18. "Memories in the Nights of Despair"

Jussuf Abbo in Berlin's Yiddish Literature of the 1920s

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In Berlin's avant-garde artistic and literary scene during the Weimar Republic, the sculptor and painter Jussuf Abbo (c. 1889–1953) embodied a number of interconnected and often overlapping categories of identity, culture, race, faith, language and artistic stylization: Oriental, Arabic, Jewish, Semitic, Muslim, Hebrew, Ottoman, Yiddish, Palestinian, Egyptian etc. Although these categories were as exoticizing and essentializing a century ago as they are today, they were perhaps more fluid and less restrictive in Berlin during the 1920s than in the post-war West.

Born in Ottoman Safed around 1888–1890, Jussuf (Yosef) Abbo traveled to Berlin probably in 1911 (Schöne 2019a: 14) and began studying sculpture in 1913 at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Charlottenburg, an affluent and vibrant city that became part of Greater Berlin in 1920. During the 1920s, he achieved great success as an artist, exhibiting his work in solo and prestigious group exhibitions in Germany, the Soviet Union, and the United States (Schöne 2019a: 203–205). Abbo was a close friend of the German poet Else Lasker-Schüler and Yiddish writer Moyshe Kulbak, and he was part of the Jewish literary and artistic milieu that centered around the Romanisches Café near Kurfürstendamm in Berlin-Charlottenburg. When the Nazis came to power in Germany, Abbo's newly wedded wife, Ruth Schulz, received threats for marrying a non-Aryan. The couple emigrated to London in 1935, but Abbo failed to maintain his status as a sought-after artist. Poverty, poor health, and despair marked the last period of his life before his death in 1953. Later his name fell into oblivion.

Recent solo exhibitions in Beirut, Berlin, and Hannover have sparked renewed interest in Abbo's work and contributed to the reconstruction of his biography and its diverse intersections with other artists and curators. A closer examination of Abbo's place in Berlin's Yiddish cultural scene of the 1920s could shed further light on his fluid artistic and literary persona in the writings of his peers.

I

In the European Christian imagination, both Jews and Arabs were considered for centuries to be "oriental" in character and essence to varying degrees. Orientalism, a philological field rooted in the humanist tradition of the Renaissance, was entrenched in the study of Hebrew and Arabic, both of which were declared Semitic. Orientalists repeatedly depicted these languages, peoples, races, and cultures as primitive and primordial, authentic but corrupt, spiritually exalted, yet base, cunning, and false. Christian culture depicted the Semitic Oriental figure, whether an Arab or a Jew, as representing the past while simultaneously being unfaithful to its origins. Thus, this figure was both admired and detested, looked up to and looked down upon.

Recently, Aischa Ahmed has used Jussuf Abbo as a case study of "Arabic presences" in Germany around 1900. Her proposed concept encompasses both "the presence of Arab people in Germany and the prefigured images, ideas, and demarcations to the Other," (Ahmed 2020: 11) which existed well before Arabs had arrived in Germany in any numbers. Rather than focusing solely on the orientalist representations of Arabs in Germany, Ahmed proposes studying Arab people "in their historical presence and agency" (ibid.: 12). Ahmed's intervention is pertinent not only when discussing Abbo's physical presence in Berlin, but also when considering his presence as a literary figure, fictionalized and immortalized by Berlin's Yiddish writers between the two world wars. However, Jussuf Abbo's first appearance as a literary persona in Berlin was not in Yiddish but rather in German. In 1923 Else Lasker-Schüler published a poem entitled "Jussuff Abbu," in which she offered a poetic description of her artist friend, using particularly orientalist imagery (Lasker-Schüler 1923).

It is possible that Lasker-Schüler was inspired by Jussuf Abbo when she created the literary character Prinz Jussuf, which became her pseudonym. In any case, Lasker-Schüler's use of her Palestinian friend to enhance her own orientalist image was consistent with her relationships with other artists, such as the Yiddish poet Abraham Nahum Stencl, whom she decided to style as "Hamid" (Valencia 1995: 84). Stencl settled in Berlin in 1921 and was also a regular at the Romanisches Café and an acquaintance of Abbo (Valencia 1995: 112). However, one should not underestimate Abbo's role and agency in his own orientalization in Berlin's artistic scene at the time. Even before Lasker-Schüler adopted the persona Prinz Jussuf, Abbo had already Arabized his Hebrew name from Yosef to Jussuf (Faerber 1982), thus styling his oriental image. There is no reason to assume that this was a superficial posture rather than a genuine gesture of identity. Abbo considered himself an Arab, as evidenced by his decision to name his second child Hussein (the baby was born in London in 1935 after the family was exiled from Germany) (Schöne 2019b: 47).

II

Before the formation of the Christian orientalist gaze, medieval Muslim and Jewish grammarians had already subjected Arabic and Hebrew to philologically purist and binary judgments. They distinguished between the classical, pure, and authentic languages of ancient times and the supposedly corrupt post-scriptural vernaculars, which were intertwined with layers of Aramaic, Greek, Latin, Persian, and other languages.

The desire to make categories such as 'the Arab,' 'the Hebrew,' 'the Oriental,' or 'the Semitic' faithful to their alleged origins and to restore the supposedly forsaken expression of their pure classical language was shared, with some variations, by several disparate groups, including the Arabic and Hebrew grammarians of the Middle Ages, the Christian humanist school of the Renaissance, the Christian Reformation, the Jewish Enlightenment movement, and modern Orientalists.

However, the impulse to purify, classify, and distinguish has always been challenged by the diasporic hybridity and conceptual fluidity of people's lived experiences. As European crusaders rushed to conquer the Holy Land from the Muslims in the 11th century, massacring Jewish communities on the Rhine along their way, a new language began to emerge from the ruins: Yiddish, a Jewish-Germanic vernacular that centuries later became the first language of the overwhelming majority of Jews worldwide until the Nazi Genocide.

In Yiddish, the word "Yiddish" also means "Jewish." Similarly, the term "Hebrew" can also mean "Jewish" in many different languages, including Hebrew itself. Yiddish is replete with Hebrew words and influenced by its morphology. Conversely, several varieties of European Hebrew, such as Rabbinic, Hasidic, Maskilic, and Modern, are all heavily influenced by Yiddish, as demonstrated in the works of Lily Kahn. The linguistic situation of Yiddish and Hebrew in Europe has been so complex that scholars of Judaism, even Jewish ones, often denied that Yiddish ever existed as a language in its own right. Instead, they called it a corrupt dialect of German or a 'jargon,' as Moses Mendelssohn did in the 18th century when referring to his own mother tongue.

Max Weinreich, a 20th-century Yiddish linguist and historian, is often cited as saying that "a language is a dialect with an army and navy." Yiddish never had an army or a navy, but it does have many dialects and varieties, including Old Yiddish, Western Yiddish, Lithuanian Yiddish, Polish Yiddish, Ukrainian Yiddish, Hasidic Yiddish, American Yiddish, and even Palestinian Yiddish. As Mordecai Kosover showed in his groundbreaking work, Palestinian Yiddish – spoken in Palestine since the 19th century – is a Yiddish dialect rich in Arabic words and structures. Nevertheless, in the 19th and 20th centuries, the term Yiddish came to be almost exclusively understood as referring to Oriental Yiddish, the Yiddish of Eastern European Jewry. Accordingly, Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe were

doubly orientalized when they migrated westward: first, for being Jews, and secondly, for being "Eastern Jews": Ostjuden in German, or "Mizrahiyim" in Hebrew. This occurred many decades before the term "Mizrahim" came to designate Jews of Arabic descent in the State of Israel.

Beginning in the late 19th-century, a large group of Yiddish-speaking Jewish emigrants from Eastern Europe settled in Berlin, mostly in today's Mitte. They were deemed primitive, backward, and obscurantist by German Jews and non-Jews alike, who nevertheless saw them as the authentic carriers of Jewish tradition. While some German Jews, such as Martin Buber, were enthralled and inspired by their arrival from Eastern Europe, others who tended forcefully toward assimilation sought to distance themselves from the newly arrived "Ostjuden".

In the 1920s, Berlin saw a new wave of Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe, including refugees from war-devastated Poland and the Ukrainian civil war, who were escaping pogroms of unprecedented scale. Among them were writers, artists, and intellectuals, settling mostly in the new district of Charlottenburg. Joining German Jewish writers such as Alfred Döblin, Else Lasker-Schüler, and Franz Werfel, the newly arrived Ostjuden created a vibrant literary scene in Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, and German. They founded publishing houses, literary magazines, and flocked to the city's literary cafés. For this diverse polyglot milieu, Hebrew, Muslim, Jewish, Yiddish, Oriental, Arabic, and Semitic were creative artistic concepts, which they reappropriated, subverted, and played with in their works. Lasker-Schüller's poetic persona, for example, featured extravagant orientalism, including her extraordinary claim that her German poems were actually Hebrew poems.

When the new Yiddish literary scene was being established in Berlin-Charlottenburg, Jussuf Abbo had already been living there for a decade. Abbo was a Jewish immigrant who was fluent in both Hebrew and German. He quickly found a common language – both literal and artistic – with the Yiddish writers and became a part of their literary scene. Eventually, Abbo was even incorporated into their works.

III

On his train ride from the 1937 World Yiddish Cultural Congress in Paris back to Warsaw, Yiddish editor and critic Nakhmen Mayzel passed through Berlin. Just a decade earlier, the city had been home to the Yiddish avant-garde in literature and art, and was the site of dozens of modernist Yiddish publishing houses, cultural institutions, and literary cafés. However, it had now become the capital of National Socialism. Mayzel wrote a short memoir essay presented in the form of a travelogue entitled "Mir forn farbay Berlin" ("We Travel Through Berlin"), in which he tried to encapsulate the short-lived glories of Yiddish Berlin of the 1920s. The essay was published in the weekly Literarishe bleter, Europe's leading Yiddish literary publication, which

Mayzel coedited in Warsaw. In one part of the text, Mayzel recalled a conversation he had with Dovid Bergelson, the president of Berlin's Yiddish writers' club and the most dominant author in the city's Yiddish literary scene at the time:

> Once, I was traveling with Dovid Bergelson on a double-decker bus in Berlin. We launched into a long, hearty, and moving conversation on Berlin's role in our work. With a trembling voice and tears in his eyes, Bergelson told me about a novel he envisioned, in which the main protagonist would be Berlin itself, to which he then felt such attachment and closeness; almost an intimacy (Mayzel 1937: 689).

The figure of Jussuf Abbo entered Yiddish literature in the context of this desire to encapsulate Berlin's Yiddish literary scene of the 1920s in a literary work. While Bergelson's short stories set in Berlin provide rich insight into that ephemeral world, he never wrote the novel he envisioned. However, Bergelson was not the only Yiddish author who dreamed of writing such a work. Perhaps the most famous attempt to provide a Yiddish literary depiction of that period is Moyshe Kulbak's satirical epic Yiddish poem, Disner Tshayld Harold, a title referencing Lord Byron's Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. In Kulbak's poem, which was published in the Soviet Union in 1931, the semi-autobiographical protagonist spends his nights in Berlin's Charlottenburg district together with Jussuf Abbo:

Abbo is a dreamy Arab,
A tender sculptor with moonlit hands,
A short fellow with curly hair,
Who yearns with clay for the Orient.
(Kulbak 1979: 180).

Abbo appears in several episodes in the poem and is depicted as a close friend of the protagonist. There is evidence that Jussuf Abbo and Moyshe Kulbak, who moved to Berlin from Vilnius in 1920, were indeed close in real life. In 1921, Kulbak wrote a two-page introduction in German to an exhibition of Abbo's work in Hannover (Kulbak 1921). The orientalizing tone of that text, which states that "Abbo is a son of the Orient" (Ibid.: 3), is consistent with Kulbak's depiction of Abbo in Disner Tshayld Harold.

In one of his Berlin stories, "Mit eyn nakht veyniker" ("One Night Less"), Dovid Bergelson parodies the desire he himself shared with many other Yiddish writers to encapsulate Berlin in Yiddish literature. In the story, a graphomaniac poet named Max Ventsl (perhaps a parody of Abraham Nahum Stencl's name) wishes to write an epic poem about the German capital but fails to do so. The protagonist has a close friend who is referred to repeatedly as "the hairy painter Babo." In the story, "the hairy painter Babo, like Ventsl, remains unrecognized by his painter peers and critics. He never exhibited or sold anything." (Bergelson 1929: 196).

Delphine Bechtel has highlighted the striking resemblance between Babo, the friend of Ventsel in Bergelson's story from 1927, and Abbo, the friend of the protagonist in Kulbak's poem from 1931. In both stories there is also a third friend: the critic Meer in Bergelson's story and the philosopher Erich Dörn in Kulbak's poem. Although Bechtel is correct in identifying the intertextual relationship between the two works, the chronology of publication is misleading, and it leads her to the erroneous conclusion that the trio in Bergelson's story served as a model for the trio in Kulbak's poem. Instead, it must have been the opposite: the artistically forgiving and mutually beneficial relationship between Ventsl, Babo and Meer in Bergelson's story was a parody of Kulbak's and Abbo's real-life friendship.

Bergelson wrote his story in 1927, while Kulbak, who had already left Berlin by 1923, only published Disner Tshayld Harold in 1931. Therefore, it can be assumed that Bergelson had access to an earlier draft of Kulbak's poem (or parts of it). The Yiddish author Daniel Charney described the Romanisches Café in the 1920s as a literary laboratory in which writers tested their works on other writers (Charney 1947: 36). Such cafés were precisely the sites where drafts and early versions of literary works circulated, both in writing and orally, among the regular patrons. It is possible that Bergelson read or heard an early version of Disner Tshayld Harold before 1923. The fact that Kulbak's poem remained unfinished and unpublished until 1931 may even be the basis for Bergelson's characterization of Ventsl as a poet who fails to complete his great poem about Berlin.

If Jussuf Abbo is already highly orientalized in Kulbak's poem, then Bergelson's parodic transformation of him into "the hairy painter Babo" was a further reduction of his artistic persona to racial features. While Lasker-Schüler's poem "Jussuf Abbo" openly adopts an oriental literary posture, Kulbak's and Bergelson's depictions of Abbo can be seen as an attempt to distance themselves from the oriental label while reaffirming its validity. Just as German Jews labeled Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe as Ostjuden to mitigate their own orientalized characterization within German society, Kulbak and Bergelson also orientalized their Palestinian Jewish colleague Jussuf Abbo in order to westernize their own identity. This shift of the oriental marker from Ostjude to the Arab-Jew foreshadowed the later redefinition of the term "mizrahi" in the future State of Israel, in which Yiddish-speaking Jews of Eastern European descent obtained cultural hegemony partly by negating their own oriental status through such means as suppressing their mother tongue (Yiddish) and reapplying the oriental label to Arab-Jewish immigrants in Palestine.

IV

The Yiddish literary canon immortalized Abbo, yet he remains objectified and orientalized within it. To rediscover his presence, agency, and voice, one must turn to his own work.

A drawing from 1929 in the recent Jussuf Abbo exhibition at the Spengler Museum in Hannover (Orchard 2019: 63 [Kat.-Nr 57]) showcases two of his most typical motifs: a large, naked female figure seated in the center and a smaller, abstract figure reclining at the bottom left. While most of Abbo's recumbent figures are women, this one lacks any feminine traits. Next to this figure is an abstract object, perhaps a sketchbook or a small drawing stand. The figure's slightly raised posture, as well as the position of its arm and its concentrated gaze, suggest it is drawing the larger figure. The smaller figure thus seems to be the artist, perhaps drawing himself from a mirror behind the seated model.

The drawing has two brief inscriptions in Abbo's handwriting (See Fig. 18.1.). The bottom inscription provides the exact date of the work: "J. Abbo. 11.12.1929." The upper inscription, however, surprisingly left unmentioned in the catalog, is the title of the piece: "Zikhronot be'leylot ha'yeush," Hebrew for "Memories in the Nights of Despair". Whether the title was given in 1929 in reference to memories of an earlier period in Berlin or added later while recalling the period in which it was drawn, the temporality it creates corresponds to that of Kulbak and Bergelson: Berlin of the 1920s is being remembered by the artist during a period of despair. The title's use of Hebrew (instead of German, for example) may be seen as an intimate gesture towards the group of Yiddish writers, all fluent in Hebrew as well, who were part of Abbo's milieu during that short-lived period.

Today, Berlin once again accommodates a literary, cultural, and political scene in which concepts such as Hebrew, Muslim, Jewish, Yiddish, Oriental, Arabic, and Semitic await new meanings, connotations, and associations. The ways that these concepts intersected and interacted with one another in the past – in Berlin and elsewhere – remains to be rediscovered, reinterpreted, and reappropriated in order to question binary oppositions and subvert hegemonic discourses of division and conquest. The hybrid, fluid, and non-binary potential of these concepts remains to be explored.

Fig. 18.1: A drawing by Yussuf Abbo

Source: Spengler Museum in Hannover

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