WHY DID THE RIVER TURN RED?
ON THE STORY “ORSHA” BY GERSHON SCHOFMANN

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Gershon Schofmann, a prominent Hebrew prose writer of the first half of the twentieth century, was a master of the concise, well-shaped, miniature short story. The Schofmann story at its peak is a condensed aesthetic structure, and its thick fabric consists of a web of motifs and narrative patterns. Symbolic objects are masterfully interwoven into his fictional world, accompanied by witty conceptual observations and culminating in sharp, surprising endings that bring the narrative sequence to a remarkable closure.

This structural density does not blur the basic simplicity of the stories, since the plot and figures are sketched in clear, discernible contours. The lucid, “thin” language of Schofmann’s prose, devoid of literary embellishment or a heavy allusive burden, makes it quite accessible for readers nowadays despite the dramatic transformation that the Hebrew language has undergone since he wrote his first stories a hundred years ago.

Yet, if there is a chance of reviving Schofmann’s work for Hebrew readers today, it does not necessarily lie in its structural sophistication or linguistic qualities. In my opinion, such a chance lies mostly in Schofmann’s overall outlook on the world. This ironic, provocative, and merciless outlook exposes the naked selfish lusts underlying most forms of human behavior. The implied author of Schofmann’s stories creates a fictional world governed by harsh jungle laws, its inhabitants struggling for survival or power. In this world people are typically related as hunter and prey. Schofmann does not pretend to commit himself to accepted human morality. On the contrary, his fictional characters are hypnotized by power and despise weakness. They

1 The most recent attempt to revive Schofmann’s fiction for contemporary readers was made by the writer Haim Be’er, who edited and published the book Shalekhet (Fall of Leaves) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1994), a selection of stories from Schofmann’s Austrian period.
admire masculine and feminine beauty and are swept by erotic obsessions that override any consideration of loyalty, morality, or simple human compassion.

The Schofmann protagonist is mostly a weak, failing personality, full of existential anxiety, who generally achieves merely second-rate satisfaction. He fulfills his yearning for power by clinging to strong, authoritative figures (a boxer, a hangman, a court officer, a well-rooted farmer, a post office manager). He derives erotic energy from observing other people’s torments and death or by watching the flourishing beauty of girls destined for others. Thus, through a cold, alienated perspective, Schofmann strips his figures of their moralistic masks, exposing the egotistical motives that drive them unconsciously or half-consciously.

Schofmann’s narrative world is not as detached and isolated as it may initially seem. He develops features inherited from his literary ancestors, such as Mendele Mokher Seforim’s cruel, satirical portrayal of Jewish society or the admiration of earthly physical powers typically found in the stories of M. Y. Berdyczewski. His own style has been indirectly echoed by major Israeli writers. Essential views and sensibilities of Schofmann are found, for example, in the dramatic world of Hanoch Levin, founded on power relations between dominant, humiliating figures and their subordinate counterparts, eager to please and to serve. We may also link Schofmann’s protagonists with the figures portrayed in A. B. Yehoshua’s early work: the obsessive but weak creatures who rejoice in destruction and catastrophe and dedicate themselves to the service of meaningless totalitarian structures. Consequently, Schofmann’s stories are not a sealed chapter in the history of Hebrew literature. The original set of values they contain and the cruel, penetrating light they shed on certain aspects of human nature may continue to interest readers and writers in the future.

The principal worldview described above may be found in every corner of the rich narrative world Schofmann created in seventy years of literary activity. At the same time each of his works is rooted in a certain historical context and connected to specific autobiographical circumstances. The deep interrelations between his stories and their time were illuminated by Nurit Govrin in her thorough monograph of Schofmann’s life and work:

Every stage of his life, from horizon to horizon, from Eastern Europe through Western Europe to the concluding biographical stage in Eretz Israel, is also a piece of Jewish history and a reflection of the changing national fate. His very personal point of view represents the collective destiny and binds the various events together through
the life of this writer who expressed them directly and indirectly in his work.2

Indeed, a full understanding of any of Schofmann’s stories depends on a combined scrutiny of all three factors described above: the aesthetic aspects of its composition, the way it relates to the overall concepts of the writer, and the way it is connected to the general and personal historical reality from which it emerges. This triple combination is the basis for the following discussion of the story.

Orsha

Last night I saw my hometown in my dream. The streets, the lanes, the suburbs—just as they were in my childhood. Stillness and grief; the same dreadful grief we sometimes taste only in a dream. Everything around is like then. Nothing has changed. Only the Dnepr crossing the town—is red.3

“Orsha” is the shortest story included in Schofmann’s collected writings—only thirty-six words in the Hebrew original. It is divided into two short paragraphs, each containing three sentences. It consists of a simple vocabulary, and its syntactic arrangement is remarkably clear.

What can such a minimalist text contain? Not much, seemingly. Only a short, simple report of a dream, in which the dreamer envisions a few sights of his hometown. Nevertheless, even in the first reading one can feel the rhythmic and musical qualities of the linguistic sequence, relating

2 Nurit Govrin, Me’ofeq el ofeq: G. Schofmann hayyav vytsirato (Tel Aviv: Yahdav; Tel Aviv University, 1982), 1:11. For an introductory essay in English, see Nurit Govrin, Alienation and Regeneration (Tel Aviv: MOD Books, 1989), 52–62.

3 “Orsha,” Kol kitvei G. Schofmann (Tel Aviv: Dvir, Am Oved, 1960), 3:172. The emphasized words are in the original.
it to the realm of poetry. A rhythmic tension is discernible between short and long sentences and in the subdivision of the longer sentences into shorter and longer segments. The punctuation indicates carefully planned short pauses of silence between the sentences and within them. There is also a clear tendency for internal rhyming: *hamisholim–haparvarim*; *moladeti–yalduti*; *demamah–ayumah*; *halom–adom*.

A deeper observation reveals that like many other Schofmann stories, this composition consists of an antithetical construction, namely, the arrangement of thematic materials in patterns of binary oppositions. Despite the brevity of the story, it contains at least four overt oppositions that systematize the narrated world, in addition to some hidden, implied ones.

**Ontological opposition between reality and dream.** The real world includes the dreamer’s childhood reminiscences. Yet, they are transformed by the typical surrealist logic of the dream. This logic allows the river to change color and turn red. The whole fictional world exists in the interim between reality and fantasy.

**Temporal opposition between present and past.** The starting point of the story is a situation in the present, from which the narrator reports of his dream, but the contents of the dream draws on past memories. The dreamer is evidently a mature man, trying to visualize an image of his hometown as it is in the present, after many years, in comparison with the sights he remembers from the past.

**Spatial opposition between here and there.** The narrating technique and the manner of remembrance imply that the dreamer is now far away from his hometown. His point of view shapes the narrated space between two poles. He is now *here*, dreaming of another place being *there*. Otherwise there would have been no need for the remembrance process aimed at reconstructing a visual portrait of that place.

**Narrative opposition between change and stagnation.** Most of the story strives to emphasize the unchangeability of the town, despite the deep agony encompassing it. This impression is overturned in the last sentence, practically in the last word of the story, marking the astonishing, unexplained metamorphosis of the river waters. The change of color, the narrator hints, conceals a major vicissitude in the town’s life and fate. The narrative opposition is constructed by the sudden surprising ending (a

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favorite Schofmann technique) shedding new light on the entire fictional reality. The surprising word “red” is not only the last word of the story but the most outstanding semantically, distinguishing itself like a strong stain of paint against the gloomy, blurry, grayish atmosphere characterizing the whole fictional space.

Following the identification of the oppositional construction, we are now ready to sum up our impressions and assumptions. Supposedly, the narrator is now far away from his hometown, which he left many years ago. Now he is flooded with anxiety and sorrow. This atmosphere is explicitly marked by the description of “dreadful grief” prevailing in the dream, as well as by the threatening metamorphosis of the river.

But why did the river turn red, and why is there such a gloomy silence in the streets, lanes, and suburbs of the town? At this point the reader may pay attention to the strange fact that the dream contains only inanimate objects. No human beings are seen anywhere. The town in the dream is empty and deserted, a ghost town. Therefore, no sound is heard, and the space is full of “grief,” a recurring word in the very short text, the second time with the strong epithet “dreadful.” The sentences “Everything around is like then” and “Nothing has changed” thus take on an essential ironic quality, bearing in mind that only the setting remained as it was. But a town consists, above all, of its people, not merely streets and buildings, especially in childhood memories. In this respect, everything has changed because all the people are gone.

Is there a connection between the absence of the people and the red color of the river? In its minimalistic, restrained way the story invites the reader to fill the gap and to arrive at independent conclusions. For the Jewish reader a river turned red evokes one association, the first of the ten biblical plagues (Exodus 7:14–25), and there can be no doubt that Schofmann meant to lead the reader to that specific context. The water turned to blood accounts for the disappearance of the people. The blood then might be theirs due to a great catastrophe that was cast upon them.

At this stage the reader may feel that a close reading of the story, sensitive as it is, cannot suffice for tracing its exact intentions. Too much information is missing, and it has to be sought elsewhere. The title “Orsha,” the name of the Belorussian town where Gershon Schofmann was born in 1880, implies that the story should be read and interpreted in a specific historical, autobiographical context. Its decoding therefore depends on identifying the exact circumstances in which it was written. Schofmann did not make it easy for his readers: when he published his collected stories he did not accompany them with original publication
dates. Yet, the detailed bibliographical appendix in Nurit Govrin’s monograph indicates that the story was first printed in the Hebrew daily *Davar* on August 29, 1941. A year later it was included in Schofmann’s book *Beterem arga’ah* (Before Pacifying).  

This publication date illuminates the story like a strong projector, immediately clearing the fog around it. Not only does it situate “Orsha” in the context of World War II and the Holocaust, a context the reader may have already figured out, but it also places it in a very specific time slot within that duration. In August 1941 the German invasion into the Soviet Union was in its full momentum. This move, starting on June 22, 1941, marks the beginning of the second stage of World War II, together with the first massive murders of East European Jews. The town of Orsha that lies on the banks of the Dnepr in the Vitebsk district of White Russia was occupied in mid-July 1941, only three weeks after the German invasion started. Schofmann’s story was written six weeks after the town was taken over, while the Germans were establishing their reign of terror there, exactly as they did in thousands of other towns.

Schofmann himself had left his hometown forty years before, at the age of twenty-one. In 1904 he left Russia, and until the end of the 1930s he lived in Galicia, Vienna, and in a small Austrian village where he settled in 1921. All those years he maintained his contacts with his relatives in Orsha through correspondence. The story “Orsha” was written in Tel Aviv, where he had settled with his family in July 1938 after fleeing from Nazi-governed Austria almost at the last moment. From Tel Aviv Schofmann followed the dreadful events occurring in his East European childhood environment. The story was presumably printed a few days after it had been written, because Schofmann always aimed his writing for immediate publication.

From the current reports of the military scene in Russia, Schofmann could have known that Orsha was already under German occupation, probably guessing the terrible distress of its Jewish inhabitants, including his close family. In this respect he resembled most of the Jewish community in Eretz Israel (the Yishuv) who had left parents and families in Eastern Europe, whose fate they could have imagined even without solid information.

This historical situation may clarify the state of mind from which the story “Orsha” emerged: deep anxiety, suppression, and denial, fearing the worst without any clear knowledge of the actual situation “there.” Indeed,

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a story like this, which sways between horrifying guesses and refusal to believe the bitter truth, could have been written only during that period of uncertainty, before the determined revelation of the massive, methodical extermination of European Jewry. Thus, it is not surprising that Schofmann chose to shape his vision of Orsha in the framework of a dream, or more precisely, a nightmare. One may even dare to assume that the story is based on a real dream the author had during that period, in which he saw Orsha as a ghost town whose people had mysteriously disappeared.

When Schofmann published his story, the Jewish community of Orsha still existed. It was only at the end of 1941 that thousands of Jews were assembled in the town cemetery, where they were shot and buried. This sequence of events gives the story a prophetic-like quality, as a dark vision of future events. The implied and restrained nature of the narration reflects the inability of Jews in Eretz Israel at the time to grasp the magnitude of the German premeditated scheme later known as the Final Solution. The actual awareness of this plan was explicitly expressed as late as November 1942, when the executive of the Jewish Agency issued an official statement concerning the overall methodical plan to liquidate European Jewry.

Placing the story in its historical context exposes additional dimensions of the biblical allusion mentioned above. Schofmann constructed an ironic confrontation between the situation he described and the story of Exodus, the plague of blood being one of its components. The river of the biblical story is turned into blood as a first warning sign for the Egyptians who refused to free their Israelite slaves. The tenth plague again involves blood, which is daubed on the doorposts and lintels of the Israelite homes. It thus serves as a discriminating mark that grants them immunity against the slaughter of the firstborn. In both plagues the blood is not human, and its appearance is part of a divine scheme destined to save the Jews from their oppressors. In Schofmann's story, however, the blood metonymically represents the slaughtered Jews, deprived of any suggestion of heavenly redemption. The reversed figurative use of blood is, no doubt, a protest against the God who did not come to save His people this time. Schofmann reacts here like other Hebrew writers. Some of the most prominent Hebrew poems on the Holocaust derive their power from the same ironic, contradictory use of biblical redemption stories, thus exposing the collapse of faith in a God who withheld His powers and abandoned His believers.⁷

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⁷ For example, “Yitshaq” (“Isaac”), by Amir Gilboa; “Mikol ha’amim” (“Of All the Nations”), by Natan Alterman; “Avi” (“My Father”), by Tuvia Ruebner; “Ketonet ish hamahanot” (“The Camp-Man’s Robe”), by Avner Treinin; “Edut” (“Testimony”), by Dan Pagis. Most of these poems were included in Natan
Today, some sixty years after the story’s first publication, it can assume a new context. For reasons much too complex to discuss here, the beginning of the 1980s saw the advent of a new awareness of the Holocaust in the Israeli public arena. One of the highly sensitive issues of this public, scholarly, and literary discourse was the problematic attitude of the Jews in Palestine toward the Holocaust during its occurrence and shortly afterwards. Did the organized institutions of the Yishuv do everything in their power to save as many Jews as possible? Did the commitment to Zionist causes contradict the dedication to rescue attempts? What was the position of David Ben-Gurion and other Zionist leaders, and how did it affect the steps taken (or not taken) in this matter? Did the atmosphere of Yishuv life during the years of World War II reflect full awareness of the tragedy of the Jewish people, or did the Jews of Eretz Israel choose to suppress and deny it? How did the Hebrew press deal with the horrifying news from Europe? To what extent was the voice of the intellectuals heard? How were survivors of the Holocaust received in Eretz Israel immediately after the war?

These questions lay at the core of an ongoing, intensive discussion in Israeli public and academic spheres. Broadly speaking, the participants of the debate can be divided into two rival camps. On the one hand stands a blunt critical approach that tends to blame the Yishuv and its leadership for concentrating entirely on Zionist interests, thus reducing its commitment for Jewish solidarity. On the other hand is a more complex approach that attempts to reconstruct the conditions and limitations within which the Zionist leadership operated and to examine the practical possibilities open to them at the time.

Several Israeli writers have participated intensively in this discussion. Some of them have even transferred it to the artistic sphere, dedicating fictional works to the immediate imprint of the Holocaust on Eretz Israel. Shulamit Hareven, for example, wrote a story condemning the alienating and disbelieving attitude toward a young boy, the only survivor of his family, who arrives in Eretz Israel before the war has ended. Hanoch Gross, Itamar Yaoz-Kest, and Rina Klinov, eds., Hasho’ah bashirah ha’ivrit: mivhar (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1974).

8 See, for example, Anita Shapira, “The History of the Mythology: Outlines for the Historiography on Ben-Gurion and the Holocaust” [Hebrew], Alpayim 18 (1999): 24–53. Beyond its proclaimed subject this essay reflects the entire historiographical debate on the issue of the Yishuv and the Holocaust.

Bartov composed a comprehensive autobiographical *Bildungsroman*, taking place between 1939 and 1943, that includes bitter self-criticism against the hero, a thirteen- to seventeen-year-old youngster. This hero is so absorbed by the delightful experiences of his flourishing youth that he is completely unaware of the horrors other Jewish youngsters are experiencing elsewhere at the same time, although the relevant information is easily accessible.\(^\text{10}\)

Schofmann’s story belongs to another group of literary works, composed in Eretz Israel during the war by writers of Eastern European origin. These writers were intimately acquainted with the Holocaust territories in which they had all left relatives and friends.\(^\text{11}\) In this respect Schofmann resembles dozens of other Hebrew writers who had no intention of alienating themselves from the harsh realities, striving, instead, to express their views and feelings toward the horrible events. Each sought to overcome the mental, moral, and aesthetic barriers surrounding this unique subject, shaping a personal formula for that purpose.\(^\text{12}\)

Schofmann’s solution in “Orsha” is more complex than it may initially seem, due to the hidden paradoxes underlying it. On the one hand, the writer fulfills his moral duty and expresses a deep empathy toward his townspeople. On the other hand, he plants significant spaces of silence within the short text, thus forcing the reader to realize that a genuine expression lies beyond the power of words. He emphasizes his deep sense of belonging to his hometown, where he is intimately related to every corner. At the same time, he recognizes the ultimate barrier currently separating him from his townspeople. He has already arrived at the safe shore while they are helplessly awaiting an awful destiny. Perhaps shaping the story as a dream implies his inability to grasp what they are going through from his comfortable bed in Tel Aviv, despite his genuine feelings of empathy toward them. The story thus contains a definite element of self irony and self condemnation.

Yet, beyond the empathy, the irony, and the paradoxes, “Orsha” essentially expresses total helplessness, reflected first and foremost in the narrative situation. Lying in bed at night, tormented by a bitter nightmare,

\(^{10}\) Hanoch Bartov, *Regel ahat bahuts* (*Halfway Out*) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1994). See also his collection of essays: *Ani lo hatsabar hamitologi* (*I Am Not the Mythological Sabra*) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1995).


the narrator exposes his ultimate passivity, knowing that even his loudest outcry will make no difference, let alone reduce the agony of his tormented brothers and sisters. This, in my opinion, is the real message conveyed in the story and the essence of the bitter truth it reflects. As many historians admit, even if the Yishuv had totally committed itself and invested all its resources in rescue efforts, it is doubtful whether anything could really have been done. Yet the outcry had to be heard.

As for Schoffmann, he managed to choose thirty-six simple words and shape them in a condensed aesthetic structure, consisting of numerous oppositions, ironies, and paradoxes, biblical and autobiographical allusions, patterns of sound and rhythm, tensions between overt and covert meanings, and interplay between words and silence. The complexity of this tiny composition enabled him to reflect and express in sharp precision and penetrating understanding the exact essence of his time and place: Eretz Israel in August 1941, gazing with fear and rage and, above all, a profound sense of powerlessness, at the coming apocalypse.