennese policeman this highly unlikely “literary passport,” explaining in German that it certified his identity as “a writer and critic who writes small, miniature sketches with great artistry.” To bolster this claim, he read the brief description: “His style is rich and multifaceted. He has a sharp eye and distinctive vision. His short stories (‘sketches’) were published in a collection by Yosef Chaim Brenner.”

To Shofman's astonishment and great relief, the policeman accepted the postcard and allowed him to enter the city. In this case, Shofman's identity as a Hebrew writer had literally displaced the need for an actual passport provided by a government authority; instead, a "literary passport" enabled entrance into Vienna, one of the most important centers of European modernism.

Shofman's journey from Lvov to Vienna was neither the first nor last time that a Hebrew writer, traveling through the polyglot and multinational European continent, was forced to use—or to hide—his or her literary passport. Thirteen years earlier, in July 1900, the young Yosef Chaim Brenner (1881–1921), then a novice Hebrew writer, traveled from Homel, the provincial capital of the Mogilev region in southeastern Belarus, to Warsaw, the capital of Congress Poland.⁴ When Brenner arrived at the Warsaw train station, he immediately rushed to 21 Dzielna Street, a modest and cramped apartment complex in the city's predominantly Jewish district, and the home of Brenner's beloved friend and fellow writer Uri Nissan Gnessin (1879–1913). Gnessin had come from Homel to Warsaw earlier that year when he was invited by Nachum Sokolov, the editor of the Hebrew newspaper *Ha-tzifira*, to work at the paper's editorial office.

In Warsaw, Brenner lived incognito in Gnessin's room because, like Shofman, he did not hold a passport or any other official papers. His identity as a Hebrew writer from Russia could hardly have served him other than to arouse suspicion. Indeed, the gatekeeper of the building complex was very suspicious of the young man with the "revolutionary" appearance.⁵ Though he was forced to conceal his identity, Brenner would later describe the time he spent in Warsaw as a foundational experience in his career as a Hebrew-European writer, an apprenticeship at the epicenter of an emerging literary tradition:

There was a youthful inspiration, a longing for something, absorption of impressions with all the bliss and pleasure that comes along with this immersion. [We] met with Nomberg and with Reisin who had just published some literary collection in Yiddish; read some books and some critical essays. Uri Nissan [Gnessin] wrote a critical essay [...] and published it in *Ha-tzifira* under a "pseudonym." Pseudonym—even the very word had a strong appeal because of its novelty. In short, we were

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“entering” as if we were standing in the midst of *Shacharit* [“morning prayer”]. One evening [Gnessin] picked up from the street a new edition of *Luach achivsaf* hot off the press [...] We sat at the dinner table and started to read [...] a poem by Ch. N. Bialik. And not too long after, when we finished our dinner, we already competed with one another to see who could best recite the poem by heart.⁶

The excitement in Brenner’s description and its sensual, almost erotic, tone point to the strong bonds between these youthful men, as well as to their palpable delight in being part of a new and dynamic literary community. Indeed, Warsaw in 1900 was an exciting place to be for young people who were just beginning their careers as Hebrew and Yiddish modernist writers. Apart from all the journals, newspapers, and publishing houses, writers like Gnessin, Brenner, Avrom Reisen, and Hersh Dovid Nomberg could meet in simple cafés where Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish, and Russian newspapers were provided to the diverse clientele, described by the habitués as a mixture of Jewish workers, political activists, writers, and intellectuals.⁷ As the image of Warsaw



Figure 2. Dzika Street, Warsaw, circa 1900.

(Source: Wikimedia Commons. Osmo Buller, gxen.dir., UEA Archives)

in 1900 suggests, it was a space of crossroads, traffic, and changes, and indeed it played an important role in the emergence of modernist Hebrew literature and culture.

Although Brenner had neither the passport nor the documents that would enable him to enter Warsaw officially, his Hebrew writing clearly provided him with a kind of calling-card into the city's Jewish literary community. By likening himself and his fellow writers to people entering "in the midst of the morning prayer," he also underscored the religious fervor that he and some of his fellow modernist Hebrew writers attached to literature. For Brenner, all this excitement and ferment proved short-lived. A month later, he was back in Homel (which was a much smaller, but no less active city), and less than a year later Gnessin followed him there. However, the time they spent together in Warsaw was a formative period that made a strong impact on their lives and on their careers as Hebrew-European modernist writers.⁸

Yet another emblematic European journey of a Hebrew writer took place at the beginning of 1931, when the modernist poet and prose writer David Fogel (1891–1944) traveled from Berlin to Warsaw and other cities in the newly formed independent state of Poland. Unlike Brenner in 1900 and Shofman in 1913, this time Fogel did hold an official passport, though it was not by any means an uncomplicated arrangement. Fogel, born in Satanov, Podolia, was also an East European Jewish writer who endured a life of peripatetic wandering during turbulent times in cities like Vilna, Lvov/Lemberg, Vienna, Tel Aviv, and Paris.⁹

In 1929, three years after Fogel moved from Vienna to Paris, he finally managed to obtain a passport: It was granted to him by the Austrian embassy in Paris because he was an Austrian expatriate who had officially resided in Vienna since 1913. Since Austrian law required every passport to state the occupation of its holder, Fogel's passport carried the official inscription *Profession: Writer* (see Figure 3). With this passport, Fogel was granted official recognition as a Hebrew writer. The arrangement was, however, based in a place where he had spent only a fraction of his life, and declaring a nationality that could not have seemed to him natural or self-evident in any way. Indeed, obtaining an Austrian passport did not reinforce his bond to his sponsoring nation, but only intensified his desire (and as important, his ability) to travel

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away from it. Fogel used the new passport to travel to Tel Aviv, where he stayed for a short while, and then to Berlin, where he immersed himself in the local Jewish literary community before returning to his initial points of departure—in Poland and Galicia.

Although he had more than one good reason to visit various Polish and Galician cities, Fogel's journey had a clear goal. *Tarbut* ("Culture")—the organization for Hebrew education that operated schools and teachers' seminars in Eastern Europe—invited Fogel to Poland to deliver lectures on Hebrew literature to an audience of women, most likely students and teachers of Hebrew.¹⁰ In spite of the organization's effort, few people came to hear Fogel; those who did probably could not appreciate the historical importance of his lecture. However, for readers of Fogel and for historians of Hebrew modernism in general, the lecture, entitled *Lashon ve signon be sifrutem ha-tze'ira* ("Language



Figure 3. David Fogel's Austrian passport, 1929.
(Courtesy of the Genazim Institute, Tel Aviv)

and Style in Our Young Literature”), is a priceless gem.¹¹ Along with other important insights that the lecture offers, Fogel proposed a mapping of Hebrew modernism in the period 1900–1930. He singled out the work of four writers of Hebrew fiction: Shofman, Gnessin, Brenner, and Dvora Baron, and Fogel implicitly connected his own writings with these slightly older Hebrew modernists. In Fogel’s lecture, a spatial history of Jewish modernism as an effect of the restive, dialectical movement between urban centers began to suggest itself.

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These three anecdotes serve as a starting point in my exploration of the story of modernist Hebrew fiction in Europe. They introduce not only some of the main characters of my story but also its time frame, roughly between 1900 and 1930, and some of the cities, locales, and the material culture (journals, publishing houses, cafés) in which it took place. Perhaps more importantly, these snapshots of what I call “literary passports” underscore the restless mobility of writers like Shofman, Brenner, Gnessin, and Fogel; they belong to a loosely linked group of Hebrew writers who had no state or territory to call home, and no clear national affiliation in the modern, western sense of the word. They were astonishingly mobile, wandering from one place to another across Europe (and beyond). These men and women were linked, however, by their restlessness, and by what we’ll come to see as their literary passports: *de facto* certifications of affiliation in a community of Hebrew writers that enabled them to travel through multiple geographical spaces as “resident aliens,” and to participate in multiple cultural contexts, while maintaining a sense of belonging to something approximating a coherent group.

Amidst the turbulence of the twentieth century’s opening decades, the places in which they touched down, congregated, wrote, and debated among themselves constantly changed, sometimes beyond recognition. Multinational empires became new nation-states; wars and revolutions changed the geopolitical borders that had been familiar and stable just a few years earlier; huge economic and historical shifts rewrote the cultures and daily lives of these familiar places again and again. At a time in which the only constant fact of life was change,

it was participation in a community of Hebrew writers that lent their lives a semblance of stability. As I will suggest, this community made them simultaneously “insiders” and “outsiders,” both in cities like Odessa, Warsaw, Homel, Lvov, Vienna, Berlin, Paris, and London, and in European modernist culture in general.

Hebrew Fiction, European Modernism

The central claim of *Literary Passports* is that modernist Hebrew prose fiction, as it emerged from 1900 to 1930, was shaped by the encounter between young Jewish writers attempting to forge a sense-of-self in Hebrew and the shifting terrain of European modernity. It was a highly charged and electrifying encounter. Jews who had acquired their education and their Hebrew linguistic proficiency in the *beit-midrash* (the traditional “house of study”) came into contact with European literature and culture as it exploded in the artistic revolution that we now know as modernism. The lives of these men and women, as well as both Hebrew letters and European modernism writ large, would be irrevocably altered by the encounter.

The pivotal role played by European culture in the formation of Hebrew modernist fiction of the early twentieth century has not, to date, been fully explored. The main reason for this absence is that we are used to thinking of modern Hebrew literature in the last century as linked exclusively with the Zionist narrative, with the creation of a Jewish community in Palestine (the *Yishuv*), which later became the State of Israel. Indeed, one of the main challenges of my study is to resist the teleological impulse of seeing the past from the vantage point of the present, and instead to capture the Hebrew, Jewish, and European cultural landscape in the uniqueness and complexity of this time and place.

On the most basic level, my focus on Europe stems from the simple but crucial fact that all of the writers discussed in this book were born and raised in Eastern Europe. Although some of them migrated, at some point, to Palestine (for a few years or permanently) or even to North America, their cultural and literary horizon was and remained European.¹² My chronological focus, too, is quite simply explained: the

turn of the twentieth century witnessed huge shifts in the foundations of Jewish life and culture, as we shall see, which coincided with the enormous upheavals that modernism both responded to and created. Simply put, around 1900, Hebrew fiction began to change, and fast. Over the next three decades, the writers we discuss were active mostly in Eastern, Central, and Western Europe, in the period before Hebrew became fully coalesced into a vernacular, and before a literary and cultural “center” for Hebrew was solidified in Mandatory Palestine in the 1930s.¹³ The story on which I focus moves, to some extent, along the tense but productive axis between the “house of study” and the *kaffeehaus*; between the texts and religious traditions of the Jewish past (with which these writers wrestled, but never really abandoned) and the contemporary currents of European social and cultural life.

My focus on Europe is bound to an exploration of early-twentieth-century Hebrew fiction in the context of modernism, already a complex concept in itself. As numerous studies have stressed, “modernism” is an elusive term, at once a period, a style, and a trend, and also a wide variety of literary and artistic movements that developed in different locations in Europe, America, and around the world.¹⁴ Indeed, modernism is comprised of numerous and often contesting practices, which first flourished in a period that did not use the term as it has come to be understood retrospectively.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the term “modernism” is a powerful one, and is actually gaining more currency in the last decade or so in spite (or maybe because) of the challenges of postmodernism.¹⁶ It continues to be powerful primarily because “modernism” is the only possible term for portraying the multitude of literary and artistic movements of the early twentieth century. It also captures how all the diverse movements under its umbrella attempted to reflect, but also to respond to, the historical and social upheavals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the numerous and deep wounds of modernity. Richard Sheppard maintains that toward the end of the nineteenth century, European culture was experiencing the shattering of the most fundamental assumptions and conceptual models on which the liberal humanist epoch, from the Renaissance through the mid-nineteenth century, had been based. Thus, according to Sheppard, the literary and artistic works of

modernism “are not just reflexes, transcriptions or symptoms of a profound cultural upheaval, but *simultaneously*, responses through which the authors of those works try to pictorialize their understanding and so make sense of that upheaval.”¹⁷

From this important general observation, one can extract a set of concerns that in one way or another preoccupied many of the movements, trends, and writers associated with modernism. Some of the more salient are: the limits of rationality and the accompanying reconsiderations of “enlightenment” and “progress”; the crisis of literary language and the questioning of mimetic representation; the tension between tradition and the Nietzschean “now”; the changing conception of time and space in the encounter with the modern metropolis; and the changing modes of gender and sexuality amidst the crisis of masculinity, the rise of the “New Woman,” and the emergence of homosexuality in newly constructed understandings of social and cultural identity.¹⁸

It will become evident throughout this book that these were precisely the concerns and issues that preoccupied Hebrew writers in Europe as well as those who emigrated from Europe to other places (Palestine, America). Given their unique historical and social situation as Jews, however, these writers experienced the ruptures of modernity in particular ways, and they thus produced a version of modernism inflected by a set of distinctly Jewish concerns. Importantly, at the same time that European and western culture as a whole experienced this upheaval, Jewish society was undergoing a far-ranging revolution of its own, one that transformed its geography, modes of living, languages, professions, and consciousness. The confluence of the modernist revolution in art and literature and the massive transformations that Benjamin Harshav has called “the modern Jewish revolution” is what set Hebrew modernism in motion, and a full understanding of this new mode of Jewish self-expression requires attention to both of these developments.¹⁹

The international (or what Susan Stanford-Friedman and Andreas Huyssen have more recently called the “transnational”) quality of modernism has long been emphasized, and for good reason. In the context of modernist literature and culture numerous individual writers moved from one location to another, becoming émigrés, perpetual

tourists, or—in one of modernism’s privileged terms—“exiles” (a term that was not surprisingly associated, usually metaphorically, with Jews and Jewish experience). Thus a number of modernist trends were initiated and developed more or less simultaneously in different locations across Europe and around the world. At the turn of the twentieth century, cosmopolitan and polyglot cities became the centers of modernism; the writers, artists, and intellectuals who lived—or just passed through—these cities were a mixture of locals, immigrants, and exiles from all over Europe and the rest of the world. As we have already seen, the restlessness of these writers was an essential ingredient of modernism’s ability to pollinate itself across a huge swath of countries and cultures. But modernism, as this study takes pains to remember, is also marked by the ways in which these trends were created and developed distinctively in different locations, and within different cultural and national contexts.²⁰

If we view modernism, for example, through an Anglo-American lens (which is still the dominant historical and theoretical perspective, even in the “New Modernist Studies”), the chronology of modernism and its very nature appear in a particular way. The focus here is usually on the years between 1910 and 1930, the time of “high modernism,” with such canonical figures as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner.²¹ But when modernism is viewed from Berlin or Vienna—the places to which many Hebrew writers gravitated—the chronological profile, the list of main poetic movements, and the set of representative figures and texts are entirely different. We would probably locate its origins in the 1890s, focus on movements like symbolism and expressionism, and explore figures such as Nietzsche (as the main philosophical influence), Rilke, Trakl, Hofmannsthal, Mann, Musil, Kafka, Döblin, and Brecht.²²

Modernism in the Russian context—the one most familiar and relevant to many Hebrew writers—offered yet another trajectory, developing first in the symbolist and decadent trends during the period 1890–1917 (which is also recognized as the “Silver Age” of Russian literature). Among the writers associated with Russian early modernism are Dimitri Merezhkovsky, Andrei Bely, Alexander Blok, Fyodor Sologug, Valery Bruiusov, Viacheslav Ivanov, and Leonid Andreyev.