

Magdalena Sitarz

Literature as a Medium for Memory

The Universe of Sholem Asch's Novels

Polish Studies - Transdisciplinary Perspectives

Edited by Krzysztof Zajas / Jarosław Fazan



PETER LANG
EDITION

1. “From the world which is already gone”¹

The future historian of Jewish life in the first half of the 20th century will fail to grasp many of its aspects without a close study of the Jewish literature of the period. For, like the treasures of any nation’s literature, Jewish writings reflect the problems, struggles, and achievements of our times, perhaps more than most others.²

This is how Eliahu Elath, an Israeli politician and ambassador to the US and Great Britain of a long standing, begins his article on Sholem Asch. It seems he managed to capture in a few lines the essence of what should be important while reading Asch today.

Sholem Asch, a Polish-born Jewish writer³ (Kutno 1880–London 1957) is known mostly thanks to a few translations of his novels, originally written in Yiddish. However, because he wrote in Yiddish only, not many readers realize how vast his literary output was and what universal acclaim he enjoyed as the first Yiddish author. Although he was a controversial writer, criticized for many of his works, no one ever denied his literary talent. Apart from being a Jewish writer, he was a humanist, striving to find ways of mutual understanding and co-existence between nations and religions. To this end, in his novels he tried to bring Jewish life closer home to non-Jewish readers and to show to Jewish readers many positive aspects of a Christian⁴ way of life.

The main objective of the present book is to examine the figures of memory present in all twenty-six novels he wrote, as they play an important role in shaping and transmitting common memory by literature. A theoretical framework of such an approach to literary works is provided in a separate chapter. At the same time the book is meant to elucidate, at least superficially, all of Asch’s literary

1 It seems it was ישראל יהושע זינגער Israel Joshua Singer (1893–1944), an older brother of Isaac Bashevis Singer (1902–1991), a Nobel Prize laureate in literature of 1978, who used this expression in the title of his childhood memories first printed in installments in *פֿארװערטס* (*Forverts*, a Yiddish daily published in New York since 1879, which now is a weekly, see <http://yiddish.forward.com>, 7 February 2012), and then published as a book after the writer’s death, see Yisroel Yoshua Zinger, *Fun a velt vos iz nishto mer*, Nyu York: Matones 1946.

ישראל יהושע זינגער, פֿון אַ וועלט וואָס איז נישטאָ מער, נײַ-יאָרק: מאַטונעס, 1946.

2 Eliahu Elath, *Sholem Asch, The Man*, in: *Canadian Jewish Review*, 9 January 1959, p. 10.

3 Depending on the language used and the pronunciation, the writer’s first and second name, which in Yiddish are written as אַש שִׁלום, are transcribed in many different ways.

4 The designation “Christian” is used throughout the book as a reference to all those who were brought up in the tradition of Christian culture, broadly understood, no matter whether they were baptized, whether they are believers and whether they practice their belief.

output and his life. Thus it contains a survey of his life and works as well as a comprehensive bibliography. A chapter on the writer's relations with his home country, its culture and literature, makes his works more vivid and substantial, as they are closely related to his life, experiences and ideals.

The inclusion of comprehensive biographical information and the bibliography was necessitated by the nature of research on Yiddish literature which often lacks even the most basic studies in biographies and general literary output of Yiddish authors. Hence it was first necessary to collect and verify the most important facts from Asch's life and to prepare an exhaustive list of his works.

The present book is also meant as a small effort to save the world which for a long time was part of Polish culture and now, at least in the case of society at large, is more than half-forgotten. Due to the Shoah, it was destroyed beyond repair in most European countries, and at the other side of the Atlantic it has gone through the process of assimilation. Apart from my natural conviction of a philologist that literature should be read in the original, this is another reason why I decided to base my analysis on Asch's works originally written in Yiddish and to quote from his works using the Hebrew alphabet whenever I cite a given book for the first time or refer to it in the bibliography. Apart from quoting from the original editions of the primary sources whenever it is possible, I quote from the original editions of the secondary sources (including non-Yiddish ones) and refer to them in the footnotes. To make the book easier to read I always include English translations of the original quotations, whereas the original Yiddish texts and their transcript in the Latin alphabet⁵ can be found in the footnotes. The inclusion of the original Hebrew transcript, now possible thanks to a rapid development and universal availability of advanced word processing programs, should be seen not only as a sign of general research validity but also as a moral

5 I consistently employ the international YIVO transcription based on Weinreich's dictionary, see Uriel Weinreich, *Modern English–Yiddish Yiddish–English Dictionary*, New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research 1968. The transcription of Yiddish words of Hebrew origin, including first names, is based on the pronunciation proposed in Yitskhok Niborski's dictionary, see Yitskhok Niborski, *Verterbukh fun loshn-koydesh-shtamike verter in yidish*, Pariz: Medem-biblyotek 1999

יצחק ניבארסקי, ווערטערבוך פון לשון קודש-שטאַמיקע ווערטער אין יידיש, פאַריז: מעדעם-ביבליאָטעק 1999

The only exception is the transcription of English, German, French, Italian and Polish first, second and geographical names, which is identical with the original version in these languages. Furthermore, as far as the writers' first and second names are concerned which appear in the body of the text, I quote them in their accepted English form, whereas in the footnotes and in the bibliography I provide the transcription invariably based on the YIVO principles (when the text is in the Hebrew alphabet) and on the version quoted on the frontispiece.

obligation of a serious student of literature which has been increasingly seen as written "in no one's language."⁶ After all, language is not just a series of sounds but also a visual sign, the fact which has always prompted the Jews to put down their languages in the Hebrew alphabet, as to them the Latin one has had manifest Christian connotations.⁷

During his lifetime Sholem Asch was an immensely popular writer—especially between the two world wars his novels and plays enjoyed universal acclaim among Jews and non-Jews alike, both in Europe and in the United States. In spite of this, research studies on his life and work are few and far between. What is more, they fall into three categories, characteristic of all Yiddish-related research, which are often cryptic, self-referential and self-contained. The first category includes studies and analyses written in Hebrew, which are given only a cursory treatment in the present work.

The next category are books and articles published in Yiddish, which have a limited readership, are mostly descriptive and often blur the border between the world constructed by a writer and the world he lives in. Typically their authors provide summaries, biographical details, personal memories or stories which are very loosely related to the real life of a writer.⁸ Sometimes such books and articles are quite valuable as they supply biographical data, facts on the literary reception of a given work or on the history of literary criticism in Yiddish. As an example we should mention the recollections of the 1930s written by Shloyme Rozenberg,⁹ Asch's secretary, who strives to show Asch in the best possible light though he writes more about himself than about his employer. An exception among literary scholars writing in Yiddish is definitely Shmuel Niger,

6 *Dans la langue de personne*—this symbolic title was given to the anthology of Yiddish poetry published by Rachel Ertel, a French translator and student of Yiddish literature, who in her own turn was inspired by the title of Paul Celan's *Die Niemandsrose*, see Rachel Ertel (ed.), *Dans la langue de personne*, Paris: Seuil 1993, p. 209; Martine Broda, *Dans la main de personne. Essai sur Paul Celan*, Paris: Le Cerf 1986.

7 For this reason the Latin alphabet was called גלקהס (*galkhes*) in Yiddish, which can be fully appreciated when we consider the etymology of the word: גלח (*galekh*) stands for a priest, especially a Catholic one, and the prefix ית- (-es) serves to produce new nouns (which have more or less plural meanings—in Hebrew this prefix is used in plural feminine nouns), so *galkhes* may be literally translated as "this which pertains to a priest."

8 For instance, in his book on Jewish writers, Efraim Kaganovski admits disarmingly that the stories presented in his book are either true or only very likely, considering the writers' characters, see Efraim Kaganovski, *Yidishe shrayber in der heym*, Paris: Afsnay 1956, p. 6.

אפרים קאגאנווסקי, "דיישע שרייבער אין דער היים, פאריז: אפיסניי 1956, ז. 6.

9 Shloyme Rozenberg (1896–1975) was a writer and translator from Polish into Yiddish, Asch's secretary in the years 1932–1938.

whose works are on a par with world critical literature. At the same time we should treat some critical works with a high dose of caution as their authors were often partial, moved by rancor or bigotry.¹⁰

The third category encompasses publications in other languages, mostly in English. They are relatively fewer than those in Yiddish. The only monograph ever written on Asch in English is that by Ben Siegel,¹¹ an American scholar, who presents Asch's detailed biography and brief accounts, predominantly summaries, of the writer's most important works and their critical reception. Separate chapters of various length have been published on Asch's life and work in a few histories of Yiddish literature and in lexicons. Also, an unpublished doctoral thesis has been written on Asch's works.¹² Finally, a collection of conference articles collected and edited by Nanette Stahl was published in 2004.¹³

So far no serious research work on Sholem Asch has been conducted in Poland. There were a few translations of his novels published in the interwar period, at least one of which was based on a German translation of the Yiddish original, as has been recently proved by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska. Just like in other countries, the recent upsurge of interest in Yiddish culture has produced a number of secondary translations of Asch's works from translations into other languages, predominantly into English. They are often accompanied by excellent forewords or afterwords, for instance, to *Mąż z Nazaretu* (The Man of Nazareth) written by Salomon Belis-Legis, to *Czarodziejka z Kastylii* (The Sorceress of Castile) by Eugenia Prokop-Janiec, to *Miasteczko* (A Townlet) by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska or Michał Friedman's foreword to *Kidusz haszem* (The Sanctification of the Name of God).¹⁴ Occasionally, one can come

10 See Av[rom] Kahan, *Sholem Ash's nayer veg*, Nyu-York: 1941; Khaim Liberman, *Sholem Ash un kristntum*, Nyu-York: Om Publishing Ko. 1950.

אב. קאהאן, שלום אש'ס נייער וועג, ניו-יאָרק: 1941; חיים ליבערמאַן, שלום אש און קריסטנטום, ניו-יאָרק: אום פאָבלישינג קאָמפאני.

11 See Ben Siegel, *The Controversial Sholem Asch. An Introduction to His Fiction*, Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press 1976.

12 See Cheryl Amy Alexander, *Major Themes in Selected American Novels by Sholem Asch*, East Texas State University: Dissertation 1984.

13 See Nanette Stahl (ed.), *Sholem Asch Reconsidered*, New Haven: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University 2004.

14 See Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Kazimierz czy Kutno? Zagadki powieści i przekładu*, in: Szalom Asz, *Miasteczko*, 2003, edited by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, Janowiec nad Wisłą: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Janowca nad Wisłą 2003, pp. 217–233, here pp. 227–231; Salomon Belis-Legis, *Wstęp*, in: Szalom Asz, *Mąż z Nazaretu*, translated by Michał Friedman, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie 1990, pp. 7–23; Eugenia Prokop-Janiec, *Wstęp*, in: Szalom Asz, *Czarodziejka z Kastylii i inne opowiadania*, translated by Michał Friedman, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie 1993, pp. 7–16;

across stand-alone articles published in newspapers, journals, encyclopedias and books.¹⁵

For a Polish scholar, Sholem Asch's works have a double significance. On the one hand they are written in Yiddish, that is in the language which for centuries coexisted with the Polish language in the same land and as such had a decisive impact on the Polish culture, language and literature. On the other hand they contain "the world which is no more," awaiting rediscovery and examination. At the same time we should emphasize that Asch's works are especially well suited to the examination of, among other things, the image of Jewish and Christian culture and their common features. This is due to the fact that in Yiddish literature Asch was undeniably a pioneer of Jewish-Christian dialogue and most of his works were not overshadowed by the Shoah, as they were written prior to the tragedy. What is more, even the novels written during and after the war continue the prewar threads.

Moreover, Asch's works exemplify parallel trends to those discussed by Eugenia Prokop-Janiec in her book on interwar Polish-Jewish literature.¹⁶ Among other things she writes about voices urging Jewish authors writing in Polish to bring Jewish life home to the Polish reader as they claimed it was the only way to make the two nations understand and accept each other.¹⁷ Asch seemed to share the same hope though he wrote in Yiddish, after a short bout of using Polish.¹⁸ By using Yiddish he was able to address directly the Yiddish-speaking Jews and he relied on translations to reach a wider audience, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Probably because of this he supported a publishing initiative launched by the Safrus publishing house: a series of translations from Yiddish titled *Biblioteka Pisarzy Żydowskich* (Library of Yiddish Writers).¹⁹

Asch was well known as an astute observer of people and nature—in 1933 he received the Order of Polonia Restituta, one of the highest Polish orders, for an excellent depiction of Polish landscapes in his novels. Thus it would be interesting to study the literary means he used to render more complex aspects of human existence, including intercultural problems. Besides, for a non-Jewish

Michał Friedman, [Introduction], in: Szalom Asz, *Kidusz ha-szem*, translated by Michał Friedman, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie 2003, pp. 7–9.

- 15 Sholem Asch's presence in Polish-language press, journals and books is presented and discussed in the chapter on the writer's links with Poland.
- 16 See Eugenia Prokop-Janiec, *Międzywojenna literatura polsko-żydowska*, Kraków: Universitas 1992.
- 17 See *ibid.*, pp. 78–91.
- 18 See Edmund Jankowski, *O polskim epizodzie Szolema Asza*, in: *Przegląd Humanistyczny*, 3, 1959, pp. 165–170.
- 19 See Eugenia Prokop-Janiec, *Międzywojenna literatura polsko-żydowska*, op. cit., p. 86.

reader an important feature of his works is a recurrent didactic impulse which makes it exceptionally easy to translate them into other languages as they do not require additional explanations of obscure notions or cultural references—as a rule everything is made explicit in the Yiddish original.

Asch was a prolific writer throughout his entire life. He wrote poems, plays and short stories, but predominantly novels, which were most often translated into foreign languages and which gained a widespread fame thanks to reviews and literary critiques. In the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's thesis that novel is the only literary genre which is still developing,²⁰ it seems that the analysis of Asch's novels may yield many interesting details related to their historical message and to the author's narrative techniques, the more so as it is novels that are sometimes compared to historiographical writings in respect of the abundance and variety of historical material they weave into their narrative fabric.²¹

In the present book I discuss all the novels published by Asch, including twenty novels published before World War II and six novels published during the war and afterwards.²² What I consider most important in the analysis of the novels or parts of them is the author's rendition of reality he knew first-hand and which revolved around Central and Eastern Europe. Many of his novels take place there and many of his characters are emigrants from Central and Eastern Europe—either those looking for a better future in America or those hoping to rebuild a Jewish world in the land of Palestine. It is also well-nigh impossible to present and understand many protagonists of his novels who live in Western Europe without any references to their East European roots.

Understandably, the events of World War II and the geographical and cultural background of Asch's readers and critics made an impact on the reception of Asch's works, including those published after 1939 as well as the older ones, which were published or translated again. I examine the reception of his works

20 See Michail Bachtin, *Problemy literatury i estetyki* (or: Mihail Mihajlovič Bahtin, *Voprosy literatury i èstetiki*, Moskva: Hudožestvennaâ lit. 1975), translated by Wincenty Grajewski, Warszawa: Czytelnik 1982, p. 538.

21 See Michael Holquist, *Introduction*, in: Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (selection from: Mihail Mihajlovič Bahtin, *Voprosy literatury i èstetiki*, op. cit.), translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press 1981, pp. XV–XXXIV, here p. XXVIII.

22 As a matter of fact, some of these novels are rather “long short stories” (e.g. *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilyen*), but I follow Asch's own classification contained in the introduction to the third Warsaw edition of his collected works, see Sholem Ash, *A por venter fun Sholem Ash*, in: Sholem Ash, *Gezamlte shriftn*, Varshe: Kultur-lige 1925, Vol. I, pp. I–IV, here p. IV.

שׁוֹלֵם אַשׁ, אַ פּאָר ווערטער פֿון שׁוֹלֵם אַשׁ, אין: שׁוֹלֵם אַשׁ, געזאַמלטע שרײַפטן, וואַרשע: קולטור־ליגע, 1925, I, IV, דאָ I, I–IV.

using available responses to his novels published in newspapers, journals and literary studies in English, German, Polish, and Yiddish.

No matter what the idiosyncrasies of an author’s writings are, while studying literature in Yiddish one should never forget the tragic legacy of the Shoah. In the interwar period, Yiddish literature shared many features with European literatures of that time, whereas after World War II it acquired the role of a repository of national memory and its major objective was to preserve what remained of the destroyed world of the European Jewry. This is most evident in autobiographical works and in a large number of remembrance publications, most notably in *yizkor* (memorial) books.²³

Surprisingly enough, this legacy is not evident in Asch’s purely literary works, possibly because by the time of the Shoah he was a seasoned writer who long before chose a path which he always believed was a right one. Besides, from the very beginning he infused his novels with memories of the world inhabited by the Jews, which made his writings almost naturally reflect the post-war trends in Yiddish literature.

23 See Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, Adam Kopciowski, Andrzej Trzciński (selection, edition and introduction), *Tam był kiedyś mój dom ... Księgi pamięci gmin żydowskich*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS 2009. 650 memorial books are available online in their entirety at the New York Public Library website, <http://yizkor.nysl.org/> (28 January 2012).