

YECHIEL-YESHAYAHU TRUNK

(March 15, 1887-July 7, 1961)

Born in the village of Osmólsk¹, near Łowicz, Warsaw area, Poland, into a family of Rebbes, rabbis, and landowners. On his father's side – the grandson of the chassidic Rebbe, Mr. Yitzhak Worker, and of the *gaon*, Mr. Yehoshele Kutner; on his mother's side – a grandson of Baruch Grzywacz, one of the richest Jews in Poland. In his early years, he moved to Łódź where he studied in *cheder* with private *melamedim* and teachers and, through self-education, secular knowledge and languages. He married a granddaughter of Yeshayahu Prywes, the "iron king" of Poland. On many occasions, he traveled through Europe, Asia and Africa. In 1913-1914, he lived in Israel.

Under the influence of his father who, despite being a chassidic Jew, wrote poetry, knew European languages and literature, and was an admirer of Y. L. Percec – Trunk became a guest at the home of Percec, who influenced him to abandon writing in Hebrew and try to write in Yiddish. "Why don't you write in Yiddish?" Percec asked him.

"Shouldn't you, a son-in-law of the Prywes, write in the language of the tailor's children?" (Trunk, *Poyln*, Vol. 4, p. 289).

During the years of WWI, he lived in Switzerland and then, in 1919-1925, in Łódź where he was involved in a textile company. He then lived in Warsaw. He was the president of the Yiddish PEN Club in Poland in the 1930s. When the Germans occupied Poland in 1939, Trunk moved with the general flow to the East, until mid-1940 in Vilnius where he worked on a YIVO show based on Percec's "A Night in the Old Marketplace". Then, through Russia and Japan, he came to the United States. Since 1941, he settled in New York.

He began writing in Hebrew with the "Diary of the Revolution in Łódź" (1905), in which he described the Jewish revolutionaries at the barricades fighting against the Tsarist rulers (perhaps had begun at this time his faith in the *Bund*, to which he belonged organizationally since 1923 and to which he remained a loyal follower until the end of his life), then wrote an autobiographical novel in Hebrew. In 1907, he published (under the name "Teyl") an essay (in which portrayed allegorically and affectionately Jewish revolutionaries) in the Orthodox "*HaKol*"² Warsaw, which was published under the supervision of Trunk's brother-in-law, Mr. Mendelev, a brother of the Gerer Rebbe. Y. Y. Trunk published there, aside from a series of essays entitled "*Mitoch Pinkasim*"³, poetry, short stories, and nature scenes. Since 1908, he switched completely to Yiddish. He wrote landscape descriptions, travelogues, and nature scenes in Percec's publication, "The Yiddish Weekly Writing": "Amid the Mountains", Warsaw, 1908; "Gypsies", in anthology "Yudish", Warsaw, 1910; and "The Sea", in "The Book and the Reader", Warsaw, 1911; etc. Since then, he has published poems, essays on literary philosophical and social topics, descriptions of nature, stories, historical novels, popular stories, novels, scientific critical considerations, and articles in "The Friend", "The Free Voice, in Geneva (1917), "Today", "People's Newspaper", "Literary Pages", "Weekly Writing for Literature, "Onward", "The Globe", "Warsaw Almanac", "Warsaw Writings" and "Writings" edited by Sh. Zaromb⁴, in Warsaw; "Letter" in Łódź-Warsaw; "Łódź Alarm" in Łódź; "Vilnius Day" and the anthology "Pathways", in Vilnius; "People's Newspaper" and "Links" in Kovno; "Future", "Anthologies" edited by H. Leiwik and Y. Opatoshu, "Day", "Day Morning Journal" and "Our Time" in New York; "Life issues", "The Golden Chain", "My Home", "*Davar*" and "*HaBoker*" –in Tel Aviv; "Jewish Newspaper" and "Our Idea" in Buenos Aires; "Existence" and "Our Voice" in Paris; etc.

In book form: "From Nature: Designs and Landscapes", with illustrations by Artur Szyk, Warsaw, 1914, 110 pages; "Fig trees and other stories" (includes his former translation of the Babylonian epic "Gilgamesh"), Warsaw, 1922, 144 pages; "The world – A Dream"

¹ TN: probably Osmólsk Górny, near Sanniki, Gąbin and Gostynin.

² TN: Hebrew, "The Voice".

³ TN: Hebrew, "From the Notebooks".

⁴ TN: Shmuel Zaromb, pen name of Moshe-Zvi Fajncajg (1896 – 1942).

(essays) "Dreamer", "On the Psychology of Jewish History", "On Shalom-Aleichem", "The Book of Job", "Death", "On Knut Hamsun"⁵, "Yiddish" – a justification for Yiddishism, and "On Y. L. Percec", Warsaw, 1922, 116 pages; "Weary", stories – ("Ruins", "In the Mountains" and "A Tale of Love"), Warsaw, 1923; "Dorian Gray" (treatises on art and reality, with a few words on the subject of "Dorian Gray" by M. Vonvild⁶), Warsaw, 1923, 64 pages and 18 pages; "Idealism and Naturalism in Yiddish Literature", Warsaw, 1927, 234 pages, with a 28-page portrayal, "Y. Y. Trunk in Profile and Full Face" by M. Vonvild; "Josephus Flavius of Jerusalem and other historical novels" ("The letter to Novatus", "Symposium", "Superstitions", etc.), Warsaw, 1930, 206 pages; "Between Will and Impotence – H. D. Nomberg"⁷ (attempts at analysis and characterization), Warsaw, 1930, 185 pages; "Jewish cultural issues and socialism, for our house" (with a preface where Trunk brings out his way of believing in socialism), Warsaw, 1935, 55 pages; "Near and Foreign", essays, Warsaw, 1936, 177 pages; "Shalom-Aleichem, His Essence and His Work", with a preface "To the Reader" where Trunk brings out the motifs of his literary trilogy ("Idealism and Naturalism in Yiddish Literature", "Between Will and Impotence" and "Shalom Aleichem"), Warsaw, 1937, 434 pages and 4 pages; "World Account", prose and poetry about the world, Warsaw, 1938, 80 pages and 2 pages; "Socialist impressions", Warsaw, 1939, 45 pages (given as a prize to the Bundist literary magazine "Forward" in Warsaw); "Tevye the Dairyman, Fate and Faith", a psycho-philosophical insight into the world of Tevye with the background of the Jewish spirit", Vilnius, 1939, 208 pages (published later in a new edition with "A Word to the Reader", New York, 1944, 302 pages); "Leaves in the wind", poetry, ("Songs of the Old"), New York, 1944, 126 pages. Especially impressive was the publication of his epical work, "*Poyln*"⁸, in seven volumes, Our Time Publishing House, New York (chapters of it were published in the Yiddish press throughout the world) – in which he describes "the picture of my life in the frame and in the relation to the image of Jewish life in Poland" (from the preface to volume 1). The order of the seven volumes is: 1) "Genealogy of the Fathers", New York, 1944, 352 pages; 2) "Childhood Years", New York, 1946, 318 pages; 3) "Youth", 1946, 287 pages; 4) "The Prywes", 1949, 304 pages; 5) "Percec" (it also deals with the environment and the emerging of Yiddish literature in those years in Poland), 1949, 308 pages; 6) "Łódź Between the Two World Wars", 1951, 244 pages; 7) "Warsaw between the two world wars" (with "some words" by the author about the fact that this work was written "not only 'in the light of objective truth, but also in the light of subjective poetry)'), New York, 1953, 275 pages – for which he

received the Louis Lamed Prize ("'*Poyln*' is first and foremost a work created by an artist and his artistic meditative spirit, created over the ten years of the Holocaust in Europe. This is a book that gave a profoundly sensitive writer the opportunity to speak about the deep-rootedness of Jewish Poland and at the same time avoid speaking about being uprooted." – Shmuel Niger⁹).

A special feature of Trunk's artistic creations was the unique popular novels he wrote in his last years. These are: "Simcha Plachte of Narkawe, or the Jewish Don Quixote" ("based on the wonderful tales of Yankel Lehrer"), received the Zvi Kessel Prize, Buenos Aires, 1951, 375 pages (published initially in installments in "Day Morning Journal" in New York, "Yiddish Newspaper" in Buenos Aires and "Our Voice" in Paris, etc.); "Wise men of Chełm, or Jews from the wisest city in the world" (stories from the Chełm records which were recently found in an attic a *mikveh*), with a preface by the author and drawings by Y. Shlos (Buenos Aires, 1951), 348 pp. (Y. Shlos's drawings also appeared in a special album under the same title: Chełm Wise Men, Buenos Aires, 1951, 20 pages); "The Happiest Jew in the World, or Hershele's School Year", a popular novel from the life of Hershele of Ostropol, with "some words" from the author, Buenos Aires, 1953, 378 pages; "The world is full of miracles, or a story of the Gimmel brothers" (popular novel from Yankel Lehrer, also known as Morgensztern, from the city of Łódź), with an introduction essay, "Jewish myth" and a poem, Buenos Aires, 1955, 327 pages; "Messianic-Weather, historical novel from the times of Shabbetai Zvi", in eight parts an added "ninth part", a dialogue between a reader and the author, pp. 234-265), which deals with various philosophical problems of Jewish history and Jewish nationality. The novel was published with "Jews looking out from the window", eleven stories of the Bal Shem, (New York, CYCO publishing house) and (Buenos Aires, Yidbuch, 1961), altogether 357 pages. A preface was also added to the front of the novel, entitled "Personal accounting", in which the author gives a philosophical-artistic account on his own writing career and his writing path until this novel. At the end of the eleven stories of the Bal Shem Tov, was added a "Glossary of Kabbalah Terminology" used in the book. In 1958 Trunk also published "Springs and trees", historical novels and essays, a selection of new and freshly adapted historical novellas and essays, New York, 468 pages. Trunk (together with Aaron Zeitlin) also compiled an "Anthology of Yiddish prose in Poland between the two world wars, 1914-1939", New York, 1946, 637 pages and himself published "Yiddish prose in Poland in the era between the two world wars", essays on Jewish writers in Poland from the classical writers to the youngest, New York, 1949, 154 pages. He edited (with Noah Pryłucki and

⁵ TN: Knut Hamsun (4 August 1859 – 19 February 1952). Norwegian writer, Nobel Prize in Literature 1920. Pro-Nazi.

⁶ TN: pen name of Moshe Yosef Dickstein (1889 – 1940s, in Warsaw ghetto).

⁷ TN: Hersch Dovid Nomberg (14 April 1876 – 21 November 1927). Polish writer, journalist and essayist.

⁸ TN: "Poland, Memories and Images". Only partially translated in English.

⁹ TN: pen name of Samuel Charney, (1883 – 1955). Yiddish writer, literary critic and historian.

Israel Rabon) a collection of Jewish writers refueged in Lithuania: "Pathways", Vilnius, 1940. His work on antisemitism was published, in English translation, in a periodical for psychiatrists, *The Psychiatric Quarterly*, New York, March 1958. Some of Trunk's works were also published in *Commentary* and others Yiddish-English magazines in America. Trunk translated Nietzsche's "Zarathustra". His rewriting of Rabbi Nachman Breslover's "Story of Seven Beggars" was published in Hebrew translation by Aharon Wajzman as "Seven Beggars", Tel Aviv, 1957, 50 pages. Several letters from Perec to Trunk were published in "Pages from YIVO", Vilnius, 1937, pages 183-190. In June 1961, he began to publish in "Day-Morning-Journal", New York, a long novella on the life of the Bal Shem Tov and his tales.

On July 7, 1961, Trunk died of a grave illness at "Mount Sinai Hospital", in New York. The elder writer and thinker knew that he was dying and calmly said goodbye to his friends. His death made a deep impression on all Yiddish writers and readers in countries around the world. The obituaries and articles about the deceased in the newspapers and magazines were incredibly numerous.

"To a large extent, Y. Y. Trunk was not appreciated in our literature. One had first to 'unearth' his writings, then dig deeply into them as they deserve and then, one will see in full the great scope, what Y. Y. Trunk meant and what he was in Yiddish literature (...) Y. Y. Trunk lived his entire conscious life with the fate of the Jewish people and the Yiddish language. The tragic national way of history continuously and repeatedly haunted him. The catastrophe of Polish Jewry – intertwined with a lot of personal suffering – caused him an incurable wound. It was often difficult for him to find the form, to give tongue to his inner pain. He swayed between the grotesque and the folkloric; seeking a haven in irony." (A. Glanz-Leieles)¹⁰

"In his seven-volume biographical work '*Poyln*' (...) one sees the Polish Jews in all of their colors and with all their virtues and weaknesses. When Trunk fantasizes, when he tells strange stories and exaggerations, you see no less the Polish Jew than when Trunk tells true facts. (...) In exaggeration, in extravagance of colors and sounds, you see Trunk's genuine Polish Jew, with his large scope, his great appetite, his chassidic enthusiasm, his abundance of ideas and imagination." (B. Szefer)¹¹

"The aim to which Trunk aspired in virtually all his works was, as is the case for the great masters: to delve into the mysteries of nature, into the mystery of life and to discover the cosmic link between temporary people and eternal nature. (...) The philosophical idea was for Trunk always moving forward. And the way of his philosophical conception was irrational, metaphysical, even mystical. (...) Through the irrational world, he sought to find the answer to the riddles of the rational world. It so happened that Trunk moved in the world of ideas in two planes simultaneously: in a higher, metaphysical plane, and a lower, realistic plane, in the world of matter." (Yitzhak Charlash)¹²

"Y. Y. Trunk's entering of the '*Bund*', followed a natural, safe way.... He carried all his life in his memory the images of enthusiastic and stormy demonstrations of the Bundists through the streets of Łódź, which he observed through the window of his spacious home. (...) He joined the *Bund* in his mature years, with a unique life experience and an independent philosophy of life. Bundism coincided with his entire worldview, with his view of Jewish history, Jewish fate, and life." (Y. Sh. Herc)¹³

"Trunk's Bundism did not match his literary spirit. (...) Trunk tried to combine ideas which could by no means be combined. (...) Trunk was philosophically a monist. He often repeated these words, that the truth is one, (...) that there is no such thing as coexistence of two ideas that deny each other. With the power of analysis, Trunk was able to make peace between fire and water." (Yitzhak Warszawski)¹⁴

"Y. Y. Trunk had within himself all the qualities, all the attributes of a leading (...) figure in our Yiddish literature. And, the only virtue he was missing, was the ambition to be a leader. (...) Trunk was one of the greatest storytellers in our literature. (...) He was one of the deepest commentators of our classical writers, especially on Shalom Aleichem. He was a student of and, in a certain sense, a successor to Perec and Shalom Aleichem. They were both, in their own unique way, integrated into his abundant writings." (Melech Rawicz)¹⁵

Chaim Lajb FUKS
Lexicon of Modern Yiddish Literature,
Volume IV, New York, 1961, p. 116.

¹⁰ TN: Aharon Glanz, aka A. Leieles (March 5, 1889 – December 30, 1966), Yiddish poet and writer.

¹¹ TN: Baruch Szefer (September 26, 1896 – August 18, 1977), journalist and feuilletonist.

¹² TN: Yitzhak Charlash (July 13, 1892 – February 18, 1973). Bundist activist, journalist, Yiddish and Hebrew playwright and lecturer.

¹³ TN: Yaakov Shalom Herc, (August 6, 1893 – April 18, 1992, New York). Bundist activist, Yiddish writer.

¹⁴ TN: Yitzhak Hersh Zynger aka Isaac Bashevis Singer (November 11, 1903 – July 24, 1991). Yiddish writer, Nobel Prize in Literature 1978.

¹⁵ TN: pen name of Zechariah Choneh Bergner (November 27, 1893 – August 23, 1976, Montreal). Yiddish writer and poet.