**מ"עיר המתים" ל"עיר ומלואה" לעגנון**

**יוסף סאקס**

Careful examination of the often overlooked early works of S.Y. Agnon offers crucial insight into the origins of the literary universe he would craft over his long career. Agnon’s adolescent writing in Yiddish and Hebrew prior to his departure for *Eretz Yisrael* in 1908, aged nineteen, are the “חומר גלם” which he would rearrange throughout the ensuing six decades of his career.

Among the more remarkable items in the catalog of his early works is a short piece, “*Ir HaMetim,*” which appeared in the Lvov Hebrew newspaper, *HaEt*, on 14.3.1907, and reappears here for the first time in over 111 years. Signed with the pseudonym *Ehad Min HaIr* (which I presume was an intentional riff on Ahad HaAm), “Ir HaMetim” was written while young S.Y. Czaczkes served as assistant to Gershom Bader, the editor of the newspaper.

The importance of this story, a string of vignettes about the history of his city Buczacz, is in the cataloging of a variety of themes and plots, in miniature, which Agnon would rework over the next sixty years, culminating with his monumental *Ir uMeloah* (as unpacked in the accompanying notes). Some of these elements were part of the town’s factual history, others indigenous folklore, and presumably much drawn from his own imagination. One striking difference must be noted with Agnon’s later work—“*Ir HaMetim*” is marked by an almost complete absence of the intertextual matrix for which Agnon was famous—his Hebrew prose being a richly woven tapestry of allusions and word-plays to rabbinic literature. This intertextuality, which later becomes almost the very subject of his writing, was not yet in place in the earliest publications.

On its own literary merits, we would now take little note the story. The sheer artistry of a work like “*Agunot*,” published just a year-and-a-half later (upon his arrival in Jaffa), is so remarkably advanced relative to his pre-Aliyah works of only a short time earlier that one wonders what—aside from the proverbial “אוירא דארץ ישראל”—caused such an accelerated maturation in the artist as a young man.

Reading “Ir HaMetim” we realize that already at the tender age of 19, Agnon already saw himself as the chronicler of Buczacz. The awareness that his hometown is on the verge of collapse, spiritually as well as physically, and the impulse to document Buczacz, is obviously rooted in his childhood experience. In fact, from his first years as a writer he had already set this as one of his areas of focus, although his narrative voice would mature, and indeed, sharply transition, over the ensuing decades. In 1956, when his published output had slackened, he answered Baruch Kurzweil’s inquiry as to where he was focusing his energy with: “בונה אני עיר, את בוטשאטש!”

Clearly, Agnon had to

"להניח את ארצו ואת מולדתו ואת עירו כדי לעלות לארץ ישראל לבנות אותה מחורבנה ולהבנות ממנה"

--so that he could turn his attention back to that city of Buczacz to rebuild it in literature—this time as a *City in Full* instead of a “City of the Dead”.

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