Did One Million Russians Change the Middle East? 

Benny Morris
The Alarming Significance of a Trivial Book

SUMMER READING

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Commentators often seek to explain the politics of the Russian community in Israel in the light of its origins, neither the Soviet Union nor its successor having been an ideal preparatory school for a democracy. But there is another way in which the Russians’ past casts a shadow over them, as Shimon Peres astutely observed in an interview with Galili and Bronfman. In an attempt to account for the evolution of the immigrants’ politics in the 1990s, he observed that “they did not have any idea of what it was to be a small state. They thought that the Jordan was the Volga, not just a stream overrated for its size, if not exactly a shocking one: The admiral for all we know was no more of an anti-Semite than the current president of Russia, and it might even be possible, with a little effort, to find some common ground shared by Kolchak, Putin, and Lieberman. Galili and Bronfman do in fact devote a fair amount of time to drawing parallels between the latter two. Russian and Israeli patriotism, Kolchak, Putin, and Lieberman—what a fascinating combination, but how will it all add up in the end?

In describing his friend S.Y. Agnon’s style of thinking, Gershom Scholem emphasized the extent to which he was “unable and unwilling to have a conversation about abstract ideas—rather only in stories or parables [neshalin].”

You’d start to speak to Agnon conceptually, and he’d immediately change the subject—“Let me tell you a story, let me tell you a naisyeh.’ He thought in pictures. Agnon expressed everything, completely legitimately, as one who thinks in pictures.

This was a perceptive remark, so it is interesting that so few of Agnon’s stories have been illustrated. Perhaps the most significant illustrations have been those of Avigdor Arikha, for the sections of Only Yesterday published under the name Kelev Hatzot (Stray Dog), in which author and artist collaborated in the drawing of the demonic dog Balak. (The Agnon House held an exhibit of these engravings, sketches, and drawings in 2010, and a catalog was published in conjunction with the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.) Theodor Herzl’s Rome, who was the son-in-law of Agnon’s patron and publisher Salaman Schocken, produced a number of spare, stylized line drawings for certain publications, which have been recycled in various printings of assorted stories both in Hebrew and in translation.

But only now, forty-three years after the Nobel laureate’s death, have Agnon’s stories been rendered accessible on YouTube) shows him walking the narrow streets of the Old City, invoking all the classic Zionist associations and symbols, including Palmach and Entebbe.

But Rosenbaum was also a member of the Russian parliament (the Duma), representing Putin’s party, and served as deputy head of the Duma’s cultural committee. Two years ago, his “Romance Kolchak” became a best-seller. Admiral Kolchak was an Arctic explorer, but he is better known as one of the heads of the White counterrevolutionary movement of 1918-1919. Kolchak was killed by the Bolsheviks after their victory. The song is devoted to Kolchak’s thoughts and feelings in the last minutes before his execution.

Jerusalem and Kolchak form a strange synthesis, if not exactly a shocking one: The admiral for all we know was no more of an anti-Semite than the current president of Russia, and it might even be possible, with a little effort, to find some common ground shared by Kolchak, Putin, and Lieberman. Galili and Bronfman do in fact devote a fair amount of time to drawing parallels between the latter two. Russian and Israeli patriotism, Kolchak, Putin, and Lieberman—what a fascinating combination, but how will it all add up in the end?

The Man Who Thought in Pictures

BY JEFFREY SAKS

Shay Ye-Agnon: Shelosha Sipurim (Three Stories)
by S.Y. Agnon, illustrated by Shay Charka
Schocken Publishing House (Israel), 48 pp., 69 NIS

In describing his friend S.Y. Agnon’s style of thinking, Gershom Scholem emphasized the extent to which he was “unable and unwilling to have a conversation about abstract ideas—rather only in stories or parables [neshalin].”

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But only now, forty-three years after the Nobel laureate’s death, have Agnon’s stories been rendered into a comic book. Israeli illustrator and cartoonist
Shay Charka has put pictures to words for three of Agnon’s stories that have special appeal for children.

One of Agnon’s best-known short stories, and likely the first that many school children encounter, is “Fable of the Goat,” the story of a magical cave tunnel between Exile and the Land of Israel, and a delightful but unfortunate goat who can lead through. Actually, this story was the first of Agnon’s ever to be illustrated. When it was published in 1925, very shortly after Agnon’s own return of Agnon’s little aggada can be read on at least two planes: We can understand the desire of any artist to escape into his own work. But artistic creation also becomes an actual embodiment of an abstract ideal. The archaic, mishnaic word mashiach means a rope because they’ll see the cord wrapped around the goat’s tail. One hopes that they will also catch the deliberate echo of the word messiah (messiah) that Agnon intended.

Since Charka does occasionally alter Agnon’s texts, it would have been better had Schocken included the canonical versions of these stories in an appendix (without illustrations each is quite short, two pages would have done it). This would have made the volume an even more effective educational tool. Nonetheless, one hopes that this important and delightful partnership between author and illustrator will introduce Israeli children (and their parents), and Hebrew students in America, to the magic cave of Agnon’s prose.

Caricature of Agnon as a young man.

It’s pleasing to think that the audience for this book will read Agnon’s rabbinic Hebrew and not be put off.

The other well-known story in the collection, “From Foe to Friend,” tells of its narrator’s attempt to settle Jerusalem’s Talpiot suburb despite the opposition of the “King of the Winds” to blow more magical one. But Charka lavishes three pages (out of twelve) on the passage. Along the way we see graphic hints to every ram or goat in Jewish history, from the “ram caught in a thicket” at the binding of Isaac, to the Yom Kippur scapegoat, to the Chad Gadya of Seder night, and more.

In short, there’s a lot of Jewish history in the past his house down. Virtually every commentator on this story has pointed out that Agnon’s Talpiot rented home was plundered during the 1929 Arab Uprising, leading to the eventual construction in 1931 of his house (now a museum and study center). Following that interpretive line, Charka draws the narrator as a caricature of a young Agnon himself, and the sturdy house built at story’s end is none other than Beit Agnon, though, somewhat oddly, more as it looks today after its extensive renovation in 2009. (There are also graphic references to Rav Kook and Bob Dylan.)

While the first two stories are well known and regularly taught in the Israeli schools, the third will be unfamiliar to all but the most diehard Agnon fans. In “The Architect and the Emperor,” Charka has taken one paragraph from Agnon’s late novel To This Day and illustrated it as a stand-alone story, which tells of an old, distinguished architect who is commanded by the king to construct a new castle: “Years went by and nothing was done for the architect had lost all interest in working in wood and stone.” Instead, he takes a gigantic canvas and paints “a castle on it so skillfully that it looked real, and sent the emperor a message that the task was completed.” When the monarch discovers it’s nothing other than a two-dimensional painting, he screams in his fury, “Not only have you disobeyed my orders, you have deceived me into thinking that the mere appearance of a building is a building.” At that moment the architect (who is drawn to look like the elder Agnon, so familiar to us from the fifty shekel bill) knocks on the door of the painted palace, whereupon “the door opened and the architect stepped through it and was never seen again.”

Agnon’s little aggada can be read on at least two planes: We can understand the desire of any artist to escape into his own work. But artistic creation also becomes an actual embodiment of an abstract ideal. The architect’s palace, which exists only in blue-print, has a Platonic existence of its own. The fusion of word and image in graphic novels may have a special power to evoke this second meaning.

Significantly, Charka has resisted the temptation to modernize Agnon’s poetic and sometimes archaic Hebrew. Nor does he insert nekudim (Hebrew vowels) into the text, which is penned in his cartoonist’s hand. Although the characters are given occasional lines of dialogue in “thought balloons” which are original to Charka and not Agnon, the words and style are essentially Agnon’s. It’s pleasing to think that the audience for this book will read Agnon’s rabbinic Hebrew and not be put off. It also underlines the power of illustration: Readers will know that the archaic, mishnaic word mashiach means a rope because they’ll see the cord wrapped around the goat’s tail. One hopes that they will also catch the deliberate echo of the word meshiach (messiah) that Agnon intended.

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Jeffrey Saks is the founding director of ATID and its WebYeshiva.org program. He also lectures regularly at the Agnon House in Jerusalem.

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