The Book of Things / Dorit Gani

In 1921, the poet Haim Nachman Bialik (1873–1934) fled Odessa and resettled in Berlin, where he hoped to resume his activities as a Hebrew publisher in the wake of the blows inflicted on the center of Hebrew culture in Russia. The following year, he met the illustrator Tom Seidmann-Freud (1892-1930) and her husband, Yaakov Seidmann, who had founded a German publishing house in which they published children's books written and illustrated by Freud. In light of the spectacular illustrations and the high quality of the printing, Bialik decided to partner with them to establish a Hebrew publishing house for children. The new publishing house was called Ophir and was based on the revolutionary principle that, in Bialik's words, "the illustrations are primary, and the text is secondary."

*The Book of Things*,Bialik's first book of poems for children, was the first title published by the Ophir publishing house in 1922. It included sixteen of Seidmann-Freud's illustrations, each facing a short poem describing the image in Hebrew rhyme. Bialik's poetic genius was matched by Seidmann-Freud's talents as an illustrator. Her work for children is considered one of the pinnacles of twentieth-century German art, and *The Book of Things* rivaled the finest European children's literature of its day.

About two years after the publication of *The Book of Things*, the Ophir partnership was disbanded. Bialik immigrated to the Land of Israel and continued his work there. However, inadequate printing technologies and a mistrust of the artistic perfectionism that characterized the Ophir publishing house prevented him from establishing a press there. *The Book of Things*, along with a number of additional books published by Ophir, attests to a magnificent pioneering experiment in the history of Hebrew picture books.