

ARTICLES

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MARK EGART AND THE LEGACY OF HIS SOVIET NOVEL ABOUT HALUTZIM

Life itself has coauthored the first part of this article, while continuing to pad its pages with information and to append them with footnotes. Were it not for a personal connection to the problem of Jewish returnees from the British Mandate of Palestine to the Soviet Union, I might not have taken an interest in the writer Mark Egart. Let me start with some family background. Both of my late grandfathers, Aron (Arkady) Polyak (Поляк) and Peysakh (Pyotr) Shrayer (Шраер), grew up in Kamenets-Podol'skii (Kamianets'-Podil's'kyi in Ukrainian), once the provincial capital of Podolia, presently reduced to a district center in the Khmel'nyts'kyi Province of Ukraine.¹ "Kamenets," as the natives and locals still refer to it with fondness, has many Jewish claims to fame, including Mendele Moykher-Sforim's service as a teacher in a local Jewish crown school in the 1850s. Born in 1910, my late paternal grandfather Peysakh (Pyotr) Shrayer had four siblings who survived into adulthood, including two brothers who were close in age: the younger brother Abram, born in 1911, and the older brother Moisei, who was born in 1907. It is the story of my great-uncle Moisei that must have given impetus to my

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An early version of this article was presented at the 2009 Conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies in Boston. I would like to thank Marat Grinberg for organizing the panel, "Zionism in the Russian Contexts: Cultural and Literary Dialogues: 1897-1939," and Amelia Glazer for her comments. I would also like to thank Michael C. Hickey and the journal's anonymous readers for their generous feedback. It is a pleasure to be part of the inaugural issue of *On the Jewish Street*.

1. See, for instance, Benyamin Lukin's recent encyclopedic article on Kamenets-Podol'skii. "Kamianets'-Podil's'kyi," trans. I. Michael Aronson. In *The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, ed. Gershon David Hundert (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2008), 1: 853-54.

tus to my investigation of the career of Mark Egart (Марк Эгарт), to which I will turn in the pages to follow.²

In Kamenets-Podol'skii and its environs the Shrayers worked in the flour milling business. Judaic traditions were respected in our family, but in the 1910s the lifestyle and educational ambitions were increasingly those of the urbanized Jewish bourgeoisie. My great-uncle Moisei Shrayer (Sharir) came of age during the Revolution and the Civil War, as regimes and authorities kept changing in Podolia. We should note in passing that Kamenets-Podol'skii had been a prominent center of Zionist activity, with a strong Tse'ire Tsiyon (Zionist Youth) organization active there after 1905. Some time in 1920, still under Polish rule, young Mosei (Munia) Shrayer joined a local group of Jewish scouts; although by 1923 the Soviet authorities had disbanded the group, Zionist activities would survive in Kamenets until 1926. My great-uncle's path was quite typical of the young Jewish men and women from the former Russian Empire, who, in the early 1920s, were thrust to then the British Mandate of Palestine by the double winds of socialism and Zionism.³ While still living in Kamenets, as Moisei Shrayer prepared himself for a new life in the land of Israel, he made attempts to study agronomy and land-surveying. Yet his "bourgeois" and Jewish background prevented him from gaining admission to a junior college mainly populated by Ukrainian peasant youths.⁴ In the summer of 1924 Moisei was in the process of obtaining papers to leave the country. He ended up fleeing Kamenets to escape a wave of arrests of the local Socialist-Zionist activists. He sailed off from Odessa, on board the legendary Novorossiisk, and arrived in Jaffa on 9 November 1924. Following the derailment of the New Economic Plan, the rest of the Shrayer family left – practically fled from – Kamenets and settled in Leningrad, where my father would be born in 1936. Moisei would never again see his parents and three of his four siblings. In the British Mandate of Palestine Moisei Shrayer would Hebraize his last name to "Sharir" (sinew; muscle; navel), a solid and un-screaming name

2. I have previously written about Egart and co-translated an excerpt from his novel *Scorched Land*; see Maxim D. Shrayer, "Mark Egart," in Maxim D. Shrayer, ed., *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature: Two Centuries of Dual Identity in Prose and Poetry, 1801-2001* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2007), 1: 398-99; Mark Egart, "From *Scorched Land*," trans. Margarit Tadevosyan Ordukhanyan and Maxim D. Shrayer, *ibid.*, 1: 400-12.

3. The history of Socialist-Zionist youth organizations such as Hashomer Hatzair (The Youth Guard) and of HeHalutz, the Zionist pioneer movement and its Young Pioneer arm, HeHalutz Hatzair, has been rather well documented, and there is no need to summarize it here. For some background information, see Israel Oppenheim's recent encyclopedic overview. Israel Oppenheim, "Haluts, He-," trans. Rami Hann, in *The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, ed. Gershon David Hundert, 1: 653-54.

4. I am following Moisei Sharir's account as presented in his Russian-language autobiographical notes, M. Sharir, *Zapiski zemlemera*. ([Tel-Aviv]: n.p., 1994).

for a new Jew of multiple internal contradictions. Initially he worked on the kibbutz Afikim in the Jordan Valley, south of the Sea of Galilee. Having dreamed of becoming a Maxim Gorky of the Hashomer Hatzair movement, Moisei Sharir ended up putting aside his literary ambitions and working as a land-surveyor in a land that was rebuilding and rewriting its history. For fourteen years he would be employed by the Land Surveying Department of the British Mandate Authority, from which he was dismissed in 1939, most likely for his anti-British and pro-Soviet beliefs. Reluctantly, Moisei Sharir started a private land-surveying business, and it took him two decades to learn to pay himself first.

There is one more twist to my great-uncle's story. In 1934 – already living in Tel Aviv with his first wife and a young son – M. Sharir petitioned the Soviet mission in Istanbul to be allowed to return. His request was denied. As he remarked in *Notes of a Land-Surveyor*, a memoir he wrote in the 1980s and published first in Hebrew, then in Russian, “If we had returned to Russia back then, I would have probably been arrested, if not immediately, then a year or two later. If they hadn't executed me as a spy, then they would have probably exiled me to the Far North.”⁵ In the memoir he also reminisced about “befriending a young woman by the name of Ada Milerovich [sic]” while staying on the kibbutz Afikim. “She became a member of the Communist Party of Palestine and returned to Russia,” Sharir recalled.⁶ Throughout his very long life – he lived into his late nineties and passed away in 2004 – M. Sharir would remain loyal to the ideals of his youth. When I met him in the summer of 1987 in Italy and subsequently saw him in Israel in the summer of 1998, we spoke at length about his politics and his past. He was never a card-carrying Communist in Israel. From the moment Mapam, the United Workers Party, was formed in Israel (in 1948, as a merger of the Hashomer Hatzair Workers Party and the Ahdut HaAvoda Poale Zion Movement), my great-uncle was an activist in its Tel-Aviv organization. He did vote for the Communists in some local and municipal elections. M. Sharir never fully shed his illusions about the Soviet Union and continued to wonder what his life might have been like had he been allowed to be repatriated in the 1930s. Which brings me to the story of Mark Egart.

In 2002 my father, the writer David Shroyer-Petrov, was speaking before an audience of ex-Soviet Jews at a book fair in the Detroit area. A woman approached him and introduced herself as Frida Egart, the daughter of the late writer Mark Egart. Ms. Egart told my father that in the 1930s her father had written and published a novel about *halutzim*, the Jewish pioneers in the land of Israel. She subsequently sent my father a

5. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

list of Mark Egart's publications and a typewritten biographical sketch. My father forwarded the materials to me and put me in touch with the writer's daughter.⁷ I had previously heard of Mark Egart only as the author of *Marusia Zhuravleva*, a Soviet factory novel. But a Soviet novel about Zionism and *halutzim*? This was hard to imagine. I was intrigued, especially because I had been working for several years on *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature* (2007). In fact, I had already completed the rather daunting selection process and had a hard time imagining additions. Yet I did some research and got hold of Egart's novel *Opalennaia zemlia* (Scorched Land), first published as a book in Moscow in 1933-34. I quickly realized that before me was something quite extraordinary and singular both in Jewish-Russian literature and in Soviet culture. It was a Russian-language novel by a former *halutz*, published in the Soviet mainstream and offering a fictionalized eyewitness account of life in the British Mandate of Palestine in the early 1920s. I ended up making a case for including in the anthology an excerpt from Book Two of *Scorched Land*, a part that bears the bitterly ironic title "Song of Songs."⁸

What do we know about Mark Egart? He was born Mordekhai Boguslavskii in Krivoi Rog, Ukraine, in 1901; Egart based his penname on his mother's maiden name, El'gart. His father was a teacher at the town's Jewish elementary school. In 1922 Egart left home with a group of HaHalutz members. He lived for a year in Poland, working and recruiting other *halutzim*. In 1923 Egart arrived in the British Mandate of Palestine. During the three years he spent there, he experienced unemployment, hunger and conflicts with the Arab population and the British authorities. In an unpublished autobiography, written for the Union of Soviet Writers in 1946, admittedly not a good year for valorizing one's Zionist past, Egart wrote: "The way [to Palestine] lay through Poland and Western Europe. Already on the way, long and arduous, I understood that what awaited me was not what I had been striving for. The reality confirmed my worst expectations."⁹ Disillusionment with the merciless realities of the marketplace and class division among Jews, coupled with the economic crisis of 1926-28 in the British Mandate of Palestine, resulted in Egart's decision to return to the USSR. According to the writer's daughter Frida Egart, a crucial factor was his progressing illness, tuberculosis of the bones. In the spring of 1926 Egart returned to his native Krivoi Rog and quickly relocated to Moscow.

7. Frida Egart, "Mark Moiseevich Egart (1901-1956)," typescript (in Russian), archive of Maxim D. Shroyer, Chestnut Hill, Mass.

8. See Egart, "From *Scorched Land*."

9. Quoted in F[edor] Levin, "Posleslovie," in Mark Egart, *Druz'ia. Roman* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1958), p. 581.

While living in Moscow in 1928, Egart turned to writing and joined a proletarian-oriented literary group “Vagranka” (cupola furnace, a small vertical device used in foundries to melt – remelt, to be precise – cast iron). Petr Pavlenko, the future author of *Schast’ e* (Happiness) and *Na Vostoke* (At the Far East), took heed of Egart’s literary aspirations. In the 1920s Pavlenko, who would later enjoy Stalin’s personal patronage, was already visible on the Soviet Pantheon. Coincidentally or not, Pavlenko had served in the Soviet trade mission in Istanbul in 1924-27 and must have been familiar with the general situation in the Near East and with individual cases of the returnees from the British Mandate of Palestine. After traveling with a working group (*brigada*) of writers to the Altai Mountains in 1930, Egart wrote *Pereprava: Altaiskie ocherki* (The Crossing: Altai Sketches).¹⁰ Describing collectivization in the Oirotia area of the Altai Region, *The Crossing* appeared in 1932 in the series “New Works of Proletarian Literature”; it came out in English and German in Moscow that same year, and also in Khar’kov in Ukraine. The book was entirely free of Jewish characters or of detectably Jewish authorial self-awareness.

In 1932 Egart published the novel *Opalennaia zemlia* (Scorched Land), a text of historical significance, and also his most accomplished literary work. *Scorched Land* portrayed the struggles of young Jewish settlers in Palestine in the early 1920s. Book one was serialized in the Moscow monthly *Oktiabr’* (October), numbers 9-12 (1932), overlapping in one issue (10) with Mikhail Sholokhov’s *Quiet Flows the Don*. Egart’s entire novel appeared in Moscow in two separate book volumes (Book One in 1933 and Book Two in 1934). The Russian-Israeli scholar Vladimir Khazan believes that the timing of Egart’s debut as a novelist, and of the publication of *Scorched Land*, had something to do with the official Soviet campaign against antisemitism in 1929-31.¹¹ While agreeing with Khazan, I also think that Egart’s novel owed its original publication in one of the leading Soviet journals to the sheer power of its narrative voice, the style of its prose, and its exotic subject matter. Additionally, I suspect that a combination of the novel’s artistic merits and its author’s unusual personal story might have caught the eye of the members of *October’s* editorial board.¹² Historically a stronghold of proletarian literature, in the spring-summer-autumn of 1932 *October* was rapidly reorienting itself following the 23 April 1932 Party resolution “On the Re-

10. A bibliography of Egart’s principal works is found in the appendix.

11. Vladimir Khazan, “Neobetovannaia zemlia Marka Egarta,” *Solnechnoe spletenie* 16-17 (2001): p. 155.

12. I have not had a chance to investigate the survival of the archival materials that may shed light on *October’s* decision to publish Egart’s *Scorched Land*.

structuring of Literary-Artistic Organizations,” which liquidated the Soviet proletarian literary associations and mandated a merger of all the literary groups into a single union of Soviet writers. In publishing *Scorched Land*, the reconfigured editorial board of *October* made what in retrospect appears to be a curious bet (against Soviet – and Jewish – history).¹³

In connection with the original publication of *Scorched Land*, we should also take stock of at least two other contributing factors of the Jewish-Soviet historical context. Even though by the early 1930s the Birobidzhan project, originally conceived as a politically advantageous Soviet alternative to Zionism, had all but proven itself a fiasco, the Soviet leadership continued to push on with the plan. In 1930, a Jewish national district was incorporated in Birobidzhan with under 3,000 Jews, and in 1934, even though the Jewish population of the Birobidzhan area was barely over 8,000 (instead of the projected 50,000), the area was made into a Jewish Autonomous Province – with unjustified fanfare. But more to the point of Egart’s novel, in 1932-34 the “Jews on the land” movement was still in full swing, with well over 100,000 Jewish toilers living in agricultural communes and the Freidorf Jewish national district having been established in the Crimea (in 1930). Even though the project of resettling Jewish toilers on land had never been realized on a scale as ambitious as when it was declared in 1924, in the early 1930s it still showed some impressive (if temporary) results.¹⁴ In fact, a fraction of the settlers of the Crimean Jewish colonies included returnees from the British Mandate of Palestine.¹⁵ If in the 1920s, to quote Jonathan L. Dekel-Chen, “Russian-Jewish returnees from Palestine appeared to be living proofs of Zionism’s bankruptcy [. . .],”¹⁶ the publication of Mark Egart’s novel in 1932-34 would have served as a fitting afterword to the Soviet anti-Zionist politics of the 1920s.

13. Following the 23 April 1932 Party resolution and the restructuring of the magazine, the members of *October*’s new editorial board included: Aleksandr Afinogenov, Aleksandr Bezymenskii, Aleksandr Zharov, Vasilii Il’nikov, Nikolai Ognev, Fedor Panferov, Aleksei Surkov, and Mikhail Sholokhov. The editorial board now included only one member of Jewish origin, the poet and screenwriter Aleksandr Bezymenskii. In 1933 *October* would become an official publication of the newly formed Union of Writers of the Russian Federation.

14. For a brief overview of the “Jews on the land” program in the context of Jewish-Russian literature of the 1920s, see Maxim D. Shrayer, ed., *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature: Two Centuries of Dual Identity in Prose and Poetry, 1801-2001* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2007), 1: 362-64.

15. The research of Jonathan L. Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land: Jewish Agricultural Colonization and Local Soviet Power, 1924-1941* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2005) is illuminating.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

Told in the agonistic first-person voice, *Scorched Land* followed Egart's autobiographical protagonist, Lazar Daian (Dayan), from the former Pale to Palestine. Egart presented Daian's life in his home town in Ukraine, disguised as Gnilopol' (from the Russian word *gniloi*, "rotten"), as one plagued by poverty and disemboweled by pogroms. It was a life Egart's idealistic *halutz* gladly left behind. In early Soviet literary works by Jews or about Jews (e.g., Iuri Libedinskii's *The Commissars* [1925] and Iosif Utkin's *The Tale of Red-Headed Motele* [1925]), historical logic habitually brought Jewish characters to the Revolution and Soviet activism. Egart's Soviet novel is unprecedented and unparalleled for outlining an alternative, if ultimately broken, trajectory: to emigration and building a Jewish enclave in Palestine. In the words of Khazan, "in *Scorched Land*, it seems, for the first and last time in Soviet literature, was sounded an unhidden sympathy for Zionism, naturally paling in comparison with the novel's overall concept, although still depicted as a distinct social and psychological reality, rather than an ephemeral, mythic sentiment, allegedly invented by the Zionist 'catchers of souls.'"¹⁷ Part I of book 1 opened with an epigraph from Theodor Herzl's *The Jewish State*. Naturally, the novel's tendentious narrative logic clamored for a Marxist-Leninist conclusion: only in the USSR – and not in Palestine – can the Jewish question be "solved." (Recall that in Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov's *The Little Golden Calf*, completed by early 1931, a Soviet journalist makes a famous comment about the Jewish question in response to a query by an American Zionist activist: "There are Jews, but no [Jewish] question.") *Scorched Land* ended with the departure of the Soviet-bound Lazar Daian from Jaffa and included no scenes of the returnee's life in the USSR. I find the latter circumstance very significant, as it suggests Egart's decision to draw a line under the Zionist and Palestinian chapter of his past while opting out of the Jewish politics at home.

In the novel's historically emblematic structure of desire, Lazar Daian finds himself torn between two Jewish women. The first, Nekhama, is a plain, unambitious young *halutz* who is trying to domesticate him; the second, Dora, is a much more captivating young woman from the former Pale, who in Palestine changes her name to Avivit (a Hebrew name charged with the aura of Spring). Dora-Avivit ends up marrying Ezra Senderei, Lazar's rival and a man of radical convictions involved in un-

17. Khazan, "Neobetovannia zemlia Marka Egarta," p. 155. The Russian expression "lovtsy dush" (literally "catchers of souls") apparently originates from the words of Jesus in Mathew 4: 18-19), where Jesus promises Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew he would make them "fishers of men" (cf. "catchers of men" in Luke 4: 10; "Jovtsy chelovekov" in the Russian). However, in Russian usage the expression "catchers of souls" possesses a distinctly negative aura; in Soviet propaganda it was often used in reference to religious sects or political organizations recruiting adepts and followers.

derground Communist activities. Lazar rejects Nekhama's comfort and consolation; she commits suicide, and Lazar leaves their tent settlement on the Sea of Galilee. "I walked toward the sunset amid the cold mountains that turned their backs on me," writes Lazar. "Like the Wandering Jew, I roamed through life and was everywhere a stranger."¹⁸ This comment already anticipates the narrative logic of the entire novel, through which Lazar the Wandering Jew gains a home and ends his wanderings after he returns to the Soviet Union. Yet the reader is left to her or his own devices in imagining Lazar's life upon his return to the USSR. As the Russian-Israeli critic Mikhail Vaiskopf observed, the first name of Egart's "resurrected" protagonist, Lazar(us), is not chosen gratuitously.¹⁹

The print run of the first book edition of *Scorched Land*, 5,000 copies, was about average by the Soviet publishing standards of the time (for comparison purposes, in 1932 the monthly print run of *October* magazine was 15,000; the print run of the novel's second edition in 1937 was 10,000; the print run of Egart's next novel, *Marusia Zhuravleva*, of 1938, was 10,000). *Scorched Land* was noted and reviewed, not abundantly, but favorably. In a long review printed in the ranking monthly *Novyi mir* in November 1933, the critic Dmitrii Gel'man wrote: "As far as Palestine is concerned, it would not be an exaggeration for us to suggest, that this country has been 'discovered' for the first time in fiction by Mark Egart [the original, *v khudozhestvennoi literature*, suggests more not just fiction, but literary arts in general]."²⁰ The point is not that the *Novyi mir* reviewer may not have been familiar with the place of the land of Israel in the literary imagination of Russian-language writers, but that he credited Egart with the "discovery" in terms that were unambiguously positive. Gel'man listed *Scorched Land* among the "most interesting and informative books published in the recent time."²¹

In 1937 a "corrected" version of *Scorched Land* came out in a single book volume. The revised edition largely erased self-conscious references to Zionism and its leaders, such as the epigraphs from Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky and Theodor Herzl. Vaiskopf notes that Book One of the novel's first edition was "literally stitched all the way through" with quotes

18. Egart, *Opalennaia zemlia, Kniga vtoraiia*, p. 40; cf. Egart, "From *Scorched Land*," p. 412.

19. Mikhail Vaiskopf, "'Krasnoe plat'itse': Obraz geroini v antisionistskoi proze 1930-kh gg.," p. 375. In his essay, Vaiskopf also suggested that in Egart's novel "the Christian transformative exegetics gain Bolshevik contents according to the model, which had been developed by Maiakovskii and Dem'ian Bednyi, although complicated by the anti-Zionist specific circumstances and the local [Palestinian] reality" (p. 372).

20. Dm. Gel'man, "Mark Egart, 'Opalennaia zemlia' [review]." *Novyi mir* 11 (1933): 199.

21. *Ibid.*

quotes from Jabotinsky.²² Even though an editorial footnote identified Jabotinsky as “one of the leaders of the Zionist movement, who has now deteriorated to open fascism,” the Zionist “stitches” – or sutures – were all taken out in the revised edition. Egart was not just erasing from his novel the self-conscious traces of Zionist history. He was expunging a great deal of his own authorial presence. The emasculated 1937 edition could not erase all of Egart’s admiration for *halutzim*, although it did its best to obliterate the lyrical-authorial pathos of the Palestinian parts of the novel while also making an anti-Zionist narrative argument rather apparent. And yet, even the revised edition stood in dire contrast to the schematic treatment of the subject by Egart’s contemporary Semen Gekht (1903-1963). In Gekht’s novel *Parokhod idet v Iaffu i obratno* (The Steamship Sails to Jaffa and Back, Moscow, 1936), the protagonist reached Palestine *only* to return to the Soviet Union.

In connection with Egart’s revisions in the second book edition, we should consider the changing Soviet attitude to Zionism and to the Jewish Socialist-Zionist activities in Palestine. Vaiskopf connects, rightly so in my estimation, the birth of the second edition of *Scorched Land* with the drastic changes in Comintern’s policy on the Near East in the early to middle 1930s. By the middle 1930s the Soviet regime and Comintern had all but severed their relations with the left-wing Zionist parties and groups in the British Mandate of Palestine.²³ Egart’s revisions thus appear to reflect a realization that Zionist sympathies would not be tolerated even within the framework of an ex-Zionist’s Soviet “odyssey.” That Egart the former Zionist and *halutz* survived the Great Terror without being harmed or purged was, in and of itself, a small miracle.

In 1937 the prominent magazine *Krasnaia nov’* (Red Virgin Soil) serialized Egart’s factory novel *Marusia Zhuravleva*. It was an average quality Soviet technocratic novel peopled by cardboard characters – especially so as compared to the cast of vibrant characters in *Scorched Land*. In January 1940, during something of a brief liberal interlude in Soviet literary culture, Egart published the short novel *Talisman* in *Novy mir*. Faintly echoing Iurii Olesha’s masterpiece *Envy*, this tale of the rise and demise of a conformist Soviet careerist possessed a certain power, boldness, and originality. Like *Scorched Land*, *Talisman* was never reprinted after World War II. Despite poor health, Egart served as a fiction editor at Navy Publishing House during the war, and subsequently he worked for many years as head of the Commission for Young Authors at the Union of Soviet Writers. Reprinted in 1948, *Marusia Zhuravleva* was supplemented by an equally formulaic sequel, the novel *Druz’ia* (Friends,

22. Vaiskopf, “‘Krasnoe plat’itse’,” p. 365.

23. See *ibid.*, pp. 364-65. For some historical background, see Hen-Tov and Franzén.

1950). After the war, Egart mainly wrote for adolescents. Some of Egart's works, especially his skillfully constructed "adventure tale" *Bukhta tumanov* (Bay of Mists, 1956), remained in print into the 1980s.

As regards the presence of Jewish themes and characters in the works written and published after *Scorched Land*, *Marusia Zhuravleva* offered precious little to report on, even for a Soviet production novel. (Think of stereotypical Jewish engineers like Valentin Kataev's Morgulis of *Time, Foreward* [1932].) In *Talisman*, written in 1938-39, we spot a certain David Samoilovich, a Jew and an older Bolshevik who happens to be the protagonist's boss; the protagonist steals and marries his wife. In 1939 *Red Virgin Soil* printed Egart's short novel *Na khutore* (On the Homestead) about the Civil War in Ukraine. In contrast to the Ukrainian opening chapters of *Scorched Land*, there was not even a trace of anything Jewish in this work, nor was there anything Jewish in *Iunost'* (Youth, pub. 1943), Egart's tale about young people's coming of age in Moscow during the first year of the war. A doctor by the name of Rozaliia Samoilovna, presumably a Jew, passes quietly through the pages of Egart's postwar novella *Mertvaia bukhta* (Dead Bay, 1947).

Egart returned to Jewish subjects in the tale "Greshnik Khet i pravednik Lot" ("Sinner Khet and Righteous Lot"), composed for the desk drawer in the summer of 1953, a few months after Stalin's death. A biblical allegory reminiscent of Lev Lunts's fabulous story "Rodina" (Native Land, 1922), Egart's biblical tale appeared for the first time in 1997, in the Russian-American magazine *Vestnik* (Messenger). The tale reveals a familiarity with both the history of Judaism and a command of the text of the Hebrew Bible that far exceeded that of many if not most Jewish-Russian writers living and working in the Soviet Union in the 1950s.

Mark Egart died in Moscow in July 1956, five months after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party. His passing was marked by a six-line obituary in *Literaturnaia gazeta* (*Literary Gazette*), and his Soviet literary postmortem was unhappy. Egart's only major novel, *Scorched Land*, along with his other principal work, *Talisman*, was erased from Soviet literary history. He himself was nearly deleted, or displaced and relegated to the category of authors of adventure tales for young adults or to brief entries in bibliographical dictionaries such as Nikolai Matsuev's *Russkie sovetskie pisateli* (Russian Soviet Writers, 1981). In 1958 Fedor Levin, the same Fedor Levin who in 1972 would publish a short (and quite good) Soviet monograph about Isaac Babel, attempted to resurrect Egart in a postface he wrote to a 1958 edition of Egart's novel *Friends*. Levin briefly discussed *Scorched Land* and mentioned, without being specific about his sources, how the book had "infuriated the Zionist press in Palestine,

tine, the United States and other countries.”²⁴ Levin’s brief discussion of *Scorched Land* might have done Egart’s legacy a disservice in what was increasingly a climate of anti-Israel hysteria in the USSR. Still, *Marusia Zhuravleva* was published again in 1965 and in 1970, and *Bay of Mists* was last reprinted by Moscow’s Detskaia literatura (Children’s Literature) in 1988.

Even though we do not have sufficient qualitative data to judge the popular and commercial success of a given work in the Soviet literary marketplace, it would be fair to say that several of Egart’s works continued to enjoy large printing sizes and lived a Soviet afterlife of their own, whereas their author had sunk into oblivion. Except for being mentioned in short biographies found on the copyright pages of his works reprinted in the 1960s-80s, Mark Egart’s most important literary creation, his Soviet novel about *halutzim*, had no place in the official Soviet literary history. Even though copies of both editions of *Scorched Land* have survived in some libraries in the former USSR, to this day *Scorched Land* has not been rediscovered or reprinted. In fact, in a publishing climate not unfavorable to rediscovering forgotten or undervalued names, none of Egart’s works have appeared in the former USSR since 1988. To the best of my knowledge, even the Jewish-Russian periodical press in Russia and Ukraine has not claimed him. Western students of Soviet literature have yet to acknowledge Mark Egart.

Two Russian-Israeli scholars, Vladimir Khazan and Mikhail Vaiskopf, have written about Egart in the past ten years. Khazan profiled Egart in his preface to a selection from *Scorched Land* published 2001 in the Tel-Aviv-based magazine *Solnechnoe spletenie* (Solar Plexus), and also in passing in other publications about Jewish-Russian literature. Vaiskopf lashed out at Egart’s legacy in a provocative essay, initially presented at a 2005 conference and published in 2008 in an edited volume. Khazan’s reading of the novel is quite sympathetic, if apologetic. While arguing that the overall pathos of the novel’s first edition is one of the protagonist’s “disillusionment of the Zionist dream,” Khazan acknowledges that a “novel about Palestine, created and published in the USSR in the early 1930s,” could not have “asserted” anything else.²⁵ In Khazan’s verdict the “castrated” edition of 1937 rids the novel’s “epic surface” of “lyrical seizures” and of personal, memoiristic ambiguities in the authorial attitude, while streamlining the anti-Zionist trajectory.²⁶ Vaiskhopf, who labels the

24. Levin, “Posleslovie,” p. 582. I have not been able to locate Levin’s sources, and I am not certain whether he refers to specific reviews published in the Jewish press or speaks rhetorically.

25. Khazan, “Nebetovannia Marka Egarta,” p. 156.

26. *Ibid.*

novel “anti-Zionist,” passes a largely downbeat judgment about *Scorched Land* and the legacy of its creator: “Despite its tendentiousness, Egart’s book is not without artistic merits. [. . .] Given all the limitations, posited by the circumstances, the novel was not a priori and entirely opportunistic. To put it more precisely, it curiously combined confessional notes with calculated tactical zigzags, censorial or self-censorial interventions and *agitprop* clichés, which became prevalent only in Book Two.”²⁷

It is not enough to credit Egart’s novel, half-heartedly, with a measure of literary artistry. The novel’s artistic merits deserve to be taken on their own terms. Especially successful in stylistic terms were the sections detailing the hardships of the Jewish-Russian pioneers. The coarse texture of Egart’s prose fiercely captured the prosaics of the daily lives of *halutzim* working amid the malarial swamps and the rough-hewn hills of Galilee. Consider, for instance, a description of muggy summer nights in the settlers’ encampment. The passage from Chapter 8, Book 2, Part 1 of *Scorched Land* adumbrates the death of Zevulan, the infant son of Lazar Daian’s fellow *halutzim* Kopl and Binka:

Summer loomed over the lake like an inextinguishable bonfire. The cliffs would get sizzling hot; tufts of scorched grass shot red and rusty along the slope. The lake, exhausted with heat, lay motionless down below, and yellow scummy foam stirred like a spreading pestilence along the shores. And thousands of mosquitoes and midges buzzed all day and all night.

Our tents now stood at the edge of the water. And still it was stuffy. It was so stuffy that in the middle of the night Binka would wake up and start tearing her nightshirt. I could hear how she tossed under the clingy mosquito net, gasping, like a fish out of water. She would push herself out of the mosquito net in the darkness, lean over the suffocating Zevulan, and look over his sunken face. Unable to bear it, Binka would take the child into her arms and, careful not to wake him, carry him to the shore. She would hold him right over the water until his breathing grew slower and deeper. He would open his tiny mouth, all dried up from the ghastly heat, wake up and cry. He had been crying a lot recently.²⁸

A retrospective of rereading of *Scorched Land* calls for a double evaluation of the novel – in the context of its author’s life and in the context of Soviet history in the late 1920s and 1930s. To call Egart’s novel “anti-Zionist” would amount to an oversimplification. To expect that a

27. Vaiskopf, “‘Krasnoe plat’itse’,” p. 365.

28.. Egart, “From *Scorched Land*,” p. 407.

novel published in the Soviet mainstream of the 1930s would not adhere to the fundamental parameters of Soviet ideology and historiography, and specifically, to the Soviet rhetoric on the Jewish question, would be historically unrealistic. The unique case of Mark Egart and his Soviet novel about *halutzim* clamors for further inquiry by historians of Zionism, scholars of Jewish culture, and students of early Soviet literature. I invite them to join me in exploring Egart's legacy.

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APPENDIX

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