For our murdered millions who didn't
or couldn't heed the warning.

Contents

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1 Vienna (Austria)
2 Prague (Czechoslovakia), now in Czech Republic
3 Munkács (Czechoslovakia), now Mukachevo in western Ukraine
4 Prešov (Czechoslovakia), now in Slovak Republic
5 Budapest (Hungary)
6 Trieste (Italy), part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before the First World War
7 Brindisi (Italy)
8 Cluj Napoca (Romania), Klausenberg, Hungarian Transylvania before the First World War
9 Bucharest (Romania)
10 Sighetu Marmației (Northern Romania); Sighet (part of Hungary) before the First World War
11 Bratislava/Pressburg (Czechoslovakia); Pressburg, Austro-Hungary before the First World War, now Bratislava (Slovak Republic)

Introduction

Dan Hecht[1]

On Thursday 8 October 1931, an announcement informed readers of the Hebrew daily *Doar Hayom* that the next day's issue would contain the first in a series of articles by the author and poet Avigdor Hameiri. They would, in the words of the newspaper, provide readers with "a true and honest reflection of postwar Europe. Not stories, table scraps, images of horror, but the brushstrokes of an artist, who, with G-d's help, does wonders. All the articles have one central theme—the relationship between an author/poet from the Land of Israel and the Diaspora. A pleasant tune is played hereby from a member of the homeland visiting the Diaspora."

The collection of articles more than fulfilled their pledge, above and beyond what was expected. The credible, disturbing articles provided an honest reflection of Europe's life and mindset between the wars. They not only allowed the reader to gain insight into the relationship "between the homeland and the Diaspora," but also to observe the return of a prodigal son to his country of birth, his original homeland.

Caught between two homelands, Avigdor Hameiri is unique in Hebrew literature—the spiritual Hebrew Zionist, a connection which gradually weakened during the course of the 1920s, and the Hungarian, which informed his *Weltanschauung* from a young age.

He was born Avigdor Feuerstein in a small village in the eastern part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and grew up in his grandfather's home. His grandfather planted in him the seeds of love for the Hebrew language. He was educated in Hungarian *yeshivot*, became captivated by the magic of Zionism, and after moving to Hungary's largest city Budapest, found himself caught between the two poles of Hungarian Jewry—strict

Orthodoxy in the region of his birth and assimilatory Neolog Judaism, both of which rejected Zionism.

By 1912, he had already made a name for himself with the publication of his first book of poetry *Mishirei Avigdor Feuerstein* in Budapest. The passion in this young man's poetry drew much attention, with critiques ranging from positive to negative. Two years later, he volunteered to serve in the First World War and fought in the Austro-Hungarian Army on the Eastern Front, first as a noncommissioned, then as a commissioned, officer. In 1916, during the Brusilov Offensive, he was taken prisoner by the Russians. Upon his release, Hameiri joined the circle of Hebrew writers in Odessa. With Bialik's help, he was finally able to emigrate to his spiritual homeland, the Land of Israel, in August 1921.[2]

The 1920s in the Land of Israel were very productive years for Avigdor Hameiri, albeit difficult and stressful. During this time, he reached the pinnacle of his creative ability and importance in the area of prose writing. His first war novel *Hashigaon Hagadol* (The Great Madness) was an artistic and financial success. However, his expectations of realizing the dreams of his youth were not in keeping with the daily realities of life in Israel. Hameiri did not become integrated with the local literary establishment. His position as head of the literary section of *Doar Hayom*, as well as his journalism itself, made him many enemies in workers' newspapers, which denounced him and made him a political outcast. His fiery temperament was also an obstacle and in his periodicals *Lev Hadash* and *Hamahar* and his satirical theater *Hakumkum*, he returned fire at his critics. By doing so, he increasingly excluded himself and acquired more and more rivals. He published many poems expressing disillusionment and disappointment, and even began to express a desire to leave the Land of Israel and return to Europe. This was Hameiri's state of mind when he embarked on a lecture tour of Europe at the behest of *Keren Hayesod* in 1930.[3]

From a practical point of view, *Masa Be'eropa Haperait* (Voyage into Savage Europe) is a travelogue consisting of newspaper reports and is, therefore, in effect, reportage. Nevertheless, when the articles are woven together as a consolidated, coherent, chronological whole, they acquire a literary value much greater than that of mere travel reports and present Hameiri's journey to his deepest being. At its center stands his multilayered personality—an author and poet filled with disappointment, bitter,

and fiery. He is not an objective journalist who is studying Europe; rather, he is a man filled with negative feelings about the Land of Israel, who makes a renewed visit to the country of his birth and experiences a kind of purification and reaffirmation of his Zionist ideals. On the other hand, the book describes patriotism, mixed sometimes with extreme nationalism on Hameiri's part, sentiments which were widespread in large portions of Hungarian society, coinciding with Hameiri's own strengthening Zionism. His trip is a kind of journey into the "heart of darkness," in which wild animals dress like urban bohemians who frequent cafés and are cordial and well mannered. Hameiri uses terms like "Bushmen," "Hottentots," and "jungle" to describe the violence crawling under the apparent order of European cleanliness and politeness. Having graduated from the killing fields of the First World War Eastern Front, Hameiri regards himself as a universal-pacifist author and poet. He recognizes the small drops of repressed violence, those harbingers of the awful flood to come, but—of course—he does not imagine the depths of depravity into which Europe will eventually fall in the years to come.

"Europe is calling." At the start of the trip, a woman is parting from her husband on the deck. Europe is pulling Hameiri back.

> And now, oh now when we have arrived,
> When there is everything, when there is nothing:
> How good it would be to return backwards
> Just a little backwards.
> To the Edges of Hell.
> (from Hameiri, "Halom Hamidbara" [Desert Dream])

This poem from 1923, a scant two years after Hameiri finally reached the Land of Israel, portrays deep disappointment and pain. Hameiri yearns for the place of hope that existed before the realization of his Zionist dream, a perfect place in Europe in the form of a long-awaited dream, not grim routine. While on the deck of the ship sailing to Europe, he hears a mixture of voices—some pioneers imbued with the dream of Zionism, others completely clear-eyed as to reality. These contradictory voices stem from what Hameiri calls his "two souls," his two identities—Hebrew and Hungarian.

When he first reaches Europe, he is impressed, repeatedly comparing people, soldiers, post office staff, the cleanliness of Italian streets, to

their equivalents in Tel Aviv. In Vienna, he describes at length and in detail a series of positive gestures and characteristics in the inhabitants of the city: kind hearts, patience, fairness, honesty, respectful officials, and respect for the law. He writes his impressions down in his notebook, as if he were a stranger. But, simultaneously, reservations appear when he suddenly longs for Israel's sun in the midst of a fog-enshrouded Vienna.

In Vienna, the reader is also introduced for the first time to the dark side of the writer's journey. Hameiri observes the first signs of the savage beast within civilized man—he spots swastika flags waving on the outskirts of Vienna. In retrospect, one may see the polished pavements in Fascist Trieste and the Austrian politeness and courtesy that Hameiri so appreciates as an expression of the desire to clean and rid Europe of unwelcome people. There is an ugly and terrifying side to the hygiene and good manners, which cancels all the comparisons Hameiri makes between them and the Land of Israel. He is sufficiently insightful to find in Vienna "a Europe that is wild, full of life, dancing with the latest fashions, whose motto is: 'Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. Tomorrow there will be a new world war, so we might as well enjoy the present'" (chapter 8).

And yet, "Europe is calling." Hameiri is drawn to Europe, but also temporarily appalled by it. This duality increases the nearer he gets to his Hungarian homeland, for which he fought and was taken captive. When he sees the Hungarian flag flying outside the Hungarian consulate in Trieste, Hameiri's feelings of patriotism border on ultra-nationalism: "My heart convulses with the tragedy of poor, mutilated, postwar Hungary" (chapter 3).

Several times during the course of this book, Hameiri grieves over Hungary's hard fate in the wake of the First World War, with the redrawing of its borders after the Treaty of Trianon. Two-thirds of its territory was taken and one-third of its total Hungarian population was left outside their homeland. Suddenly, Hungarians became a minority in another country. Hungary shrank from being part of the Imperial Dual Monarchy to a small, weak, landlocked state. Hameiri mourns like a true patriot at what he regards as a "tragedy" and likens Hungary's loss with the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

This mourning and lamentation continues when he visits the regions of his homeland which were "stolen," including the village of

his birth which was at the time of his visit part of Czechoslovakia (but is now in Western Ukraine). While visiting Transylvania (then, as now, Romanian), he writes: "Hungary has ruled this land of wonders for about 1,000 years—how many wars were fought in this region, in how many causes? But now, only one war (not even between Hungary and Romania) has been enough to change the long historical status quo" (chapter 19). When he visits Southern Slovakia (now the Slovak Republic), he writes in great pain: "How is it possible that Hungary, after a thousand years of rule, has lost all these ancient regions, including Slovakia? . . . Not one of the countries defeated in the Great War has been punished so cruelly and terribly as Hungary. . . . And yet, this same nation was forced to pay for a lost war by national destruction on a scale unlike anything previously seen in European history" (chapter 27).

Hameiri's sentiments about the mutilating annexations of his homeland echo the poisoned passions of the Nazis demanding back the territories of Alsace-Lorraine from France, the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia, and Danzig and the Polish Corridor from Poland, after the Versailles Treaty. Hameiri finds the Duce's clean and ordered Italy attractive, identifying himself with the antisemitic nationalists' feelings of theft. Again, he draws a parallel between the nationalists, comparing his feelings to the destruction of the Temple. Hameiri repeatedly mentions the "1,000 years" during which Hungary ruled over the now lost provinces, as if embracing the image of his Zionist poems about the Jews' 2,000-years exile after the destruction of the Second Temple. As a Hungarian patriot, however, he contrasts the 1,000-year-long Hungarian conquest with the Jews' 2,000-years exile from the homeland. His loyalty has two opposite faces—one as a ruler who was robbed, the other as a son of a conquered people. While he feels love and a sense of national loyalty to both—two nations that have both experienced tragedy and destruction—he sees one with fading hope, the other with hope for renewal. Hameiri wants to help his Hungarian homeland, to overcome its loss: "As a sign of eternal thanks to the country of my birth, I want to share with them what I myself have learned, as a member of the world's most tragic nation" (chapter 27).

Awareness of the dispositions of the Treaty of Trianon still lives in Hungarian communal awareness. Between the world wars, Hungary underwent several difficult upheavals. By the time the Treaty of Trianon

was concluded, the country had already experienced nationalist and Communist revolutions, as well as a war with its neighbors which ended in Romanian occupation of Eastern Hungary within six months. After that, Admiral Miklós Horthy, a controversial figure to this day, became regent of Hungary and changed the situation to what it was during Hameiri's visit.[4] A wave of anti-Communist, socialist, and Jewish persecution began, and the Hungary which Hameiri encountered during his trip was less tolerant to Jews than the country of his youth.

Hameiri's opinions about the political climate in Israel after bloody clashes between Jews and Arabs in 1929 must be taken into consideration when evaluating his comparisons between Europe and Tel Aviv. The violence led to a breach of trust between the *yishuv* and the British Mandate authorities. It also led to a growing belief, particularly among the youth, in the need for a Jewish army. In his role as a pacifist author and poet, Hameiri took an unambiguous position against the militarization of the Jews in Israel

During his trip to Europe, Hameiri makes an unflattering comparison between the Israel nationalist *Brit Habiryonim* (Alliance of Strong Men or Alliance of Thugs)—founded by Uri Zvi Greenberg, Abba Ahimeir, and others—and the Hungarian nationalist-fascist movement Association of Awakening Magyars (*Ebredő Magyarok Egyesülete*).[5] He encounters two young men from this movement, which has made the exclusion of Jews from society central to its political platform, in a train car. Their conversation is cordial and polite. The youths are portrayed as eloquent and seeking justice for their people—and they consider their stance to be legitimate in every detail. Hameiri seems to find more in common with these Hungarian antisemites than with his anti-Zionist Hungarian Jewish brothers, at the same time shaking off his earlier revelation of Jewish extreme nationalism in Israel. One of the Awakening Magyars even says to Hameiri: "When you talk, as a Jew, about your 'homeland' it changes our way of thinking pleasantly and completely" (chapter 11).

It seems that Hameiri and the Hungarian antisemites think the same way about all aspects of Zionism. They both look with hostility at assimilated Hungarian Jews who oppose Zionism. In light of the anti-Jewish pogroms of the previous decade (as well as the *numerus clausus* introduced by Horthy soon after he took power, which limited the registration

of Jewish students in Hungarian universities to six percent), his positive portrayal of these two antisemites inevitably arouses feelings of discomfort in the reader.[6] Yet, at the same time, Hameiri writes: "I think about the issue of work exclusion by Jews (*numerus clausus*) and the poem 'Sikarikin' (Zealots) by Uri Zvi Greenberg" (chapter 11).

As modernist poets of the 1920s, Hameiri and Greenberg initially stood shoulder to shoulder on political matters, but during the 1930s they grew apart ideologically. At the end of the novel, which appeared six years after the above had been written, Hameiri stated: "I don't believe that Hungary can descend into barbarism: I know it too well. In any event, no worse than our own situation at the moment, which, to say the least, leaves a great deal to be desired" (prologue). The passage of events proved this to be untrue. However, during this stage of the journey, Hameiri's bitter disappointment with Israel had not waned and the pendulum had not yet swung in a Zionist direction, when he returned to Hungary in 1930.

From a literary point of view, *Voyage into Savage Europe* cannot be classified as an objective travel diary, free of artistic impressions and sentiments. According to Avner Holtzman, Hameiri was "a pioneer whose style of writing—the documentary novel—had not existed before, sensu stricto, in Hebrew literature. The principle on which this type of novel is based is use of factual raw material, screened out and then recombined according to artistic, organizational principles."[7] This literary approach is most powerfully expressed in *Hashigaon Hagadol* and in his second novel about his time in Russian captivity *Bagehinom shel Mata* (Hell on Earth).[8] It is also present in his short stories describing the Russian Civil War and anti-Jewish pogroms in Odessa.[9] Another feature of Hameiri's writing combines supernatural elements with factual historical connections. A moving example of this is the peak of intensity reached when he visits his birth village Ó-Dávidháza. Seeing an abandoned pear tree whose top is swaying, he intermixes the literalness of a newspaper report with personification: "The thick, prickly top of the wild pear tree in the garden, whose small sour fruit only ripen around Rosh Hashanah, waves to me. Oh—Oh—Oh—since you left me, there is no one to follow your grandfather's directive to pronounce the blessing on new fruit" (chapter 22).

The house yard is also abandoned and Hector the dog is not there anymore. Instead of Hector, an impudent Canaanite puppy barks at

Hameiri. In the complete novel, published in 1938, Hameiri added some details not reported in the periodical *Doar Hayom*. The reason, apparently, was that relevant poems from *Halomot shel Beit Raban,* in which the images of Hector, Yossi the parrot, Peter, etc., are described had not yet been published:[10]

> What wonderful eternal life has nourished us all—myself, grandfather, Hector, Yossi the parrot, Maria girl of my dreams, Peter, the family of storks living on top of our cowshed, and the wild pear tree—all of us together?! Now only two of us are left: the tree and myself. Old man pear tree is gradually losing his hair and becoming blind—he hardly recognizes me, but still hears my voice. And I—I? A few futile springs have passed.—I am not—I am not "sentimental." Where is Hector? Don't you hear that you have a visitor? Where are you, Hector?! Where are my other friends? You don't even allow me the compassionate untruth of an immortal soul after death! Wicked people? Where is Hector? Maria! Peter! Yossi! Yossi!! (chapter 22).

Although Hameiri wishes to enter the house where he was born, and in which a *Prezzite* now lives, the semi-miraculous (and its disturbance of the general narrative) takes the novel elsewhere. The shadow of his late grandfather appears and forbids Hameiri to enter the house, which does not have a *mezuza* on the doorpost: "Quick March! Go home to the Land of Israel, whence you came! Quick as you can, little boy!" (chapter 22).

His grandfather's warning is instrumental in revealing to Hameiri his true homeland—the Land of Israel. This is a key moment in the journey and the novel: Zionism returns to its original place in Hameiri's heart. After all, his grandfather instilled into him the writer's love of Hebrew. This love of Hebrew is fundamental because it is synonymous with Hameiri's love of Israel.

The series of articles "Voyage into Savage Europe," published in book form in 1938 as *Masa Be"eropa Haperait. Rishmei Derech Anakroniyim* (Voyage into Savage Europe: Anachronistic Travel Notes) are presented here for the first time in English. This novel is uniquely important for understanding the extent of Hameiri's dual sense of belonging to two parallel but geographically different cultures. He was sent to Europe by *Keren Hayesod* as a Hebrew and Zionist poet

and author. He visits the Mediterranean, the component parts of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire (Italy, Austria, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia) and passes through the stations of his life in his homeland, which he has not visited for seventeen years. The picture that emerges is sometimes confused, even to Hameiri himself, alternating between past and present, with tension between his metaphysical and national worlds, and the intrigues, upheavals, and disappointments of 1920s Israel. In addition to his physical journey, the book also reflects an inner journey through the very fibers of Hameiri's being, and should be read as an important document of warning in a stormy area fluctuating between two World Wars. A world which is sharpening its swords in preparation for a new world of violence, far greater than that which preceded it, pregnant with catastrophe for the Jewish people of Eastern Europe. After the initial disappointment and disdain which he embarked on his voyage, Hameiri finally realizes that the Land of Israel is his answer to savage Europe and that Zionism is more than an ideology, but the Jewish People's escape from annihilation. His journey was in fact a farewell to a Jewish world which, in a few short years, was to disappear without a trace.

Translator's Introduction

This book follows Avigdor Hameiri's three books on the First World War and its aftermath—*Hashiga'on Hagadol* (The Great Madness), *Bagehinom Shel mata* (Hell on Earth) and *Ben Shinei Ha'adam* (Of Human Carnage)—and documents the only postwar trip that he took to Europe, during 1930. Its last chapter states that he made several "slight but important changes" during the years that followed. Because the book was ultimately published in 1938, not all the events described could have been experienced personally because of differences in dates.[1] Where necessary, this is pointed out in the text. However, most of his experiences are current and powerfully evocative of a Europe teetering on the edge of a yet unknown catastrophe. Parts of this book were published in thirty-three articles in *Doar Hayom* between 9 October 1930 and 20 May 1932.

Hameiri arrives by boat via Brindisi in Trieste and then travels to points further afield. As with all his other books, his perception of his fellow travelers is often acerbic: he couldn't have been an easy traveling companion. He has a good impression of the order and cleanliness of Mussolini's Italy: Trieste is incomparably cleaner than it was under Austria-Hungary: the streets are clean, children begging for money are absent, and post office personnel are ordered and courteous.

Courtesy and consideration permeate every aspect of Viennese life; one is left wondering how this could have changed so radically overnight after the *Anschluss*. The Jewish population of Vienna are described as directionless. Hilda, the spoiled young girl with peasant clothes, a rich background, and confused ideas about Zionism is a case in point. The noxious racial ideas of Nazism have already begun to seep in, but Jews do not understand that extreme nationalism, as espoused by Adolf Hitler,