

Zvi Hirsh Preigerzon

Hagit Halperin

Zvi Preigerzon was born in Shepetovka, in the Volhynia region; his father was a Zionist maskil, and his mother a member of the well-known Halperin family that traced its roots to Rabbi Dov Ber Karasik. Preigerzon spent his early years in heder, and at the age of 13 was sent by his parents to study at the Herzliya gymnasium in Tel Aviv. World War I erupted while he was spending a summer in Europe, and in its wake all routes to Palestine were blocked. Faced with no other option, Preigerzon completed his secondary education at a Russian gymnasium in Odessa, where he concurrently took violin lessons at the local conservatory and spent his evenings studying at a yeshiva. He gradually became disenchanted with religion and poured his energies into Zionism, which soon had to compete with his devotion to communism. Thus in 1917, following the outbreak of the Russian Revolution, Preigerzon found himself torn between these loyalties. Two years later he traveled to Moscow where he was admitted to the Academy for Mining Engineering.

In 1927 Preigerzon began to publish poetry in prominent journals, including *Ha-'Olam*, *Ha-Do'ar*, *Ha-Tekufah*, *Hedim*, *Davar*, and *Gilyonot*. However, Soviet persecutions in 1934 forced him to reduce the volume of his writings significantly, as Hebrew literary activity was forbidden. Composing clandestinely, he led a double life: to the general public he was known as Gregorii Izrailevich, a successful scientist and author of books on mineral restoration, while in private he remained Zvi Preigerzon, the Hebrew writer. His Hebrew compositions returned to their full force after World War II, with the writing of his short stories and a novel titled *Be-Da'okh ha-menorah* (By the Fading Lamp). Yet the strictures against Hebrew were not reduced at all, and his literary activity was to remain clandestine. He also assumed a key role in the only Hebrew writers' group that still survived in the Soviet Union.

In 1949 Preigerzon was arrested and sentenced to prison for 10 years, but he was released in 1955 and returned to work as a senior lecturer at the Moscow Mineral Institute. He still devoted a portion of time to Hebrew writing, and in 1968 reworked the literary compositions that he had first written in the 1940s. He died in 1969, after failing to gain permission to emigrate to Israel. His literary estate was subsequently entrusted to the Katz Institute for the Research of Hebrew Literature at Tel Aviv University.

Zvi Preigerzon was the last writer in the Soviet Union to continue publishing in the Hebrew language. His compositions are an authentic literary and historical testament to the dying Hebrew culture in Russia during the Soviet period. Preigerzon poignantly illustrates the tragedy of Jews who believed in communism and who wrongly imagined that under its regime they would be able to preserve a unique Jewish identity. Despite the circumstances, his works resonate with unrepressed optimism and a love of humanity.

Preigerzon's novel *Be-Da'okh ha-menorah*, which chronicles the life of a Jewish family in Ukraine during World War II, was smuggled from the Soviet Union and secretly sent to Israel. It was published under the pseudonym A. Tsefoni as *Esh ha-tamid* (The Eternal Flame; 1966). In 1976, his work of nonfiction, *Yoman ha-Zikhronot (1949–1955)* (Memoirs, 1949–1955), which documents his seven-year experience in Soviet labor camps, appeared. The book records, among other things, his encounters in detention camps with prominent Jewish writers including Yankev Shternberg, Shmuel Halkin, and Yitshak Kahanov (Isaac Cohen). In 1985, his stories were combined in a single

volume, *Hevle Shem* (The Sufferings of Shem; edited by Hagit Halperin). A selection of his poetry and his unfinished novel, *Rof'im* (Doctors) were published in the volume *Ha-Sipur she-lo Nigmar* (The Unfinished Story; 1991), also edited by Halperin.

Suggested Reading

Yehoshua A. Gilboa, "Hakdamah," in Zvi Praigerzon (Preigerson), *Hevle shem: Sipurim*, ed. Hagit Halperin, pp. 9–18 (Tel Aviv, 1985);

Hagit Halperin, "A Hebrew Writer in the Soviet Union: The 'Case' of Zvi Preigerzon," *Jews in Eastern Europe (Jerusalem)* 20 (1993): 5–14; (Jerusalem, 1989–1992);

Yehudah Slutzky, "Ha-ner she lo da'akh," in *Yoman ha-zikhronot*, by Tzvi Preigerson, pp. 5–24 (Tel Aviv, 1976).