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## A Hebrew Writer in the Soviet Union The "Case" of Zvi Preigerzon

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Quite a few Hebrew authors (Yehudah Yaari, Yosef Aricha, and Eliezer Steinman, to name only three) welcomed the October Revolution enthusiastically. Most of them, however, quickly became disillusioned and, realizing they would not be able to sustain Hebrew culture and literature in the Soviet Union, emigrated to Eretz Israel (pre-independence Israel or Palestine). In 1921, such a group of Hebrew authors, headed by Chaim Nachman Bialik, left for Eretz Israel. This exodus marked, one might say, the end of the Golden Era of Hebrew literature on Russian soil—a period nearly one century long.<sup>1</sup>

Only very few authors remained loyal to the October Revolution. In retrospect, Yehoshua A. Gilboa called them "whispering embers"<sup>2</sup> or "Hebrew Octobrists,"<sup>3</sup> sobriquets that attested to their difficult situation and divided loyalties. These authors included: Haim Lenski, Elisha Rodin, Moshe Chyog, Avraham Kariv, Yocheved Bat-Miriam, Gershon Chanowitz, and Zvi Preigerzon. Several of these authors (Kariv, Bat-Miriam, Chanowitz, and others) managed to emigrate to Eretz Israel after the Communist regime consolidated itself. Those who remained in the Soviet Union were imprisoned and exiled. Waking up from their dream too late, they died during or after their period of exile, broken in body and soul.

This article focuses on Zvi Preigerzon, one of the few Hebrew-language authors who remained in the Soviet Union. His life and works are emblematic of the fate of Hebrew authors under Soviet rule.

The salient theme of Preigerzon's life and works was *dualism*: on the one hand, allegiance to Hebrew language and literature and, during certain periods, even dreams of emigrating to Eretz Israel; on the other hand, love of Mother Russia and loyalty to the Soviet regime. Such a duality inevitably led Preigerzon, and the other authors mentioned here, to a tragic schism. It is on this schism that this article focuses.

Preigerzon was born in 1900 in the town of Shepetovka, Volhynia. His father, Israel, was a Zionist *maskil*; his mother came from a rabbinical family in Volhynia. He began his education in the traditional *heder*, and in 1913 his parents sent him to the Herzliya Gymnasium in Tel Aviv. But he was not destined to spend more than a year in the country. In the summer of 1914, on returning for a family visit, he was

1. Nurit Guvrin, "Mahapekhat oktober bi-re'i ha-sifrut ha-'ivrit" [The October Revolution in the mirror of Hebrew literature], *Maftēhot* (Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1978), pp. 78–119.
2. Yehoshua A. Gilboa, *Gēhalim lohāshot* (Whispering embers) (Tel Aviv, 1954).
3. Yehoshua A. Gilboa, *Oktobraim 'ivri'im* (Hebrew Octobrists) (Tel Aviv University, 1974).

trapped in Russia by the outbreak of World War I. He enrolled in a high school in Odessa, studied violin, and continued his studies in Hebrew in the evening at an Odessa yeshiva. It was at this time that Preigerzon ceased being religious and became a Zionist. When the Bolshevik Revolution broke out, Preigerzon was one of its supporters. In 1919 he came to Moscow to study at the Academy of Mining Engineering, specializing in the upgrading of coal. In the mid-1920s he joined the group of Hebrew authors who published the journal *Bereshit* [Genesis] (1926), headed by M. Chyog (Zvi Plotkin), although Preigerzon himself did not contribute to the magazine.

In 1927 he began submitting short stories and poems to Hebrew journals abroad (*Ha-olam*, *Ha-doar*, *Ha-tekufa*, *Ketuvim*, *Heydim*, *Davar Supplement*, and *Gilyonot*.) In 1934, when the Red Terror intensified in the Soviet Union, he ceased this activity.

His Jewish life shrank or even ceased; he concentrated exclusively on publishing Russian-language scholarly publications in his field of specialization.

Preigerzon resumed his Hebrew writing in 1945 in response to the Jewish tragedy of the Second World War. Subsequently he wrote the novel *Bi-d'okh ha-menorah* (When the light waned), which describes the fate of Soviet Jewry during the Holocaust. At that time Preigerzon belonged to a circle of Hebrew writers including Moshe Chyog and Yitshak Cohen. This small group was infiltrated by an undercover agent of the secret police, who managed to persuade Preigerzon and his colleagues to send some of their writings to Israel.

Thus, in 1949, Preigerzon was arrested. Accused of anti-Soviet activity, he was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment and spent time in various camps. In 1952, he was transferred to a camp in Vorkuta, northern Russia. Here the conditions of his imprisonment improved, and he was allowed to practice his occupation, quality enhancement of coal.

Released and rehabilitated in late 1955—by which time he suffered from heart disease—Preigerzon resumed his scientific work. From then until his death in 1969 he continued writing in Hebrew without interruption. In June, 1970, his family transported his ashes to Israel for burial as he had requested in his will. He was buried in Kibbutz Shefayim.

After his death, he was eulogized in Russia only as a scientist; no mention was made of his Jewish persona. His Hebrew stories, however, are an ineradicable testimony to the tragedy of a Jew who was forced to live a dual existence.<sup>4</sup>

His book *Bi-d'okh ha-menorah* was published in Israel in 1966 by Am Oved, under the title *Esh ha-tamid* (The eternal light). The book appeared under the pseudonym A. Tzefoni ("A Northerner"). In 1976, Preigerzon's memoirs were published posthumously, again by Am Oved.

4. For further biographical details, see Yehoshua A. Gilboa, "Sodo shel ha-mehandes ha-rusi" (The secret of the Russian engineer) [*Et-Mol* 2(1) (Sept., 1976), reprinted as part of Zvi Preigerzon, *Ha-sippur she-lo nigmar* (The unfinished story), edited with a foreword by Hagit Halperin, (Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1991), pp. 9–12; Yehuda Slutzky, "Ha-ner she-lo da'akh," in: *Yoman ha-zikhronot (1949–1955)* (Am Oved, 1976).

In 1985, 21 of his short stories (some from his literary estate, preserved at the Katz Institute at Tel Aviv University) were collected in an anthology entitled *Hevlei shem* (The pangs of Shem), published by Am Oved.

In 1991, another book originating in this literary estate was published: *Ha-sippur she-lo nigmar* (The unfinished story), containing Preigerzon's unfinished novel, *Rofe'im* [Physicians], a selection of poems, and excerpts from his diary. This volume was co-published by Hakibbutz Hameuhad and Tel Aviv University.

Preigerzon, like some of his colleagues, was "addicted" to Hebrew. It was his secret passion, the mainstay of his life. For him, Hebrew was his spiritual home, an elixir of life, a craving, almost a *dybbuk* (an incubus). Only thus can Preigerzon's Hebrew works be understood. A renowned scientist, devoted to his profession and family, a circumspect person by nature, enamored of his native Russia and its countryside, and happy to belong there, Preigerzon nevertheless continued to write in Hebrew and send his stories to Eretz Israel, even though this endangered himself, his wife, and his children. The allegiance that Preigerzon and his fellow Soviet Hebrew authors felt toward their language was almost certainly the product of their education. These authors still belonged to a generation that had received a traditional upbringing in *heder* and sometimes in *yeshiva* as well, and they absorbed the language from early childhood. They rebelled against religion, tradition, and the ancient culture, and sometimes even the Zionist dream—but not against the language. The language remained their main tie to their nation, and they were exceedingly proud of it.

Preigerzon had an additional connection with Hebrew: he had spent a year at the Herzliya Gymnasium. This year influenced his feeling for Eretz Israel and its language. It taught him the Sephardi pronunciation and gave him a fluent and idiomatic grasp of the language, which he never forgot.

With years of hindsight, Preigerzon described the year he spent in Eretz Israel in nostalgic and idealized terms as the golden era of his early adolescence: "It was great, wonderful, to be in the land of our fathers' desire," Preigerzon wrote in his unfinished autobiographical novel *Rofe'im*.<sup>5</sup>

The hero of the novel, like the author, travels to Eretz Israel for study at the Herzliya Gymnasium. He treats this journey as a totally natural thing; he is going because his parents sent him. But the adult author endows his hero's journey with special significance. The young voyager is an envoy, so to speak, of his people:

This was the resurrection of Hebrew life after a vast interval of several millennia. Shoel did not know it, but he was an envoy of the people, a small emissary of a scattered nation at the foot of the gallows.<sup>6</sup>

Preigerzon never explained why he, a Zionist who loved and acquired consider-

5. Preigerzon, *Ha-sippur she-lo nigmar*, p. 41.

6. *Ibid.*

able expertise in Hebrew language and literature, never “made *aliya*” (emigrated to Israel). He never discussed this with his son and daughters, never wrote about it in his diaries, and never mentioned it in writings that were published during his lifetime. However, the novel *Rofe'im* provides an answer of sorts in the narrator's response to the hero's decision to remain in Russia. The narrator gives several reasons: Shoel's young wife did not wish to emigrate to Eretz Israel; it was hard for him to leave his ailing mother-in-law; he had been influenced by Soviet propaganda. He had heard of the harsh conditions of life in Eretz Israel, and he was intoxicated by the possibility of pursuing higher studies in the USSR. Beyond these prosaic reasons, Preigerzon, like many of his Jewish Communist friends, perceived the Russian Revolution as the beginning of Redemption. The war had been an apocalyptic one of “Gog and Magog,” and now the “long-awaited redemption” (he wrote) was nigh, “the Messiah's arrival was imminent.”<sup>7</sup>

Thus we are shown several factors that would explain why Preigerzon remained in the Soviet Union. From this point on, Preigerzon was dogged by a covert sense of guilt for having failed to realize his youthful ambition: *aliya*. His life, before imprisonment, was split: outwardly he was a scientist, an expert in the upgrading of coal, a staunch patriot who was happy to belong to Russia. Inwardly, however, his allegiance was to his Hebrew writing, which he continued in secret.

A perusal of his works reveals this duality. Many of Preigerzon's heroes are torn between their Jewishness and the gentile mask that they willingly or unwillingly wear. The dominant figure in his works is the protagonist who begins as a Jew but, for various reasons (such as the wish to integrate into Russian society or to flee Nazi persecution) dresses, acts, and speaks like a gentile in every way, and even assumes a gentile name.

All the stories have a pivotal event which causes the hero to reveal his true identity and express his hidden nature.

Preigerzon's first short story, “Bein Purim le-Pesah” (1927)<sup>8</sup> portrays the tragic inner schism and divided existence of the Jew. The plot is based on an April Fool's joke. The story begins with the return of the hero, a government official, to his bourgeois home. As the hero envisions his return to the happy family hearth, his wife plans an April Fool's joke, pretending to have left him. The joke reveals the schizophrenic nature of the hero's world, a world that is held together only by the flimsiest of threads.

The hero, son of a gentile father and Jewish mother, forsakes his Jewish heritage and considers himself a gentile in every respect. However, he cannot cross the religious divide completely. He still carries memories of his youth, i.e., how street urchins used to taunt him by calling him *zhid* (kike). He is torn between his love for

7. Ibid., pp. 173–174. See also Yehiel Halperin, *Ha-mahapekhab ha-yehudit* (The Jewish revolution), Vol. 2 (Am Oved, 1961). Halperin states that some Jews' faith in the Revolution was a secular metamorphosis of the Messianic vision.

8. “Bein Purim le-Pesah” (Between Purim and Passover), *Ha-doar* 6(30) (June 24, 1927), in Zvi Preigerzon, *Hevlei shem* (The pangs of Shem), pp. 19–26.

his beautiful Jewish mother and respect for her memory, and his hatred of the Jewish people. In the grips of his rancor, he strangles to death a Jew who asks him for help. The story ends well, or so it seems. The joke over, the hero returns to his doting wife. The veil, however, has been lifted and the mask torn off. His domestic happiness is shown up for the thin, fragile veneer that it is, and the tragedy of the half-Jew, half-gentile is exposed.

The short story "Hevlei Shem"<sup>9</sup> also highlights the tragic inner schism of the Soviet Jew. The central event in the story is the naming of the first-born son of the hero, Solomon, an erstwhile cheerful bachelor who has finally married. Solomon is in a quandary. By giving his boy a gentile name, he will spare him hardship and facilitate his acceptance in Russian society. But he also wishes to perpetuate the memory of his father, killed by the Germans in the war. After considerable vacillation, Solomon solves the problem, in a manner of speaking, by giving the infant several names, actually all four of his grandfather's names: Hayyim-Naphtali-Zvi-Hirsch. In the child's birth certificate, however, he is registered by his Russian name only: Grigorii. Even though the child has four Hebrew names and only one Russian one, the very proliferation of the Hebrew names clearly deflate their value. It is obvious that the child will use his official Russian name that appears in his birth certificate: Grigorii.

In some of Preigerzon's stories, the inner schism works the other way: the story begins with a hero who acts like a gentile in every respect; only as the plot unfolds does the Jewish element—which is also the positive, humane side—emerge.

An example is the short story "Ma'aseh be-qaytanah" (Story of a summer house).<sup>10</sup> The story describes an assimilated, provincial, petty bourgeois Jewish family whose only aim in life is to build a *dacha* (summer house). But tragedy strikes the family: the Nazis invade Russia and the family's two sons are killed. At the end of the story, the reader again encounters the parents, now bereft and prematurely aged. They still continue to build their summer house, but now they want to use it as a shelter for their indigent Jewish relatives, whom they had ignored throughout their lives.

These examples are but a few of many. Almost all of Preigerzon's works reflect his sense of duality and his ambivalent attitude toward being Jewish. His ambivalence toward Eretz Israel and Zionism is even more evident in his poems. Although Preigerzon is known chiefly for his prose, he began his literary career as a poet. In the years 1922–1928 he wrote more than 50 poems, six of which were published in his lifetime and the rest preserved in the author's literary estate.<sup>11</sup> Most of these poems, evoking the spirit of the times, describe, as do his stories, a traditional Jew-

9. "Hevlei shem," written in 1945. It was first printed in the late 1960s in mimeograph form in a very small number of copies, anonymously, and reprinted in *Hevlei shem*, pp. 80–85.

10. "Ma'aseh be-qaytanah" was apparently written in the 1950s and revised in 1969. It was first published from a manuscript in the archives, in *Hevlei shem*, pp. 126–144.

11. Selected poems of Preigerzon are published in *Ha-sippur she-lo nigmar*, pp. 177–192.

ish life that is dying out. Unlike his short stories, however, his poems paint a bright, dynamic, and optimistic picture of the new post-revolutionary world which holds new hopes. The Jewish *shtetl*, as a symbol of an obsolete, stagnant life, is doomed to destruction, and rightly so, the poem suggests. In the poem "Ayarati" (My village),<sup>12</sup> for example, the *shtetl* is described as having dilapidated houses, 12 empty shops, and a solitary *batlan* (habitué of the synagogue). On Thursdays, they still occasionally fry *latkes*. Such a wretched life is doomed to extinction, as the poet declares:

Farewell, farewell, let us make a clean break, onward, onward!  
Bury yourself under your dust when your day comes, desiccated mother.  
We are leaving in droves, bundles on our shoulders.  
Days filled with happiness are nigh, announcing joyful toil.

The poem that best expresses the Russian-Soviet pole, if we may call it that, of Preigerzon's work, is "Iggetet le-imma" (Letter to mother).<sup>13</sup> This poem underwent several interesting transformations: it was written in 1923, when it was entitled "Im Erev" (At evening). In this version, it describes the discrepancy between the pioneers' dream of an idyllic Eretz Israel ("blue skies, vineyards, and songs"), and the shattering of this dream when confronted with the difficulties of life in Eretz Israel ("silent heavens" and a "desolate and alien" earth). The caustic tone of the poem is somewhat mitigated by the poet's description of his ordeals in Mother Russia, where he felt as alien as did the *halutsim* in Eretz Israel. The poem ends on a despairing and pessimistic note: a request that God uproot the Jews from the world so the world would be free of them.

The poem was rewritten three years later in 1926, after Preigerzon decided against *aliya*. The later version describes only the misery of the disillusioned pioneers; the narrator's own wretchedness and alienation are absent:

You dreamt a legend of blue;  
You dreamt of a homeland, laughing skies,  
Melodies in vineyards, shadows of kindness,  
And a corner, a sanctuary, bathed in flowers and sun....  
The spark is ignited, becomes a roaring flame;  
The fire in your hearts guides you to the land of your dreams,  
And behold, its skies are ominously silent.  
The land has become desolate, alien,  
And you scream, abandoned in the sanctuary,  
For the legend has become profane.

The later version omits the poet's ordeals in his native Russia. (One might note that by 1926, life had improved in the Soviet Union with the New Economic Plan.)

12. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 184-185.

Now it is only the pioneers who meet a bitter end, who are banished from the world. The complexity and ambivalence have disappeared, and what is left is the "sour grapes" syndrome: having renounced *aliya*, he attempts to give poetic justification to this decision. However, his last poetic output, apparently written in 1934, evinces a disillusionment with the new world. Here, we again encounter a description of the tragedy of the homeless Jew, who is sentenced to the gallows even in the new world on which he had pinned high hopes.

The other pole, the proud Jew who yearns for Zion, surfaces in ballads written by Preigerzon during his imprisonment in the *gulag*. During this difficult period, in an attempt to boost his own morale and that of his fellow inmates, he explicitly describes his yearning for Eretz Israel and views his imprisonment and that of his associates as a consequence of their allegiance to Zion. In these poems, he vows passionately that, once released, he will emigrate to Eretz Israel.

The ballad "Ten Years of Wandering"<sup>14</sup> ends with the following stanza:

Hearken, O brethren, to the vow  
Of one ill-fated man of sorrow:  
If they will only let me out  
I will again pledge my life to you, O Zion.

As we however know, Preigerzon never succeeded in realizing this aspiration.

One of the questions that concerns students of Preigerzon is how did this optimist, who loved life and people, react to the period of his imprisonment? Did it modify his opinions, outlook, or personality?

The answer is not simple, but Preigerzon's diaries shed light on his views after his release from prison.

Preigerzon's diaries are unique historical and literary testimonials. Preigerzon wrote his first diary between late April, 1957, and February 1958, describing his difficult ordeals during his trial and time in the *gulag* (1949-1955). This retrospective diary, in which hardly a day passed without an entry, was set forth in notebooks in clear and compact handwriting, and was published in Israel about seven years after Preigerzon's death.<sup>15</sup>

In 1958, about half a year after he completed his memoirs of the *gulag*, Preigerzon wrote a second diary, this time of a different type. In this diary he documents his present life, only occasionally returning to the recent past of his imprisonment and exile, or to the remote past of his childhood and youth.<sup>16</sup> This diary covers a period of ten years (up to 1969, about one week before his death).

One may infer from this diary that Preigerzon's views had not changed substan-

14. Printed in *Hagut 'ivrit bi-vrit ha-mo'atsot* (Jewish thought in the Soviet Union), ed. Menahem Zahari, Michael Zand, and Aryeh Tartakower (1976).

15. See n. 4.

16. The original handwritten diary is kept in the Preigerzon archives at the Katz Institute, Tel Aviv University. Excerpts were published in *Ha-sippur she-lo nigmar*, pp. 203-214.



tially. The man was still plagued by duality. He explicitly affirms his abiding faith in Communism and admits that he is torn between being a Communist/patriot and a Jew who loves his people and language:

Even though the Communist authorities in our country imprisoned me, even though the interrogators subjected me to a humiliating and cruel interrogation, to torture and brutality, despite the lengthy years in the *gulag*, despite everything, I continue to believe in the triumph of Communism, on which I have based, when all is said and done, all the years of my life, for which I fought with all my heart and integrity. Nevertheless, I am also a Jew—a Jew I was born and a Jew I shall die [he writes in 1958].

On the other hand, his stories and diaries continue to bewail the gradual disappearance of Jewish life in the Soviet Union. He confesses that his family no longer celebrates the Jewish festivals, and writes with an undertone of nostalgia:

It is the first day of Rosh Hashanah. In the synagogues, the pleasing tremolos of the cantors can be heard, the sound of the ram's horn bursts forth. Today the world was created. Do you remember the dark, balmy nights—still balmy, a sliver of warmth rescued from last year's summer—the nights of the festival?

Though a proud celebrant of May Day, he is intimately connected with Jewish life. This can be seen in several ways:

(1) After he left the *gulag*, he devoted much time and energy to his Hebrew literary work. He wrote the novel *Bi-d'okh ha-menorah*, revised his earlier stories, and began writing his novel *Rofe'im*, which he was destined not to finish.

(2) He collected material on the Holocaust period in the Soviet Union, a topic that concerned him almost to the point of obsession. His Holocaust research was also needed as background for *Bi-d'okh ha-menorah*. He travelled to the Ukraine, to discover that only scant remnants of the Jewish community had survived. There were but 40 Jewish families in the town to which he travelled, and they were estranged from Judaism, whiling away their lives with card games.

(3) He participated in Jewish events insofar as he could. For example, he attended concerts by Nehama Lifshits<sup>17</sup> and an evening dedicated to the memory of Sholem Aleichem.

(4) However, as Preigerzon's diary shows, his strongest allegiance was to the Hebrew language. Preigerzon devoted much energy to following the development of the language and studying its modern, spoken form. The only Israeli newspaper that he could obtain was, naturally, the Communist *Qol ha-'am*; even this, however, was not easily available. He concerned himself not with the paper's political content but with its language and its literary column. He sometimes found his vocabulary

17. Nehama Lifshits (Lifshitsaite), born 1927, Kaunas, popular Soviet concert singer, who began her career in 1956 singing Yiddish songs. She emigrated to Israel in 1969. See Yaacov Ro'i, "Nehama Lifshitz: Symbol of the Jewish National Awakening," in *Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union*, ed. Yaacov Ro'i and Avi Beker (New York and London, 1991), pp. 168–188.

deficient on even the most basic level, and this upset him greatly:

Much of Hebrew's vocabulary is still evolving. But I wish I knew the standard vocabulary that any Israeli ten-year-old is familiar with! (1963)

He wrote in his diary a list of expressions apparently culled from Hebrew books he had read, most of them colloquial and slang expressions such as "I could eat a horse," "Don't be a cad," "Get off my back," and so on.

He regretted the dwindling number of Hebrew speakers in the Soviet Union. His generation was disappearing rapidly, and the new generation spoke only Russian. "Once my generation disappears, Hebrew will no longer be heard in our country. It is so sad," he wrote in his diary in 1960.

Preigerzon did not deny the reality of Soviet antisemitism; he also protested the official attitude toward Jewish culture:

"Why is a Russian allowed and enjoined to love his people and culture," he asks, "whereas a Jew is not allowed to love his people and culture? If I want to tell someone that I love the Jewish people, the Hebrew language, Jewish music, Jewish folk-songs, and the ancient civilization of the Jews—I have to whisper, look around fearfully. Why hasn't one textbook on the Hebrew or Yiddish language been published for decades? Why have Jewish schools been closed, newspapers shut down? Why are there no Jewish theaters, etc.?" [he wrote in 1958].

The reader of Preigerzon's diary and his later literary works comes away with the impression that the author continues to assert his former values not so much because he still believes in them but because he feels that if he were to admit his fatal error—that of staying in the Soviet Union—toward the end of his life, when he is ailing and weak and can no longer change course, his very *raison d'être* would be challenged. After a lifetime of maneuvering between the two poles, it was too late now to embrace one of them, Israel.

He occasionally expresses in his diary the feeling that his life is about to end, but he knows that somewhere in that faraway land, Israel, he has distant brethren who will read and take an interest in his Hebrew writings, for which there is no demand in his native Russia. Somewhere else there are proud Jews who continue to uphold the Jewish tradition, who celebrate the Jewish festivals joyously. In his diary, he writes about the Purim of 1960:

I am happy that somewhere on our earth there are people and children who wholeheartedly celebrate the downfall of all the Hamans and Hitlers in the world. They are holding Purim fests and getting drunk as the tradition prescribes. As for me, if I perish, I perish.<sup>18</sup>

In Preigerzon's mind, anguish about his own imminent death merges with anguish about the death of his people in the Holocaust and in the Stalin era. It is in

18. The last sentence echoes Queen Esther's statement in the Book of Esther, which Jews read on Purim.

this spirit that he composed the inscription for his own tombstone, containing the words *Bi-d'okh ha-menorah*—an allusion to his novel of the same name, to his own death, and to the waning of the Jewish people:

Here lies / a Hebrew author / Zvi son of Israel Preigerzon / when the light  
waned / He returned to the soil.