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IN PURSUIT OF THE REJECTED “JEW FROM THE GOLAH”. ON LIFE AND WORKS OF DR. JACOB (KOBI) WEITZNER

W poszukiwaniu odrzuconego „Żyda z Diaspory”. O życiu i działalności doktora Jakuba (Kobi) Weitznera

Abstract: Since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 everything related to the Diaspora (“Golah”) such as culture, language, or mentality was considered despicable and Israelis tried to keep away from it. This article is about Dr. Jacob (Kobi) Weitzner a writer, playwright and Yiddish theater director. This article is not about his academic achievements or artistic works, but his seminal activity for the preservation of Jewish culture in the Diaspora.

Keywords: Yiddish, Jew, Diaspora, Israeliness, Second Generation, Jewish Theatre, Yiddish playwright

Streszczenie: Od powstania państwa Izrael w 1948 roku wszystko co wiązało się z diasporą (Golah) – kultura, język czy mentalność – uważane było za niegodne szacunku i Izraelczycy starali się trzymać od tego z daleka. Doktor Jacob (Kobi) Weitzner był pisarzem, dramaturgiem i reżyserem teatru żydowskiego. Artykuł nie omawia jego osiągnięć akademickich czy twórczości artystycznej,

lecz przełomową działalność na rzecz zachowania kultury żydowskiej w diasporze.

Słowa kluczowe: jidysz, Żyd, diaspora, izraelskość, drugie pokolenie, teatr żydowski, dramatopisarz w języku jidysz

Dr. Jacob (Kobi) Weitzner was born in Tel Aviv in March 1951 and died in September 2018 in Warsaw. Kobi was a writer, play writer and Yiddish theater director. This article is not about his academic achievements or artistic works, but his seminal activity for the preservation of Jewish culture in the Diaspora. Kobi was a Yiddish teacher and lecturer in Israel, Poland and other countries around the world. He developed a unique method for teaching the Yiddish language through the study of everyday spoken language and Jewish humor. Kobi was the artistic director of the Jewish Theater in Warsaw from 2006 until his death. He also established a children’s theater in which the children learned Yiddish and Jewish culture.

Ever since the beginning of Kobi’s life, his biography has been characterized by duality that seemed always to complement him. On the one hand, his biography was typical of an Israeli of his socio-economic status. His Polish-born parents came to Israel before the war. His father from Lviv, today’s Ukraine, came to Israel in 1934 and was a lawyer. The family lived on one of the most beautiful streets in Tel Aviv where Kobi studied there in elementary school. He served in the military during the Yom Kippur War; and studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem for his Bachelor’s Degree, majoring in Hebrew literature and theater. Later, Kobi majored in Yiddish and Hebrew literature as part of his Master’s Degree. The topic of his Ph.D. was “Shalom Aleichem in the theater.” Such a life story, naturally brands „Israeliness” in one’s consciousness, as the eminent Israeli poet Shaul Tchernichovsky (2020) states, „Man is nothing but a pattern of the landscape of his homeland.”

On the other hand, Kobi received part of his high-school education in Vienna, while completing his studies in French at the College des Frères

in Jaffa. Kobi studied at various universities around the world including Cambridge, in the UK and Columbia, in New York. He also taught at various academic institutions, among them, the Hebrew department at Hunter College in New York.

Kobi was involved in many festivals, events and films dealing with the Yiddish language and culture. From 2005 until his death in September 2018, Kobi was the artistic director of the Ester Rachel Kamińska and Ida Kamińska Warsaw Jewish Theater. Kobi was a key figure in the life of the Jewish community in Warsaw. In addition to his work in the theater, Kobi was also involved in Jewish-Israeli relations. He was an integral figure in the project to establish a memorial monument for the Righteous Among the Nations in Warsaw, designed by Dani Karavan.

In the years 1995-2001 he worked as an editor at the “Yiddish Kemfer” and from 2000 until his death he worked as a correspondent for the Yiddish newspaper “פארװערטס” (Fahrverts – “Forward”), which is published in New York. From 2006 until his death, Kobi worked as an editor of “Yiddisher Vort” in Warsaw.

Kobi mentioned many times that he was the last Yiddish playwright. However, the truth is that he is not only the last “Israeli-born” Yiddish playwright, he is also the first, and the only one. For Kobi’s generation in Israel, Yiddish symbolized everything that was disdained about being a Jew from the Diaspora. No secular “Israeli-born” from his generation had any desire to speak Yiddish. Moreover, his contemporaries were ashamed of their Yiddish-speaking parents. This is a generation that wanted more than anything to be “Israeli”. Kobi’s generation in Israel is usually referred to as the „Second Generation”, meaning that they are children of parents who survived the Holocaust. The “New Israeli” at that time viewed his parents critically; he wanted to be different from them. The parents of Kobi’s generation were perceived by their sons and daughters as Jews with a “Golah mentality” and as such, it was almost the worst thing you could then say about an Israeli. One might say that the “Golah mentality Jew” is the repressed “The Other” in all of us, the Israelis. In Professor Hannah Jablonka’s book *Children by the Book: Biography of a Generation: The First Native Israelis Born in 1948-1955* she describes the children of this

generation. She is a part of this generation as she was born in 1950. About 300,000 children were born in the State of Israel since its independence in 1948 to 1955. The year 1955 was the last year for children to have been born who participated in the Yom Kippur War - the war that brought a great change in the image of many in the State of Israel. Jablonka writes:

We were born to parents of the mythological generations - the generation of the Holocaust and World War II and the generation of 1948, as we represent Jews of a completely new breed. One whose basis of existence is characterized by routine, normality, and above all, basic existential security. We were a generation that did not understand at all what the existence of a social minority in a social majority was. We were suntanned children - the first to be born in Israel, Israel as a reality and not the dream. We grew up in a small, defined and intimate country, whose borders are clear and it is the core of our identity and the center of our world.

Hannah Jablonka refers to the term „generation” and claims that she follows mainly Karl Mannheim (1952) and the concept of „historical generation”. The external conditions cannot suffice, nor can a common age, environment or background, in order to create a group. A generation also requires, in particular, a shared experience of a founding historical event such as war or revolution, and beyond that, the ability to process that event into a collective experience strong enough to unite people whose backgrounds (economic, religious, political) are not similar. A generation, then, is a social „domain” that unites within it those who share even if concealed this consciousness. By the word consciousness, Mannheim effusively meant a historical consciousness that originated in a historical experience.

Kobi, born in 1951, belonged to a generation of the state of Israel in which its developing culture and language - were very central to its education in schools of course, but not only. In the years when his consciousness was molded, there was almost a consensus on „the righteousness of our ways”, on how the „Israeli” should look and behave. The true Israeli is „tall dark and handsome” as is mentioned in Haim Guri’s poem (2011).

The Israelis not only did like the mentality of the “Jew of the Golah”, but also everything concerning the everyday life like food, customs, etc. Kobi liked it all and declared it loudly. This was a subversive act indeed. The Israeli is fit, he is a soldier, he is a hero, he defends the homeland and most important he is not “the Jew from the Golah”. This is the ethos on which Kobi’s generation grew up. There was no understanding then, that we were actually dealing with the collective repression of “the Jew from the Golah” mentality; by doing that, we were actually repressing our culture, our history and our roots. However, if there was an understanding, it was considered a necessity in order to build a new country with a new ethos. Kobi did serve in the army including in the Yom Kippur War, like everybody else of his generation. Following his literary inclination, he began studying Hebrew literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He was fluent in German, French and English as his high-school studies were conducted in German and French and not in Hebrew. It would have been natural to have chosen to study general literature at the university. I believe his choice to study Hebrew literature was in the spirit of that generation. During his studies at the university, Kobi met Professor Chone Szmeruk, who was born in Warsaw and was the head of the Department of Yiddish Literature and a recipient of the Israel Prize for „Researching Jewish Languages”, and it was he who made Kobi fall in love with Yiddish literature. He was also his doctoral supervisor in Kobi’s dissertation on Shalom Aleichem. Chone Szmeruk, like Kobi, lived his last years in Warsaw and he died there.

Dan Horowitz opens his book *Light-Blue and Dust* (1993)⁵ with the sentence „Man is more than a pattern of the landscape of his homeland as imagined by Shaul Tchernichovsky, he is a pattern of the landscape of his culture”. In the documentary I made about Kobi he told me:

We are a generation that our parents have exited from. Our parents spoke Yiddish and Polish. When you are in Poland you feel that their world is still alive. I want to live in Warsaw because I feel warm here, I’m wrapped in a coat of words, all in Yiddish.

The home of theater director Szymon Szurmiej and the Jewish Theater in Warsaw became his home. He put it this way:

I want to come to a theater that is not just a business; I want to come to a theater where the director is also my father and the actors are my friends. When I'm hungry, I get on the tram and go to Szymon Szurmiej's home, the theater director. I go to sleep there and I eat there and I get up in the morning, and I come to the theater and there is a kind of “plotka” (gossip), a kind of warmth.

Kobi is thus a pattern of his culture. He is the Israeli pioneer who recognizes that the Israeli culture did not begin in 1948 with the establishment of the State of Israel, but has much deeper roots than the state's existence and this culture belongs not only to exiled elders but can also integrate and captivate young Israelis.

Indeed, in the early 2000s, the new Ashkenazi movement arose in Israel. In September 2003, they declared that they were „not ashamed of Yiddish, looking for the “*cholent*” and the „גאלער” (jellied calves' foot), searching for the last remnants of the grandparents' community and unwilling to bear the guilt of the original sin against the immigrants from North Africa.”

Most of the reactions to the movement, as reported in the media at the time, came from *olim* from North Africa and their descendants who did not understand the need for such a movement because from their point of view, the Israeli culture is in Ashkenazi hands, so is academia, book publishing and more. Another response was also from a “Mizrachi” point of view and that of the Israeli singer and poet Kobi Oz who welcomed the Ashkenazi awakening, mainly in the hope that after the Ashkenazim feel comfortable in their own identity, they would stop suppressing the identities of others.

The truth is that the discussion about Ashkenazi identity is an attempt to bring back to Israeli culture what was expunged from it with the beginning of Zionism especially after the Holocaust and with the establishment of the Israeli state.

There were a number of cultural movements among the Jews in Europe: Communists, Bundists, Zionists, secular and religious Zionists and especially millions of non-Zionist ultra-Orthodox Jews. The Zionists naturally concentrated in Eretz Israel. They were not the majority of the Jews. The others remained mostly in Europe or emigrated to the United States. The Holocaust led to a quantitative change among Zionist and non-Zionist Jews, and moreover, to a change in attitudes toward European Jewish culture that from a Zionist point of view was called „*galutit*.”, or “Jewish mentality of the Golah”. In the eyes of the Zionists, the Holocaust proved their righteousness. Many Israelis of my generation and Kobi’s contemporaries still remember the teachers in the schools describing the Jews as those who went „like lambs to the slaughter”. The Jews with “the Golah mentality” and their culture embodied an inferior being. Moreover, this mentality personified the existential anxiety of the Israelis, and therefore so much necessity for denial.

Yosef Vitkin in his book *The Occupation of the Land and the Occupation of Labor*, published in 1908 described the Jew as such:

and at the same time he almost always serves, who can be exploited unhindered, and immediately receives with love his owner the revelation of his power and lordship ... , and the kind of submission we have to admit is very fond of the Golah mentality Jew, who himself was all his days in terms of „and let my soul be like dust to everyone.

The “Golah mentality Jew” in the eyes of the Israeli is first and foremost the antithesis of himself, and without a doubt represents everything he, the Israeli –loathes to be - passive, weak, cowardly, and mostly suffers from the hand of the Gentiles.

Muscle Jews (*Muskeljudentum*) is a concept coined by Max Nordau at the Second Zionist Congress held in Basel on August 28, 1898. In his speech, Nordau spoke of the need to design a new type of Jew, mentally and physically strong, capable of fulfilling Zionism. The characteristics of the Muscle Jews are the antithesis of the Jews from the Golah.

It took about fifty, sixty, or even seventy years for this buried culture to erupt and surface with the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Holocaust survivors and other Jews who fled Europe and often even hid their Jewish identities - not necessarily religious but cultural.

Kobi discovered Yiddish and its culture long before all this. He was instilled with a feeling of having a sense of calling, and his doctoral dissertation on the work of Shalom Aleichem was unique. He told me this: „When I wrote about Shalom Aleichem in the theater, no one wrote before me and no one will write after me; I was not satisfied with the written text, but I also saw the productions and examined what happened to the text on stage, meaning “from page to stage”. I went to the directors and I knew they were the last directors - I went to Cuba Rotboim. I knew I was the last person who would be there - standing at Mount Sinai. I was there, watching Jewish theater in Europe and after that, no one would be. And I knew it was a pioneering work, both initial and last.”

On January 13, 2016, the Israeli journalist Yossi Klein wrote an essay in the Haaretz newspaper entitled „I want to be a Jew from the Golah”, and so he wrote:

I want to be a Jew from the Golah. Like the ones depicted in the caricatures. I am ready for the hump and the long nose. I do not mind being like that. I do not mind that people will recognize my Judaism in the street. I do not hide it. I am proud of it. It is more than a long, crooked nose and a hunch-back; my Judaism is the Judaism of Einstein, Freud and Kafka I don't care if I am viewed as odd, that people claim that I want to be aloof – on the contrary – I want to assimilate. I want to be influential and be influenced. I want to be the Jew from the Golah, one of those who were mocked in literature and history classes. To be such a Jew I am willing to give up my national erection. The Jew once sought security and pride. The security he has wherever they do not promise „the sword shall devour forever”. He manages on his own proudly; he is proud of his education, culture and knowledge, and prefers an open gentile régime over a withdrawn Jewish rule.

Such a defiant position, which, incidentally, ironically internalizes the gentile's view of the Jew, can be expressed mainly by the leftists in Israel who are so disappointed with the way the State of Israel is heading these days. The current government in Israel is not acceptable to the vast majority of Kobi's contemporaries who grew up in the same melting pot as he. But even in this respect, Kobi was extraordinary; his right-wing worldview was alien to the secular and liberal Israeli. Kobi chose Warsaw not in defiance of what is happening in Israel today but out of a deep love for Jewish culture and its language - Yiddish. Beyond being the artistic consultant of the Jewish theater, a lecturer in Yiddish and editor of the Jewish newspaper. He taught Hebrew to his children and the children at the Jewish school in Warsaw. It was very important to him that his children get to know Israel and its culture and of course his Israeli family members.

Kobi wanted to teach Jewish cinema in Israel and in his humorous manner, he told me how he once came to college and saw a „Jewish cinema”¹ sign:

I said to myself - Jewish cinema - that's my middle name, maybe finally.... Nevertheless, they made 300 films in Yiddish, and in every country where they study cinema, they also teach their cinematic past. I checked, so the secretary said to me 'No, it is Indian cinema', so I said to myself, probably in India, Jewish cinema is taught because otherwise where is the logic?

Indeed, the truth must be told, festivals for Jewish culture - for Jewish theater, Jewish cinema, and Jewish music as they take place in Warsaw, Krakow and other places in Poland that cannot take place today in Israel. They cannot exist because they have no demand. They cannot exist because the political and social atmosphere that exists today in Israel has created not only ludicrous indifference but in some cases, even antagonism.

¹ The sign actually read "Indian cinema" – in Hebrew, there is a one-letter difference between Jewish (Yehudi) and Indian (Hodi).

Jewish theater and cinema have in fact not existed in Israel for a long time. There is a small Yiddish theater, whose visitors are older immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

A Yiddish theater play was first performed in Israel in 1894. It was Goldfaden's production of „Shulamit”. In 1914 it was put on again; this time stink bombs were thrown into the theater by the Hebrew Language Defenders Regiment in order to prevent the play from being performed. On August 10, 1949, after the establishment of the State of Israel, the „Committee for the Criticism of Films and Plays” imposed an official ban on performing shows in Yiddish. Except for foreign theater companies whose visit to Israel does not exceed six weeks. Thus, Dgigan and Schumacher and others were particularly successful in the early 1960s. In February 1951, the Goldfaden Yiddish Theater was established. It closed a few months later for financial reasons and a court order was issued to prevent further performances. Nathan Wolfowitz, the theater's founder, violated the order and staged Moshe Gershenson's play „Herscheleh Austrafalier”. He was sued and subsequently published an article in the Yiddish newspaper „לעצטע נייעס” (The Latest News) and wrote: „All my life I spoke Yiddish and performed in the Yiddish theater, and now I hear that it is forbidden in Israel, just as if Yiddish was opium, or some bootleg distillery. The main thing is that during all the years of the war, I assumed that when the nightmares passed, it would be possible to inhale the air of national freedom ... and here I am, in a Jewish Court facing a criminal trial, representing our theater troupe for producing „Herscheleh.”

As the number of Yiddish speakers waned, so did the fear of the language. From the middle and towards the end of the sixties, there was a measure of flourishing of Yiddish theater. The play that was the biggest success was „Di Megila” (The Megilla) by Itzik Manger, staged by the Burstein family and director Shmuel Bunim.

In 1987, the Yiddishpiel Theater was founded, staging over forty productions with prominent artists such as Ephraim Kishon and Aharon Meged. However it should be remembered that most of the visitors and the measure of success of the theater came following the many waves of immigration from the Soviet Union.

The Israelis born in general, do not go to see Yiddish theater even if plays translated from Yiddish are staged. Jewish music is also heard mainly in religious circles.

In 1996, precisely because Yiddish is considered a dying out language, the Knesset of Israel enacted a law establishing a national authority for Yiddish culture, the purpose of which was to „deepen the people’s knowledge of Yiddish culture in all its forms and to cultivate cultural research and teaching.”

Precisely the fact that there is such an authority indicates that the state of Yiddish culture in Israel is quite dismal. No wonder Kobi eventually found his place in Poland, as he told me when I interviewed him, „I feel like an envelope that has finally fallen into the right post-office box.”

With the fall of Communism, an influx of Israelis to Poland began. It began with travel for the purpose of restoring property, continuing with what is known in Israel as a „roots trip” in which family members from three generations took part. Sometimes documentaries and plays were also made as a result of these travels. One of the most popular plays is Hillel Mittelpunkt’s play „A Guide to the Traveler in Warsaw” which tells the story of a mother and son who travel to Warsaw to try to return the family’s property. The play, which addresses the subject in a humorous, sometimes sarcastic way, was a great success. Another form of Israeli tourism in Poland that was very prevalent until the onset of Covid-19, is shopping-spree tourism. Israelis really like to „shop” in Poland, especially for clothes because the prices are lower than in Israel. As the years passed, Israeli businesspeople entered the real-estate business in Poland and later other businesses as well. There is no exact estimate of how many Israelis have chosen to live in Poland in recent years, but the „Israelis in Poland” Facebook group has around 700 members. According to various media interviews they are less interested in the Jewish past in Poland and much more interested in the business opportunities that Poland has to offer them, and in life itself.

Kobi’s stay in Poland stemmed from entirely different motives. He felt a calling in fulfilling his various roles in Poland. As I mentioned at the beginning of the article, he was the editor of the Yiddish newspaper “Der Wort”, the artistic director of the theater and a Yiddish teacher. The past

of Polish Jews and their culture were the main reasons why Kobi found his place in Poland. In our interview (Lewkowicz-Shenholz 2015), he told me this:

There is a perception in Poland that the culture of the Jews of Poland belongs to Poland; the trouble is that there is no one to represent them. They are all in the ground and Shemruk, my teacher and mentor is dead, so it seems that I am filling some sort of void.

In fact, we were a noble tribe. There were 3.5 million Jews here with theaters; there were 300 newspapers here. It seems to me that one can understand why a person connected to these things would want to go back to them.

Things that Y.L. Peretz instituted - creating a Jew who would also be educated but not assimilated, creating a Jewish culture, not just a Jewish religion that would not be defined by territory, is something that one, can only do today in the Diaspora.

I came to the conclusion that I am really a Polish Jew. I have a shared fate with the Jews from Ethiopia. It's clear to me, I will not deny it, that I do not have the emotional connection with them as I have with Arthur Hoffman, who is our director in the theater in Warsaw. I can sit with him and understand him in a flash, and though I know what he's about to say I stay because I just love to listen to him.

We Polish Jews have remained very few, we are an endangered species as UNESCO calls it. Uri Zvi Greenberg called it “The Kingdom of the Cross”; we are hiding in our corner in the kingdom of the cross but we are just fine there in the corner ... I did not come to solve the problem of anti-Semitism in Poland.

At the end of the interview with Kobi in Warsaw in 2005, Kobi spoke in his special humorous way about his death, which then seemed very far away.

I intend to buy a grave here, firstly, because it is cheaper and more beautiful than the cemetery in Tel Aviv and secondly, so as to also renew the tradition. I will be buried by Y.L. Peretz and my teacher and mentor Chone Szmeruk¹⁰.

Jacob (Kobi) Weitzner died on September 20, 2018; he was buried as he had chosen by Y.L. Peretz and Professor Chone Szmeruk in the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw. His wife and three children live in Warsaw and his children continue to receive an education with an affinity for Judaism and Israeliness. Will another Israeli possibly be found to replace him?

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