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REUVEN BRAININ: THE FALL OF AN ICON



Naomi Caruso

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THE FALL OF AN ICON

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REUVEN BRAININ: THE FALL OF AN ICON

Naomi Caruso

Cover photograph: Reuven Brainin on his visit to Palestine, 1926. Photograph from the Jewish Public Library Archives, Montreal.

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Reuven Brainin circa 1900

(Photo from *The Complete Works of Reuben Ben Mordecai Brainin*; Jubilee Edition, v.1, published by the Jubilee Committee, New York, 1922.)

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PREFACE

In introducing his first *Canadian Jewish Archives* volume on Brainin, David Rome wrote that his was “not an easy biography to look at because it is a shattered tale, each shard belonging to another jigsaw puzzle. Each fragment fascinates some segments of human history, but historians have seldom been interested in the entire man; he has alienated many of the nations which he loved and sought to serve as prophet.”

Although *Reuven Brainin: The Fall of an Icon* constitutes an independent narrative, it can also be seen as completing the themes explored by David Rome in *The Canadian Story of Reuben Brainin Part 1* and his posthumously published *Part 2*, edited by Naomi Caruso and me. In the concluding pages of the latter volume, Rome briefly recounts the course of Brainin’s final years and hints at the controversy and negative outcry that surrounded him then. After reading those last pages I had long continued to wonder at how Brainin’s star could have fallen so dramatically and at how his own belief system could have changed so greatly. This book addresses and answers those questions.

In assembling the material for this volume, Naomi Caruso has relied most extensively on Hebrew sources, the language of many of the most deeply involved parties in the story, and also the language of Brainin’s own private diary. Her fluency in this language and her access to these sources provide us with unique insights into Brainin’s last years that have hitherto been unexplored. In accord with the linguistic orientation of this volume, the Hebrew spelling of Brainin’s first name (“Reuven”) has been used here rather than the “Reuben” of previous volumes.

Janice Rosen
Archives Director
Canadian Jewish Congress Charities Committee
National Archives

INTRODUCTION

It is a pleasure to introduce this volume to you. The book is a collection of essays on the history of the Chinese language, written by a group of leading scholars in the field. The essays are arranged in two parts, the first dealing with the history of the language up to the 19th century, and the second dealing with the history of the language from the 19th century to the present. The book is written in a clear and concise style, and is suitable for both students and scholars.

The first part of the book, dealing with the history of the language up to the 19th century, is written by a group of leading scholars in the field. The essays in this part are arranged in chronological order, starting with the earliest known forms of the Chinese language, and ending with the language of the 19th century. The essays in this part are written in a clear and concise style, and are suitable for both students and scholars. The second part of the book, dealing with the history of the language from the 19th century to the present, is written by a group of leading scholars in the field. The essays in this part are arranged in chronological order, starting with the language of the 19th century, and ending with the language of the present. The essays in this part are written in a clear and concise style, and are suitable for both students and scholars.

The book is a valuable contribution to the study of the history of the Chinese language, and is suitable for both students and scholars. The essays in the book are written in a clear and concise style, and are arranged in a logical order. The book is a valuable contribution to the study of the history of the Chinese language, and is suitable for both students and scholars. The essays in the book are written in a clear and concise style, and are arranged in a logical order.

James H. M. Li
Yuen Ren Chao
Chung-chi Liu
Hsiao-chi Liu

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My interest in Reuven Brainin began years ago, when I undertook the task of sorting and organizing his massive literary archives at the Jewish Public Library. The finding of 180 love letters that his woman friend Chava Shapiro wrote to him led me to the topic of my master's thesis in Jewish Studies at McGill University in 1991.

Since then I have always been intrigued by this complicated and moody man who did so much for the Hebrew language and Zionism in his prime, and yet when in old age he begged to differ and espoused another view he was ostracized and excommunicated by the very establishment he helped bring into being.

My thanks go to Shannon Hodge at the Jewish Public Library archives for providing me with the relevant boxes I needed in spite of the semi-chaotic state her domain was temporarily in; Peter Margo for his patient help with the German translation of the court proceedings; and Shirley Brodt, who edited and formatted the manuscript. A special thank-you to Janice Rosen of the CJCCC Archives: first, for accepting to turn my research into a book in the continuing series of Canadian Jewish Archives publications, and second, for always being there to listen and make constructive suggestions.

Naomi Caruso
Montreal
November 2007

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The author also wishes to thank the following people for their help and encouragement: [names listed]

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BRAININ CHRONOLOGY

- 1862 Born March 15 in Liady, Russia.
- 1866 Heder studies.
- 1868 Yeshiva studies.
- 1878 Leaves Liady for Harky to study agronomy.
- 1879 Goes to Smolensk and begins to write.
- 1880 In Moscow, organizes a student Bnei Zion group.
- 1885 Edits *Hamelitz* in St. Petersburg.
- 1888 Marries Masha Amsterdam in Moscow. His article on P. Smolensky appears in *Hamelitz*.
- 1890 Daughter Miriam is born.
- 1891 After expulsion from Moscow, goes to Vienna, where he attends university and rabbinical seminary.
- 1892 Daughter Bertha is born. Family moves to Berlin, and Brainin becomes involved with Zionist activities.
- 1893 Son Moses is born.
- 1894 Founds and edits the journal *Memizrah Umema'arav*.
- 1895 Son Joseph is born.*
- 1897 Attends the first Zionist Congress in Basel, lectures at the university of Berlin, and starts writing his diary.
- 1899 In May, meets Hava Shapiro in Berlin.

- 1902 In June, spends six months in hospital recovering from a nervous breakdown.
- 1907 Mother dies in Vienna.
- 1909 Visits North America for the first time.
- 1910 Visits Montreal in January, then tours the U.S. with his wife until May. Edits the journal *Hadrar* while there. Back in Montreal in November, negotiates with the Yiddish daily *The Kanader Adler* over the editorship position. Returns to Berlin.
- 1912 He and his family move to Montreal and in March he starts work at *The Kanader Adler*.
- 1913 Daughter Miriam marries Dr. Sam Ortenberg. Brainin leaves for Europe in August and returns in November.
- 1914 He and Yehuda Kaufman found the Jewish Public Library.
- 1915 Leaves *The Kanader Adler* and starts *Der Veg*, which folds within nine months.
- 1916 He and his wife move to New York City.
- 1918 Daughter Miriam dies in the influenza epidemic. Sam Ortenberg marries Brainin's sister Lisl.
- 1919 Becomes the editor of *Hatoren*.
- 1921 Son Joseph marries Shulamit, David Naimark's daughter. They settle in New York.
- 1922 Brainin's 60th birthday is celebrated.
- 1925 *Hatoren* folds. Brainin and his wife travel to Palestine for the Yiddish daily *Der Tog*.

- 1926 He and his wife visit Russia.
- 1927 Starts working on behalf of ICOR.
- 1928 Brainin's most active year working on behalf of ICOR, lecturing and fundraising for the organization throughout the United States.
- 1929 Travels in March with son Joseph to Europe and South Africa. In May, Bialik's article appears in Palestine. On October 7, the Court of Honour takes place in Berlin.
- 1930 Visits Russia during the summer.
- 1934 Wife dies.
- 1939 Dies in son Joseph's apartment in New York.
- 1941 Sons Moses and Joseph give their father's literary archives and books to the Jewish Public Library of Montreal.
- 1957 Joseph gives his father's diaries to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
- * Two sons born between 1896 and 1899 die in early infancy.

FOREWORD

This book is neither a biography of Reuven Brainin nor a critical assessment of his career but rather a detailed account of four fateful years of his life — four years in which Brainin took three trips that provoked denunciations from certain parties, which in turn resulted in the astonishing drama of the Court of Honour in Berlin.

I set out to investigate why a man of such early promise and renown among the Jewish intelligentsia in the early part of the twentieth century had become almost completely forgotten.

Having worked among people who had still remembered Brainin in person, I picked up rumours of various sorts, mostly dealing with his conversion to Communism in his old age and his run-in with Haim Nahman Bialik. But knowing how many other Jews sympathized with Communism in the 1920s, this alone did not explain why Brainin was ostracized the way he was.

My detective work began among the treasure piles of yellow, brittle newspaper clippings in the files of the Jewish Public Library archives, continued in the chilly vaults of the National Archives of the Canadian Jewish Congress Charities Committee, and ended in Jerusalem at the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, which is part of the Hebrew University, and at the Central Zionist Archives.

What I found astonished me. Brainin's entire fate was decided by the Jewish press, primarily the Hebrew press, which set out on a passionate vendetta against him subsequent to his trips to Palestine in 1925, to Russia in 1926 and to South Africa in 1929.

My aim in this research was to answer three questions: What precisely was Brainin's crime? Was the vendetta by the Zionist establishment against him justified? Did the punishment suit the crime?

I think I found the answers to the first two questions. As for the third question, I will let the readers decide.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part is made up of a detailed account of Brainin's fateful trips as reported by the Jewish press of the time and his own rebuttals to them. The second part views the same period through translated excerpts taken from Brainin's Hebrew diaries. Brainin kept a personal diary from March 1897, just after his 35th birthday, to September 1931, six months prior to his 70th birthday. The diary accompanied him everywhere, and in it he confided his most private thoughts. Not surprisingly his observations of what had happened during these years differ from the official line. They do not belie the accusations against him but rather offer an explanation.

PART ONE

WHO WAS BRAININ?

Reuven Brainin was born in Liady, Russia, in 1862 to a poor and religious family. He was 17 years old before he read his first secular book and began his long journey towards enlightenment. He left Russia in his twenties and settled first in Vienna and then in Berlin, making a living as a journalist. His two lifelong passions were his love of the Hebrew language, which he worked hard to revitalize and turn into an everyday, idiomatic language, and his belief in the Jewish people's entitlement to a national home. He was an ardent Zionist, a personal friend of Theodor Herzl and a delegate to the first Zionist congress in Basel in 1897 and almost every subsequent congress until his death.

In the years between the 1890s and the early part of the 1900s he traveled extensively throughout Eastern Europe, lecturing in small and large places on the new ideas permeating the modern Western world. He was good-looking and charismatic and wherever he went attracted thousands of young shtetl dwellers, who avidly drank in his words on subjects previously unknown to them, i.e., art, architecture, science and the new dream of returning to Zion. He came to represent for them the model of the new Jew, one who remained an observant Jew in his home but adopted Western ways outside. In 1894 in Vienna, he started publishing the journal *Memizrah Umema'arav*, (*From the West and From the East*), in which he set out to express this new approach to Jewish life. He had great hopes and an ambitious agenda for the journal, but unfortunately it folded five years later, in 1899, after only four issues, due to lack of funds.

How and why Brainin found himself in Montreal in 1912 editing the Yiddish daily *The Kanader Adler* has already been addressed in David Rome's two-volume monograph *The Canadian Story of Reuben Brainin* (Canadian Jewish Archives New Series Vols. 47 and 48). Suffice it to say that his coming to the city made an

enormous impact on the local Jewish cultural scene. Many educational and cultural institutions that exist here to this day owe their inspiration to him. Foremost among them is the Jewish Public Library (JPL), which he and his friend Yehuda Kaufman started to organize in 1913 and finally opened in May 1914 after many previous attempts to start a Jewish library in Montreal had failed. Brainin and Kaufman were also instrumental in laying the groundwork for the 1919 founding of Canadian Jewish Congress.

Brainin stayed in Montreal for four years and in 1916 moved to New York City, where he continued his literary and community activities. He ventured again into publishing his own Hebrew journal, *Hatoren* (1919-1925), wrote for other publications and was very active in Zionist circles, reaching the highest echelons of many Zionist organizations.

He was at the height of his acclaim as a Hebraist and Zionist in 1922, when he celebrated his 60th birthday. A special book was published on that occasion to extol his 40 years of literary accomplishments, and serious plans were underway to collect his writings and publish them in 30 volumes, because "[t]hey would make a complete library, where every chapter will provide pleasure... [These] writings are essential for every Hebrew home."¹

Three years later, this same man, after undertaking a trip to Palestine and Russia, became the target for criticism by the Jewish press, criticism which grew during his next trip to South Africa, in mid-1929, and reached such hysteria by October of that year that a disgraced Brainin resorted to the rare spectacle of a Court of Honour, pitting himself against the renowned Hebrew-language poet Haim Nahman Bialik to save whatever shred of reputation he still possessed.

¹ The last chapter of the commemorative volume for Brainin's 60th birthday, p. 85-96, describes detailed plans for publishing all of Brainin's writings in 30 volumes. The above quote appears on p. 88 of that publication.

In seven short years a lifetime of accomplishments was forgotten, and Brainin experienced a precipitous descent from the height of acclaim to the depth of rejection, where censure and loss of reputation gradually led to a total erasure of his name from the pantheon of Hebrew intellectuals.

Throughout his life Brainin's heart remained attached to Montreal. He visited his children and grandchildren who lived here, spent the summer months in the Laurentian mountains and always kept in touch with the library that he had founded. When he died, in 1939, a sick and broken man, he willed his literary archives to the Jewish Public Library; in 1941 his sons, Joseph and Moses, handed over a treasure trove of books, journals, manuscripts, correspondence and photos to the library.

There was, however, one unfortunate omission. Brainin had kept a personal diary, written in Hebrew, for over forty years. According to an interview given by Joseph Brainin to B.Z. Goldberg, of the Yiddish journal *Der Tog*, in New York on December 3, 1957, his father withheld the diaries from the JPL because they contained sensitive material concerning people who were still alive. By the time this interview took place the diaries had already been donated to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, because that was, according to Joseph Brainin, "[w]here my father's heart belonged." Considering that Brainin is on record as one of the first people to suggest establishing a university in Jerusalem prior to 1925, it is a fitting place for the diaries. They can be found today at the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, which is part of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

HIS CAREER

Reuven Brainin burst onto the Hebrew literary scene with his article on Peretz Smolenskin's death, which appeared in *Hamelitz*² in 1888. The choice of Peretz Smolenskin as a subject was not an accident. He represented to Brainin, as he did to many others in the Enlightenment movement, a shining role model.

Smolenskin (1842-1885) was the editor of *HaShahar* (*The Dawn*), a journal published in Vienna in Hebrew. For 17 years this was the main platform for debate among the Jewish intellectuals on issues such as the creation of Jewish nationalism in the absence of a national territory, or how to find the middle ground between Orthodox Judaism and total assimilation. It also published creative writing, including his own stories and novels. Smolenskin was passionate both about his journal and community affairs, making Jews aware of their plight, spreading the word about secular culture and the existence of a world beyond the shtetls.

His hectic life and tireless work took their toll. He was stricken by tuberculosis and died at the age of 43. But his influence continued well beyond the grave.

We can trace his effect on Brainin by the two central choices Brainin made in his own life: choosing to write in Hebrew and working for Zionism.³

² *Hamelitz* was a Hebrew journal published in St. Petersburg and Odessa from 1860-1904. It saw its role as a mediator between Jewish progressive thinkers and the established Jewish orthodoxy.

³ Brainin tried to emulate Smolenskin by publishing his own journal, *Memizrah Umema'arav*, (*From the East and From the West*). It appeared in 1894 in Vienna with great fanfare and an ambitious agenda but lasted only four issues, appearing at irregular intervals, until 1899. He subsequently tried three more times to publish a Hebrew journal: *Hador* in 1900, *Hador* in 1910 and *Hatoren* in 1919, which lasted the longest, until 1925.

WRITING IN HEBREW

The decision to dedicate his life to the revival of the Hebrew language, knowing full well that the potential reading public was small, was a brave one for the multilingual Brainin. In a special volume published on the occasion of Brainin's 60th birthday, an illustrious group of Hebrew scholars paid homage to him by enumerating the many accomplishments of his 40-year-long writing career. Here are some of the things they said:

"Brainin took the stilted, formulistic biblical phraseology, which had hitherto been the style of the early Hebrew writers, and turned it into a lively, straightforward, everyday, idiomatic language which served to express the new subjects that he introduced, subjects like biography, science, psychology, aesthetics, fine arts and the theatre."

"He traveled tirelessly through the settlements of the Pale, bringing with him the message of the rebirth of the Jewish people and its true language, Hebrew, setting up study groups with whom he corresponded for years after. Everywhere he went he preached to his thousands of young followers that it was possible to be a traditional Jew in the home and yet be open to new ideas and knowledge of the outside world."

"He personified the image of the new Jew. He was handsome, well dressed and well spoken. He brought with him an air of expectancy and exuded a sense of excitement. To the multitudes of "desert dwellers," dying of thirst amid their tradition-bound lives, he provided a life-saving source of pure spring water. He was their hero, their prophet. People remembered the impact of his appearances until their dying days."

"He was a dreamer, a fighter and a seeker of truth. His goal was to integrate the Jewish soul with all of humanity, without betraying its true self. He was curious and interested in everything. He was generous with his time and advice to young writers, encouraging

them and spurring them on. His home was an intellectual centre, open to everyone. He emanated a sense of hope and optimism in the possibility of progress and the reemergence of a better world. He loved life and loved learning. He was forever reinventing and regenerating himself. He never grew old."

"Everything in his creative output generated shock waves in our hearts and lifted our spirits. He elevated and lent such grandeur to all things."

Brainin fiercely believed that the strength of literature depended on the writers of each generation. It was they who were responsible for creating an era of new structures and new ideas for the future. The writer was the trailblazer, the prophet of his time. The value of literature, however, depended on the reader, who, by demanding a high standard from the writer, had the ability to uplift and improve, to polish and make perfect the literary work. There was a pact between the reader and the writer, each bearing his part of the responsibility by pledging to uphold the sanctity of literature.

WORKING FOR ZIONISM

Working toward a Jewish national home in Zion was the second choice Brainin made early in his career and he stuck to it for most of his life.

The end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th were turbulent times for the Jews of Russia. Pogroms and expulsions traumatized the Jewish population in spite of their efforts to blend in and become good Russian citizens. None of the policies pursued by the various Jewish movements was improving the condition of their lives.

Socialism and Zionism were two new movements that presented themselves as alternatives. Of the two, Zionism required the extra stretch of the imagination. It had the effrontery to pin its hope on the reclaiming of the land of Zion for the Jews of the Diaspora and reestablishing a homeland there.

Brainin, who was born in Russia, was one of the first who joined Theodor Herzl in believing that that was possible. He accompanied Herzl to the first Zionist congress, where, according to eyewitnesses, he was the "star," standing out from the rest of the delegates. He never had any doubt about the viability of a Jewish nation. He worked tirelessly for the establishment of a World Zionist Congress and a Hebrew university in Jerusalem. He helped every institution that had a Jewish national agenda. He traveled and lectured on behalf of the Zionist cause in thousands of venues, large and small, and never saw a penny for his efforts.

But by 1922, when the homage to him was published, the world around him was changing and he was beginning to feel dispirited with the slow pace of progress toward the establishment of a Jewish homeland. The three million Jews who had remained in Russia needed an immediate solution to their survival, yet England was dragging its feet in its decision to open the doors of Palestine for Jewish immigration. In the U.S., Brainin who was involved with

every level of Zionist activity, noticed how the movement was splitting into opposing factions, wasting time in petty quarrels and intrigues, and how much effort was spent in fundraising and socializing. He felt that the noble enterprise of building a homeland, in which he believed so implicitly, was dissipating into nothingness.

At the same time he was hearing more and more about Jewish colonization in Soviet Russia, and yearning for any action on behalf of his Russian Jewish brothers, he interpreted that as a positive move. But like everything else in Russia, nothing was exactly as it seemed.

JEWISH COLONIES IN RUSSIA

In 1918 a commissariat for Jewish affairs, Yevsektiya, was set up within the Communist party to deal with the special needs of the Jews, who, it became apparent, were different from the rest of the minorities that made up the Soviet Union. The Jews did not have their own territory, they did not speak Russian, they practiced a different religion, and they were mostly unskilled city dwellers living in dire poverty. Statistics for 1918 show that 70% to 80% of them had no regular income and were dependent on remittances from abroad.

Yevsektiya's role in bringing the masses of Jews under the aegis of the Communist party has been called into question by non-Jews and Jews alike. Did their motive spring from a sincere wish to integrate their impoverished brethren into the new social order or were they power hungry, self-serving people who justified the continuation of their official existence by creating issues and problems where none really existed? Suffice it to say that Yevsektiya sprang into action before the regime had any real concern with the Jews, their religion or what language they were going to use. There was general sympathy among the Communist leaders for the Jews and for the anti-Semitism they had suffered during Czarist times, and there were many examples of affection towards the Hebrew language as expressed by prominent people like Anatoly Lunacharsky and Maxim Gorky.

In fact, Hebrew had experienced a revival in pre-revolutionary times, and between 1917 and 1919 it had no opponents within the Communist party. The Balfour Declaration⁴ made Zionism the dominant trend in Russian Jewry. The organization maintained the

⁴ The Balfour Declaration was a letter sent on November 2, 1917, by Britain's foreign minister, Arthur James Balfour, to Lord Rothschild. In it the possibility of establishing a Jewish national home in Palestine was mentioned for the first time.

Tarbut network of 250 schools and other educational institutions whose language of instruction was Hebrew. The city of Odessa was a vibrant hub, where Hebrew flourished. Writers, poets and journalists gathered around the famous poet Haim Nahman Bialik and were responsible for Hebrew publishing houses and an active cultural scene.

In 1919, however, all this came to an end, not because of the regime's change of mind but because of Yevseksiya. It ordered the schools shut and nationalized the Hebrew presses, using them to publish Yiddish materials instead. Many Hebrew writers and teachers tried to leave the country but could not. Yevseksiya set for itself the task of hounding the Hebrew language to extinction. Its first decisions were to make Yiddish the official language of the Russian Jews and to ban Hebrew from schools, textbooks and any other publications. Yiddish was the common language of the toiling masses, they said, while Hebrew was the language of the bourgeois, the capitalists, the Zionists and the rabbis. In fact, the majority of Jews did not embrace the Yiddish language, religious Jews resented being told what to do, while others embraced the Russian language and the new opportunities of study and work that were now open to them.

A very emotional battle ensued between the fanatic Yevseksiya and the defenders of Hebrew, resulting in many cruel and unwarranted decisions, as both sides regarded it as a life-and-death struggle.

The Soviet regime itself developed an ambiguous, two-pronged policy towards the Jews. On the one hand it associated Hebrew and Zionism with England, which ruled Palestine and whom they considered the worst of the imperialists powers; Hebrew and Zionism were thus equated with counter-revolutionary behaviour. This attitude allowed Yevseksiya a free hand and offered the regime a convenient excuse when it heard complaints from abroad. The regime was merely a "passive observer," it claimed; the persecution came from within the Jewish community itself. At the same time, for propaganda purposes, especially vis-à-vis American

Jewry, it sometimes helped the Zionists. So while in 1921, Bialik and a group of Hebrew writers could not leave Russia without the special intervention of Maxim Gorky, and in 1922 in Kiev the first persecution of Zionists took place at a public trial, in 1924 an organization called HeHalutz, made up of labour Zionists, was created, dedicated to a back-to-the-land movement. But while the Jews thought "land" meant Palestine, the real aim was to "productivize the Jews" by turning them into Russian peasants. This campaign met with the approval of American Jews, who believed that a land base would legitimize the status of the millions of starving Jews, and the same time it achieved the goal of the regime, which could not tolerate an unassimilated minority in its midst.

Seventy-five collective agricultural settlements were established, at first with the intention of training the members before immigrating to Palestine but later with the hope that they would become permanent Jewish territories. Over the years the American Jewish Joint Distribution Agency⁵ poured 80 million dollars, 1,000 ploughs, 2,000 barrows, livestock and other machinery into this enterprise and helped about 50,000 people settle on the land, half of whom were not even Jewish.

Twenty-five colonies were located in the inhospitable northern part of Crimea, consisting of about 5,000 Jews. In spite of the harsh environment, it attained a romantic image, and its slogan "Crimea or Palestine?" became very popular.

At its peak this policy saw a great movement of Jews going from the cities to the countryside. Not even Palestine had as many Jewish settlers. However by 1926 this conciliatory policy toward Zionism

⁵ The American Jewish Joint Distribution Agency was founded in 1914 in New York by Louis Marshall and Jacob H. Schiff to aid starving Jews living in the Ottoman Empire. After the Russian Revolution and the First World War, the agency's mandate expanded to help Jewish victims wherever they were. Its Agro-Joint branch worked with the Soviets in resettling Jews and training them as farmers.

was changing. In the summer of 1925, a meeting took place in Moscow between the regime and the Zionist leadership. The Zionists demanded three things: persecutions against the Hebrew language must stop, the Yevseksiya must be reined in, and all imprisoned Zionists must be freed. Negotiations dragged on until March 1926, when they abruptly broke off and the Zionist leaders were arrested.

After this, only a small group of fanatical Zionists remained, who descended into the underground, where they continued to teach their beloved Hebrew language and yearn for Zion.

In 1928 a new five-year plan was devised. The Central Soviet Government decided that industrialization, not agriculture, was the key to making Russia great, and all support was withdrawn from the colonies. The Jews were now pushed into factories and transformed into industrial wage earners. Yet at the same time, not to alienate world Jewry, the regime was also planning Birobidzhan, a new Jewish national territory in the Far East, to replace Palestine altogether. In 1930 the Yevseksiya was disbanded.

THE FATEFUL TRIPS

PALESTINE (December 25, 1925–February 19, 1926)

The year 1925 was a turning point in Brainin's life. In his diary entries a note of bitterness began to appear against the way some of the Hebrew writers, the so-called "wise men of the pen," those who had never lifted a finger on behalf of the Jewish nation, treated him. He also excoriated the American Zionists, who only thought of themselves and forgot the greater cause for which they were working. He saw in Zionism the movement of redemption and revival and suffered from the superficiality of the Zionist "machine." He expressed a growing frustration with the Zionist establishment. He felt they had used him as a spokesman on countless occasions, all over the country, in front of small and large groups, for which he had never asked for or received a penny, and yet they had never thought of sending him as an emissary to Palestine. The reason, he was convinced, why the Palestine Zionists did not like him, was his habit of telling the truth and his independent views, which did not conform to theirs.

During that same year, Brainin found himself, not for the first time, in a precarious financial situation. His Hebrew journal *Hatoren*, which had been bringing in a steady income, ceased publication, and royalties from his other writings also dried up. It was in this context that he agreed to work for the owner of the Yiddish newspaper *Der Tog*, David Shapiro, who offered him and his wife an all-expense-paid trip to Europe and Palestine in exchange for articles for his paper.

The trip began in July 1925 and ended in November 1926, a 16-month-long odyssey that saw the Brainins travel in a leisurely fashion through the major capitals of Europe, meeting old friends and family relations, staying in comfortable hotels and wining and dining in pleasant surroundings. It was the visits to Palestine and Russia, however, that shook up the Zionist-Hebrew worlds of New

York and Tel Aviv and ended up having long-term repercussions on Brainin's life.

He arrived in Palestine in December 1925, full of joy at finally visiting the yearned-for homeland. In letters he wrote to Meyer Weisgal, the managing editor of *The New Palestine*, which found their way into print, he described how lost he was in silent admiration at what was being built in front of his eyes; how overwhelming it was to see the efforts of the revival of the land and its people; how the propaganda posters of Palestine he used to see in New York paled in view of the real-life pioneers. He visited the agricultural settlements, the towns and the cities and was impressed by everything, especially the healthy and happy children. He noted that the Jewish religion had turned into the religion of labour in Palestine! He was glad to see 3,000 to 4,000 new immigrants arriving monthly and being absorbed by the local economy; this was the advance army that would prepare the way for another 50,000 or maybe 60,000 more. He was convinced that only in Palestine lay the solution to the Jewish problem and nowhere else: "An irresistible power radiates from Palestine, which consumes and nullifies every contrary stream of life." (January 15, 1926, *The New Palestine*)

In speeches he made in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, he emphasized the importance of the role of the writer and his language. He was thrilled, he told his audiences, to hear Hebrew spoken everywhere and noticed how the language had expanded with everyday use. He hoped that it would be exported from Palestine to the U.S., where four million Jews lived who spoke mostly Yiddish in spite of his own efforts over the past 15 years to increase the use of Hebrew. He foresaw in the future two large Jewish centres in the world: Jerusalem and New York. (*Hadoar*, December 13, 1926)

But in his diary it was not long before he began expressing disillusionment with the writers whom he met. He found the "gang" that surrounded Bialik sadly lacking in talent and when he spent a long session with the members of the Writers Association, all he heard was bickering and ill-willed snapping and the members

embroiled in personal intrigues. All in all he came away deeply disappointed in the national enterprise. In his opinion the principal players were listless and lacking a grand spiritual vision for the future of Zionism. He began to seriously doubt the viability of the Jewish settlement in Palestine, which had reached a stagnant point.

In reality the picture was grim. Following the Balfour Declaration, in 1917, Zionists everywhere pinned great hopes on the British government, expecting that the yearned-for dream of establishing a home for the Jewish people would finally happen and that the gates to Palestine would be flung wide open and thousands of Jews allowed to enter. To their bitter disappointment the military regime that replaced the Turks was exceptionally hostile to Jewish aspirations and openly opposed to the Balfour Declaration. In 1920, when the military rule was changed and Herbert Samuel, a Jew and a Zionist sympathizer, was named high commissioner, the situation improved somewhat. But then the Zionist organization showed great incompetence. Of the 16,500 entry spots that were allotted to Jewish immigrants during Herbert Samuel's first year in office, the Zionist groups managed to distribute a dismal 1,000 certificates, with the rest being forfeited.

At the same time, Russian Jews, who were the moving spirit behind Zionism, who always gave large amounts of money to develop industry and construction in Palestine and who until the Communist takeover represented the largest number of settlers there, were dramatically cut off by the new Russian regime from all Zionist activity. Their ties to world Jewry were severed and their immigration to Palestine stopped.

Conditions in Palestine were deteriorating, money was running out and Zionist organizations abroad could not keep up with the increased demands for money. To aggravate matters the local Arab population was restless and periodically rose up against the newly arrived Jews. The number of pioneers who were leaving to return to Europe was alarming. It was obvious to Brainin that Palestine could never be the hoped-for haven for the three million Russian Jews.

RUSSIA (May 1926–August 1926)

Brainin left Palestine at the end of February and traveled through Poland and Romania to Russia. He arrived there in May of 1926, just when the situation of the Russian Zionists was undergoing a critical change. The positive attitude of the regime towards Jewish colonization with which Brainin was familiar no longer held sway.

On his arrival in Moscow he was visited by at least two groups of Zionists who gave him hard evidence to take back to the West: proof of the terrible situation the Zionists and the Hebrew language were facing in Russia.

The first group, representing the outlawed Tarbut organization, gave him three issues of their illegal journal *Ba'Peretz* (*In the Breach*).⁶ The second group was a delegation from the United Agency for Helping Imprisoned and Exiled Zionists, headed by Brainin's old friend from Berlin days, Professor Shlomo Feldman, who shortly after was imprisoned and exiled to Siberia, where he died. The latter group presented Brainin with a memorandum that described in great detail the terrible living conditions under which the Zionist prisoners lived in jail and in exile. Brainin reacted with great emotional anguish when he read this and promised unequivocally to do upon his return home whatever it took to gain help on their behalf. He then left Moscow to visit a few Jewish colonies in the Crimea and was very impressed with what he saw. He visited a colony named Mishmar, where he met colonists who spoke fluent Hebrew and were preparing to go to Palestine. He followed this by a visit to another colony, Tel Chai, where the people were not Zionists but Communists. Tel Chai had a library, where he saw year-old Hebrew newspapers and where the colonists

⁶ This information comes from a four-page typed transcript of an article that has no mention of an author or a publication. It is in the Brainin Archives of the JPL, Group II, box b, file 13.

raised swine though they never ate the meat. ("The Truth about the Jews of Russia," Seven Arts feature syndicate, 1927⁷) In both places the Jewish settlers were healthy and happy, they kept the Sabbath and did not intermarry. He was told that they received free transportation to the colony and free land, that each family received bank credit to buy timber, tools and seeds to start farming, which they did not have to repay for 14 years. They paid reduced taxes and were exempt for three years from army service. In the towns, by contrast, he found that Jews were starving and had no means of support. He was so impressed by the colonies that he cabled *Der Tog* to say that "whoever is against Jewish colonization in Russia is guilty of a crime against the Jewish people."

Unbeknownst to him by the time he left in August, the regime he so trusted was in the midst of liquidating the Jewish colonies and cracking down on all Zionist activity, and some of the people he had met earlier in Moscow were being thrown into jail or exiled.

⁷ The newspaper clippings mentioned here are all in the Brainin Archives of the JPL, Group I boxes K & L.

THE PRESS MAKE THEIR MOVE ⁸

When Brainin returned to the West he failed to publicize the plight of the Zionists. He never published or presented the memorandum or any other evidence he was given in Russia to any Jewish or non-Jewish organization. Whenever there was any criticism about the treatment of Zionists by the Russians, he would spring to the defence of the Russian regime and blame the Zionists for clandestine, counter-revolutionary behaviour. This just increased the hardships for the Zionist prisoners because the secret police would quote to them "the well known Brainin's" justification of the regime's actions. The disappointment and bewilderment of Brainin's constituents as to why such a Zionist icon had turned his back upon them were enormous.

This frustration was expressed by the Jewish press, which started a campaign of ferocious attack against Brainin for having betrayed his brethren and for not standing up and defaming the Russian regime for its cruel treatment of Zionism and the Hebrew language.

On August 20, 1926, *The New Palestine* wrote: "An amazing business, Reuven Brainin must have in his secret possession information which has reached no one outside of Russia. Unless he has such information, what he says is slanderous and irresponsible." The article's author proceeded to wonder how Brainin could believe Russian Communist leaders when they told him that Jewish colonization was not intended to be against the settlement of Palestine, when these same leaders contradicted themselves earlier and later about the same thing. The fact was that "Jewish colonization was the parapet of the trenches of anti-Zionist Bolshevism."

In *The New Palestine* of November 19, 1926, Brainin defended himself on the subject of his cable to *Der Tog*. How could anyone

⁸ Ibid.

imagine he meant the Zionists? He was unaware that the Zionists were ever opposed to Jewish colonization. He meant other Jewish groups in Russia. He was deeply insulted by how quickly the Zionists condemned him, he who had given 40 years of his life to them. In his opinion Jewish colonization in Russia and Jewish colonization in Palestine worked hand in hand toward a common goal.

The next day, November 20, 1926, Brainin spoke at a meeting organized by the Y.L. Peretz group of Jewish writers in New York. Describing the event in the *Davar* of January 2, 1927, the paper's American correspondent recalled how Brainin, who went to Palestine as the correspondent of *Der Tog*, promising to send many articles about his impressions of his trip, never actually sent any until he got to Russia. Only then did he start sending articles, including the infamous cable, which started a polemic war and turned him in his old age into such an enigmatic figure, a riddle.

The article continues to describe what Brainin said that evening. Brainin spoke of his Palestinian tour very superficially and then went on talking about Russia at great length. He recounted how he visited Romania and Poland first and how in both countries the governments were openly anti-Semitic and the situation of the Jews appalling. By contrast the Jews in Russia, as long as the Bolsheviks were in power, had nothing to fear. He was neither a Communist nor a member of the Yevseksiya but a Zionist and a Hebraist and above all a Jew and a human being. He had always loved Hebrew but had also maintained that whoever hated Yiddish was an anti-Semite. Both these languages had equal rights. He would have liked to have Hebrew spoken in Russia but the governing principle in Russia was that each nation should speak the language of the majority, which in the Jews' case was Yiddish.

The Yevseksiya, he maintained, was not all bad. Some of its members were very helpful and it was to their credit that the Jewish colonies existed and were saving the Jewish people from certain disaster. The colonies needed financial assistance so more Jews could be helped. Hopefully half a million Jews could eventually

be settled on the land. In Russia all Zionists were for Jewish colonization. Only outside Russia did someone tell him that he would rather see half a million Jews dead than accept any help from the regime. He spoke to all kinds of Jews in Russia, including Zionists. But he could do nothing for the imprisoned Jews.

More settlements in Russia would lead to more settlements in Palestine. There was no contradiction between the two. To a question from the audience regarding the status of Hebrew in Russia, he replied that if the majority spoke Hebrew, then Hebrew education would be allowed. He pointed to countries like Germany, Austria and the U.S., where Hebrew was legal, yet Hebrew education was not thriving.

By the end of December 1926, Y. Lamdan, writing in *Yediot Ketuvim*, Tel Aviv, summed up the affair thus: "The Braininiada, a comedy in three acts which has been running for the past year, is now over. The first act played out in Palestine, the second in Soviet Russia, and the third act was the triumphal return of Brainin to New York. His new friends in New York have called him 'a veteran of Hebrew literature, the father of Zionism,' when in fact he spits at both Hebrew and Zionism. Why are American Zionists so shocked with Brainin's behaviour? Have they never been kicked in their teeth before? It is the man's own affair if he has changed his mind. It happens. Let's remove his titles of distinction and send him on his way. Bon voyage, Mr. Brainin! We give up on this great activist and spiritual leader without any qualms, and let him not pretend in the coming days that he is one of us. Enough is enough."

Lamdan goes on to say that when Brainin was accused of loving two women at once, Palestine and Russia, he said in front of a Yiddish audience in New York that the Torah did not forbid polygamy. According to Lamdan, "But this second love of his was more like rape. It revealed a crime rather than hid it. It was not our business to judge his new love. His new friends would find out his true nature soon enough. But let him please keep his hands off his old love. She is too precious. We will not allow her to be abused

even when the abuse is called love. Keep away from her, Mr. Brainin.

"The curtain is down and the last act is over. Our editorial board will refuse to receive any further items regarding this acrobatic act. There are more important issues in the world."

SOUTH AFRICA (April 1929–August 1929)

The storm of resentment that Brainin unleashed when he returned to New York festered and grew for three years and reached a dramatic climax toward the end of his next trip.

Brainin and his son went to South Africa as guests of the South African Association for Jewish Colonization in Russia, which was holding a conference in Johannesburg starting April 12. They arrived by boat on April 8, and following the conference they spent three months traveling through the vast country, representing the American Joint and fundraising for Jewish colonization in Russia.

Raising money for non-Zionist activities in South Africa was a delicate undertaking. The Zionist organization was embedded in South African Jewish life, representing the entire Jewish community and enjoying the full support of the South African government. It had a very efficient fundraising apparatus, which raised the second largest amount of money in the world for Palestine. Most of the South African Jews originated in Lithuania. They had come to South Africa poor and uneducated and were intent on improving their lives. Being Zionists did not require any effort on their part other than donating generously to the cause.

The Zionist Organization of South Africa had always been against Jewish colonization in Russia. When its members heard of Brainin's planned visit they reiterated their stance but pledged not to oppose him. Judging by newspaper accounts of the time, Brainin had excellent turnouts wherever he went. Local dignitaries from both the non-Jewish and Jewish communities greeted him and thanked

him for venturing at his age (he was 67) to come 10,000 miles to bring his message of hope for the Russian Jews. He was addressed as Dr. Brainin and was heralded as a great scholar, sound thinker, noble Jewish soul and the world's greatest Zionist, though few of his audience had ever heard of him before his arrival.

He spoke in Yiddish and covered each time the same basic points. First, he emphasized that he spoke in the name of all Jews, not just in the name of one party, especially not a party which believed that it had the only solution to the Jewish problem. In his opinion it was absurd to have two fundraising campaigns, one for Palestine and one for Russian Jews. Collecting for Russian Jews was the only way to ensure that they would become self-supporting as quickly as possible.

He then told the various audiences about his trip to Russia in 1926, how he went there without any preconceptions and that what he saw convinced him beyond any doubt that the Jewish population was much better off than it had ever been. He painted an uplifting picture of what Jewish life was like in Russia, how no government in the world was more anxious to solve the Jewish problem than was the Russian government, how the Jews in Russia were more secure than anywhere else in the world and that Jewish salvation lay in the land, just like the Bible had repeatedly said. Working the land filled the Jews with hope and enthusiasm for the future. The greatest moments of his life, he told his audiences, were spent visiting the Jewish colonies, seeing how successful they were and how healthy and cheerful the children.

THE ATTACKS ESCALATE

As the visit progressed, the Zionist press in South Africa and elsewhere began taking Brainin to task for his romanticized version of the Jewish situation in Russia. They reminded their readers that Russia hated the Jewish national spirit, that its war on Zionism and the Hebrew language was well documented and that the 1927 Zionist congress had unanimously protested against Russia's behaviour and yet the situation since had gotten worse. Anti-Semitism was rampant, as was the anti-religious policy.

Even before Brainin had arrived, the *London Jewish Chronicle* of March 29, 1929, wrote:

"The Jewish Colonization movement, which claimed to solve the Jewish problem, was a 'virtual Pale of Settlement' among the muzhik population, which makes the position of the Jews there even more perilous. Why American Jewry deemed it necessary to send a missionary to gather further monetary support for this scheme is incomprehensible. It only served to paralyze world Jewry's efforts on behalf of the Jews in Palestine, while Russia was endeavoring to annihilate millions of 'our brethren.'"

By June, Mr. M. Shoshani had this to say in the New York Hebrew weekly *Hadoar* (no. 37):

"Suspicion was raised by the mere fact that Brainin with his worldwide reputation as a Hebrew writer and Zionist advocate was allowed entry into Soviet Russia. It was well known that others with similar leanings, whether they were natives or outsiders, were either punished, exiled or not admitted. Yet no objections were raised to Brainin, who in addition to an entry permit was also given free access to travel throughout the country, a privilege that had never been granted before and that was obviously given in exchange for a very high price. The high price? The subjugation of any independent thought, the covering up of reality and his own self-abasement and forced praise. Brainin reported that he was touring

Russia freely, seeing marvelous things, when in fact he was not free at all but a malleable puppet in the hands of Yevseksiya who forced him to do their bidding, i.e., send out reports that were false. He had no business ever visiting Russia, knowing how his Zionist and Hebraists brothers were treated there. But once there he should have raised his voice against the attitude of the regime towards Hebrew culture. Where was his sense of shame? Why did he not send a single article from Palestine that had excited him so much but chose to send article after article from Russia extolling its Jewish colonies? Was Russia more worthy than Palestine? How does he have the gall to preach and scold us about not closing ranks regarding Jewish colonization, almost accusing us of treason? If only his ears would hear what his mouth spews out! Brainin the Zionist and Hebrew writer helping the Yevsketsiya against our own cause. Is there anything more pathetic than that? This is frivolity bordering on crime, a crime that has no expiation. But why are we surprised? The man has always been frivolous and irresponsible, devoid of any sense of pride. Surprise is for the naïve; the triumph is for Yevsketsiya and the shame to Brainin."

The *South African Jewish Chronicle* reprinted an article on June 28, 1929, by M. Glickson which first appeared in *Haaretz*, Tel Aviv. Glickson added his voice to the fray:

"A conference to help Zionists in Russia is going to be convened in Palestine, which intends to hear some clear information from reliable witnesses who managed to escape the clutches of the Russian regime. It will remove the mask from the campaign of lies and irresponsibility conducted by Reuben Brainin, which helps the enemies of Zion and the persecutors of Zionists, and justifies the acts of the 'heroes' of the Yevseksiya and the GPU. The campaign which is all the more dangerous for its being headed by a 'friend' whose testimony is readily accepted by unsuspecting people because it is coming from one who has been known as a Zionist."

The *South African Zionist Record* of July 5, 1929, not to be left out, translated this article, which had originally appeared in

Moznaim, Tel Aviv:

"How can Brainin remain in the Zionist camp while he is being used as a tool by the Soviet Union? Had Brainin deserted us and gone over to the other camp, it would have been so much easier for us to understand him. We would have tried to explain it as a 'crisis,' real or imaginary, in his life. But he remains within our camp — to its shame and offence."

The final straw was the reaction heard from Palestine to an interview Brainin gave when he first arrived in Johannesburg in April. Due to the slowness of the mail, the offending article did not make waves in Palestine until mid-May, and it was mid-June before those waves reached back to South Africa while Brainin was still there.

The interview, conducted in Yiddish, was given by Brainin to the *South African Jewish Chronicle* on April 8, 1929, from aboard the ship on which he had just arrived, and appeared in the paper on April 12. The interviewer was a woman who for journalistic purposes called herself "Rozilda."

"Rather frail and aged-looking, a man who gives the impression as though he had spent most of his life burning the midnight oil, who knows more about books than about men" was how Rozilda described Brainin, who apparently had been ill during the sea voyage.

Whether it was his weakened state or the presence of an attractive woman, Brainin proceeded to tell her more or less the same things he would later tell his audiences but with some additional embellishments. He described his intensive six-months' study of the Jewish colonies in Russia and how he came to the conclusion that aided colonization was the only solution to the particular problems of the three million Jews there, since trade and commerce, which were how the Jews used to earn their living, were no longer possible. From what he himself had seen, it was not true that Judaism was suppressed. Synagogues were fuller than ever and

Jews had been permitted to open a yeshiva. The state-aided schools were filled with Jewish children who could study Hebrew if they wanted. He saw healthy colonies of Hasidim and Mithnagdim,⁹ and assimilation seldom occurred.

The "Dean of Hebrew Literature" and the "Founder of the Hebrew Public School" in America (it is not clear whether it was Rozilda or Brainin who claimed these titles) then went on to speak of his early life and friendship with Herzl and the estimated 500 Hebrew articles he had written over the years on a myriad of topics. Rozilda asked him who in his opinion were the three greatest Jews in the world. He thought they were Einstein, Louis Marshall and HaRav Kook, chief rabbi of Jerusalem. Was there a distinct Jewish art? she wanted to know. He answered with a short erudite lecture on art, mentioning many Jewish painters of the day. Then came the final question: "Where would you most like to live?" And Brainin coyly responded: "Where most Jews are to be found: in New York, or where the Jewish future is being built." "Do you mean Palestine?" she asked. "I believe that the Jews of Russia have a shining future; there they will be able to live their own life, a free life," Brainin responded.

⁹ Mithnagdim is a Hebrew word meaning "those who are opposed." It was coined by the Hasidic movement to refer to the established Orthodox Jewry.

THE GAUNTLET IS FLUNG

When the *Jewish Chronicle* article arrived in Palestine, all hell broke loose. Brainin's half-truths or wished-for truths, which may have sounded convincing from the speaker's podium, evoked only deep horror in the hearts of the Zionists in Palestine when they read them in cold print. By coincidence Yitzhak Rabinovitch, an engineer and well known Zionist activist who was the chairman of the Maccabi in Russia, had just arrived in Palestine from Russia and bore personal testimony to the unbearable conditions endured by the Zionists as well as to Brainin's behaviour during his 1926 visit.

A scathing reaction came from Bialik, as chairman of the Writers Association, who wrote a response which appeared in *Haaretz* on May 24, 1929:

A PUBLIC DECLARATION

Regarding the State of the Jews in Russia

At a meeting of community workers and writers which took place in Tel Aviv on the 21st of May 1929, it was decided to make the following public declaration to world Jewry: Based on precise information from most reliable sources, the condition of millions of Jews in Russia is beginning to look like a national disaster. A decisive portion of our people is facing complete ruin and utter destruction, the likes of which have never been experienced yet in the Jewish Diaspora.

The Russian Jews suffer economic distress, which results in dire poverty and hunger, as well as spiritual distress. These two combined could cause in a short time the total annihilation of all Jews in Russia. In addition the regime is heaping abuse upon the most important values of our people, namely their culture, religion, Hebrew language, the Torah and Zionism. All of these are in danger of disappearing, forever. The Jews are also facing constant cruel and sadistic terror, manifested openly as well as secretly.

Only heartless, evil people who hate their brothers can ignore such a dreadful reality. A reality which is screaming out loud and is attested to by thousands of facts and documented deeds. If at such a time all of Jewry does not wake up and undertake some kind of mission of rescue and relief, using all the means and resources at its disposal, the shame will never be erased and the crime will not be forgiven until the end of time.

The members of the above meeting admitted that one of the principal reasons why the public has been so passive in acknowledging the criminal exploitation of our brothers in Russia has been the way it had been presented to them by certain Hebrew-language newspapers and their servants worldwide. Using different excuses, most of which are incorrect and not always pure, these newspapers have avoided revealing the horrible, frightening truth coming from Russia and at times have even maliciously covered it up.

Among these are journalists who have shamelessly sold out their conscience and their people for the sake of real or imagined gain. In this group belong the numerous so-called "community emissaries" or self-appointed emissaries who returned from Russia and proclaimed worldwide the message of "salvation and comfort." These writers have cast a drunken spell on the public and prevented it from seeing the truth.

The time has come for public opinion to force the Jewish journalists of the world to show their loyalty towards their people. Let them unanimously persist in daily expressing outrage by crying out loudly and bitterly, a cry of fear and terror, at the sight of three million Israelites who are condemned to annihilation by tyrants. Let our anguish be raised from morning till night so all of enlightened humanity will hear it.

And finally the members of the meeting express their confidence that Hebrew public opinion everywhere will join in feeling the pain and shame, the bitterness and disdain that fill every Jewish heart who worries about the plight of his people when he hears of

the Brainin affair. This man, who in the past served the cause of Hebrew literature and Zionism, has recently assumed, to his shame and degradation, a very sad role, the role of a traitor and a renegade. By the daily spread of his lies and fabrications since he sold out to infamy, he aids the criminals and evildoers in Russia and puts a potent weapon in the hands of those who persecute Judaism and Zionism. Woe unto him that we see him acting thus.

Chairman of the meeting,

H.N. Bialik

One can only imagine the shock that Brainin felt when this issue of *Haaretz* arrived in South Africa about a month later. From the *Zionist Record*, Johannesburg, of August 9, 1929, we learn that on June 24 Brainin cabled *Haaretz*, not taking issue with what Bialik had written but instead stigmatizing the interview he had given back in April which caused the whole furor. He called it a ridiculous farce, its writer a young girl totally ignorant of Jewish affairs who misunderstood his Yiddish and distorted everything he said. This cable was published in Palestine on June 25 and reached South Africa two weeks later. This time the *Zionist Record* of Johannesburg was incensed. Why had Brainin waited three and a half months to retract an interview he did in Johannesburg through the medium of a Palestinian newspaper rather than direct his displeasure to the South African paper in which it had originally appeared? If the interview was so inaccurate, why had Brainin not complained to the *South African Jewish Chronicle* at once? Rozilda in fact was not an ignorant young girl; she was a knowledgeable journalist who spoke Yiddish and English very well and had witnesses who were present when the interview took place who could corroborate everything she wrote.

Brainin's own defence when the *Zionist Record* asked him for an explanation was that his cable to *Haaretz* was not translated correctly and his assertions in the offending article were just unintentional slips. The paper found the reply lamentable, feeble, illogical and unconvincing. "He too often resorts to using such

tactics without giving any real evidence. It is a nasty habit, which could recoil on its performer. The real truth, however, was revealed when Brainin admitted that his son Joseph was unable to give the Rozilda interview a 'look-over' before publication. In other words a word-for-word interview was not authentic unless Joseph Brainin edited it," the paper concluded.

To regain some respect, Brainin published an article in the New York *Der Tog* entitled "I Accuse My Judges," in which he complained that he had been accused behind his back without having a chance to defend himself.

THE COURT OF HONOUR

This ignominious affair came to an end in a most remarkable way.

An ailing Bialik came to Germany for medical reasons in July 1929. While in Berlin in mid-September, he found out that Brainin, who was on his way home from South Africa, was also there. Feeling perhaps some remorse over the harsh language he had used against him, Bialik offered Brainin an honourable way of saving face:

"Since I, the chairman of the Writers Association who you think has judged you unfairly, find myself in Berlin at the same time as you, and since there are also some eyewitnesses here who were in Russia when you were there who can clarify the facts, I suggest we turn this case over to the German Zionist Organization's court. It will hear evidence from the witnesses and us and will arrive at the truth of the matter. I accept in advance whatever the court will decide. It seems to me that this is an equitable way to clear your name of a heavy crime... If you will not accept this proposal, I will see it as an evasion on your part and will take the liberty of openly publishing this letter."¹⁰

Brainin had no choice but to accept. On September 30 he informed Dr. S. Gronemann, president of the Berlin Zionist Congress, that he was suing Bialik in his role as chairman of the Writers Association of Tel Aviv and he wished him to set up a court of honour for that purpose. There was no time to lose as both men were leaving Berlin shortly. And so on October 7 at 8:30 p.m., a highly unusual event took place.

Two giants of the Hebrew world of letters voluntarily confronted each other in a most bitter war of words over what was best for the minds and souls of the Jewish people. In the context of the times,

¹⁰ In S. Sheva's "O Seer Go Flee," p. 287.

having recently come through the military violence of the First World War and the Russian Revolution, it was an amazingly civilized encounter, in tune with the People of the Book's strongest conviction that the pen was mightier than the sword.

The two men could not have been more different. Brainin, at 67, was no longer the tall, handsome charmer of bygone days. He had become an old, stooped man, sickly and grey, whose accomplishments were far behind him, while Bialik, at 56, was still vigorous and feisty and his fame was growing steadily with each passing day.

Brainin and Bialik had first met in 1907 at the Zionist Congress in The Hague. Bialik, who was already known as the greatest Hebrew poet since Yehuda Halevi, had failed to impress Brainin, who described him unflatteringly as lacking a poetic aspect. Bialik was a short, stocky man, strong like a rock, "a lion with a powerful body." Brainin likened him to a young barbarian, sprung from nature, who came from a poverty-stricken milieu and whose intellect was not cluttered by a veneer of learning.

Brainin also disliked Bialik's view of the life of the Jews in the Diaspora, which he found chaotic and filled with nothingness, contrary to Brainin's view, that the spirit of God hovered over everything and that creative people ought to be optimistic and filled with faith and hope. "Pessimism kills, weakens and decreases creativity," he wrote.

Brainin derided those who called Bialik "a prophet of our times." According to Brainin, Bialik was no such thing: "He was incapable of soaring like an eagle or rising above the present." Even Bialik's use of the Hebrew language did not impress him; there were many Hebrew teachers who had a better command of the language. Bialik's style was instinctive, unscientific and personal.

To claim that Bialik was the greatest was highly exaggerated; it was an insult to the truth and to moderation; the most that could be said about him was that he was "a decent fellow." There were,

however, two things that Brainin liked about Bialik: his expressive eyes and his poems of rage.¹¹

According to Bialik's biographer, Shlomo Sheva, Brainin's feelings towards Bialik were very ambivalent. It was a push-pull kind of relationship, filled with love, envy and yearning. He represented for Brainin the complete Hebrew writer that he himself had aspired all his life to be. He recognized genius when he saw it but had a difficult time reconciling it with the rough, unworldly peasant-like demeanor of "our national poet."

Bialik for his part appreciated Brainin's contributions to Zionism and the Hebrew language even when he disagreed ideologically with his approach to the question of Jewish nationalism and Hebrew culture. Disagreement, however, turned into violent dislike when Brainin began promoting Jewish colonization in Russia. In a private letter written some time in 1926, Bialik stated: "Brainin's actions are horrid and vile. I feel sorry to see how low he has sunk. At this moment, just when people are beginning to see the real situation of the Jews in Russia in all its fearsome aspect is when this old decrepit idler chooses to announce to the world the redemption of the Israelites in Russia.... He must be cut down so that he never rises again. He acts not out of sincerity or innocence nor out of mistaken conviction but out of pure malice and cruelty."¹²

These were the two men facing each other that October night in the "tragic Jewish mock trial" (A.S. Lirik's account of the trial). The imposing main hall of the congress and the adjacent rooms were filled to overflowing when the proceedings began and remained tense and attentive for the next eight long hours.

The court was comprised of four judges: Rechts Amwalt, Attorney at Law (or RA), Dr. S. Gronemann in the chair; RA Oskar Cohn,

¹¹ Taken from a lecture given by Brainin in 1923 on Bialik, from the Brainin Archives at the Jewish Public Library, Group I, box 13, file 6.

¹² In S. Sheva's book, p. 286.

assisting; Dr. Med. Oskar Wolfsberg, assisting; and RA Dr. Aron Barth, congress member. On one side sat Brainin, the claimant, and his son Joseph, isolated and forlorn; on the other side sat Bialik, the defendant, surrounded by a crowd of admirers. In addition, there were two stenographers and a long table to accommodate the press. According to an eyewitness report, "Only the gendarmes were missing."

The court first raised the question whether Brainin's suit against Bialik was justified. The offending article from *Haaretz* was read out in a German translation, and it was decided that although the tone was hurtful and insulting, a thorough investigation of the matter was justified.

Brainin was then asked to speak but pleaded ill health. His son Joseph spoke instead. In his father's name he proceeded to enumerate the by-now familiar points, i.e., that Jewish colonization was the only means to Jewish survival. He did acknowledge that there were persecutions in Russia against Jews and he did mention them when he returned to the West, not hysterically, but calmly. In fact he had never received any complaints from the American Zionist Organization regarding his behavior. They accepted his role as a bridge between the abyss separating the Russian world and Zionism. He denied going to South Africa to represent Russian interests; he was representing the Joint. In fact he offered to speak on behalf of Keren Hayesod¹³ while there but was refused. Working on behalf of Jewish colonization was not treacherous; if it were, then prominent people such as Weitzmann, Warburg and Marshall would also be traitors.¹⁴ Bialik's attack against him was an unconscionable act which deserved punishment and severe reprimand.

¹³ Keren Hayesod was established by the World Zionist Organization in London in 1920 as its central fundraising agency.

¹⁴ Chaim Weizmann, Felix Warburg and Louis Marshall were all well known Jewish personalities of the day.

Dead silence reigned during his speech as people made sure they did not miss one word. Bialik too sat quietly and did not interrupt once.

Next, the court read into the record Mr. Rabinovitch's testimony, given earlier in Palestine, which ended with the following quote: "Whoever has a warm, beating heart in his bosom will be filled with utter disdain at the role that Brainin, the elder statesman of Hebrew writers, has assumed, the role of a traitor and the betrayer of our trust, aiding and abetting our destroyers and enemies."

Bialik then took the stand and calmly stated how much he would have liked to see Brainin regain his well earned reputation by proving that all the accusations against him were false. As far as his article in *Haaretz*, that was actually a milder version than the one originally intended. However, some verbs referring to Brainin which appeared in the article in the present tense were due to the typesetter's error. They were meant to be in the past tense, and for that he was sorry. Bialik's voice began to rise as he proceeded to describe the horrors of Jewish life in Russia. The Jewish colonies were not the main point, he said, no Zionist was against them, recognizing that they did help somewhat, but why did Brainin, upon his return from Russia, insist on only bringing good tidings, never mentioning the negative things that were happening or even conveying accurate information about the colonies themselves? The colonies were a "forced settlement" pushed on people who had no bread, no human rights and therefore whose last resort was the colonies. By never mentioning any of that, Brainin had caused terrible disappointment to the Jews in Moscow, who awaited his arrival like the Messiah's.

Bialik's tone became highly charged: "The Jews today in Russia are worse off than they were under the tsars or under Hadrianus, the Roman emperor. Their lot is torture, hardship, exile and death. Even innocent babies, whose only crime is their faith in their people, are severely punished. Why hadn't Brainin repudiated any of the interviews he gave to *Izvestia*, where he criticized English imperialism in Palestine and insisted that Jewish colonization was

the only solution? For someone in Brainin's position to say such things was certainly a deed of treason and betrayal."

It was 2:00 a.m. when Brainin himself took the stand. In a weak, hardly audible voice he repeated that he did talk about the terrible situation in Russia when he came back but he did so in private. He refused to take a narrow partisan view of the situation of the Jews in Russia; he preferred to look at it from a wider perspective. He then reiterated all the advantages the Jews had in Russia — no pogroms, no anti-Semitism, Jewish colonies — and added that he had meant to speak to the authorities regarding the persecution against the Hebrew language but his time in Moscow had run out.

Two witnesses were then called to the stand. The first was Rabbi Jacob Maze, who recounted how he met Brainin in Moscow. It was during Shavuoth of 1926, as he was preaching in the Great Synagogue, which was allowed to function openly. He told how surprised he was to meet him, the first emissary from the West to be a known Zionist, and how Brainin told him that he came as a private citizen to find out about the state of the Russian Jews. Maze warned him that matters concerning Jews could not be discussed openly and so he had set up four or five meetings in his own home with other community members to talk about Jewish matters, including Jewish colonization in the Crimea. They told Brainin that the Russian regime had a political agenda behind building the colonies, which was to impress the Jews of America and gain their financial support. They also told him about the Hebrew language: that although it was not banned, anyone speaking Hebrew could be exiled to Siberia. When Brainin went on to visit the colonies, Maze and his friends were surprised that he wrote about them as a separate issue from the general Jewish situation in Russia. He knew that Brainin sought out Pyotr Smidowich, the chairman of the executive of Greater Russia, and talked to him about the problems facing the Jews. Smidowich wanted facts, so the Jewish central committee drafted a memorandum comprising three points: the persecutions of Zionists, the problems of the Hebrew language and the problems facing the Jewish religion. This last point was dropped when "Tarbut," one of the organiza-

tions, raised objections, since the community wanted to present a common front. The memorandum, which was in the form of a letter, ended up not being presented to Smidowich because Brainin ran out of time.

Brainin also met with Moshe Litvakov, chief editor of the Jewish section of the Communist party, and talked to him about the problems facing the Hebrew language. Litvakov was unsympathetic and Brainin found him unpleasant to deal with. At the end of Brainin's visit a banquet was given in his honour, organized by all the Jewish organizations, at which several people spoke. Some expressed the opinion that industrialization and not agriculture was the way to solve the Jewish problem. Brainin spoke too and said that he thought that the Jews of Russia were better off than they had ever been and that the settlements in Palestine were a wasted effort. He praised the Soviets and never mentioned the plight of the Russian Zionists or the Hebrew language. This sorely disappointed everyone there, who waited in great anticipation to hear this world-renowned Zionist and Hebraist demand justice on their behalf. His speech was considered an anti-Zionist one. His behaviour provoked Bragin, a Communist leader and ex-Zionist who was present, to turn to Rabbi Maze and advise him to be like Brainin and renounce his Zionism too.

Dr. Gronemann wanted to know whether there was a strong reaction from the local Jewish and Zionist organizations when they read Brainin's interviews in the Russian press. The rabbi answered that there was no such reaction, mainly because there was no strong Zionist body that could react and that most Jews did not want to draw the attention of the authorities to themselves. According to Maze, Brainin could not criticize the regime while he was in Russia since such an act would have been illegal, and he did not think it would have been a good idea for Brainin to criticize the regime from abroad either, as he planned to return at some later date with some larger scheme to help the Jews.

The second witness was a Hebrew teacher named Judah, who had recently escaped from Russia. Due to the fact that he spoke only

Yiddish and the judges only German, Judah's testimony was difficult to understand. But his main accusations were that Brainin had omitted to hand over the memorandum he was given by the Zionists in Russia to the Zionist Executive of England and that Brainin had not found time in the last three years to make that information public.

Brainin then requested a short session behind closed doors, which according to Bialik did not add anything to mitigate his crimes. Instead of questioning the witnesses, Brainin then cried out in despair: "Achad Ha'am would never have allowed this kind of shameful behaviour; you, Bialik, are a hardhearted lion! You who stand for universal justice, why are you so quick to pass judgment on me? I will surprise you, though. Wait a month or two and you will see my actions. I still believe in Zionism, and my heart believes in Hebrew. I shall die not in Moscow or America, but in Eretz Israel [the land of Israel]!"

Bialik spoke again and repeated how the Jewish colonies in Russia were riddled with hypocrisy and dishonesty and were ruined and soiled by the presence of Yevseksiya. They represented at best a solution for only a few, but what of the rest of the three million Jews? Yet Brainin praised them and the criminals who put innocent babes in jail for possession of a single Hebrew book. Those were indeed deeds of betrayal! Overcome by emotion, Bialik pounded his fist on the table and went on: How could Brainin ever equate the persecution of Hebrew in Russia with the persecution of Yiddish in Palestine? Palestine was flooded with Yiddish journals and libraries were filled with Yiddish books, while in Russia people were sent to their death for possessing Hebrew materials. What was the Joint thinking by sending such an old respected Hebrew writer to South Africa to raise funds? Was the measly \$20,000 that he collected worth all the subsequent anguish that befell him? Why was Brainin afraid to defend Zionism publicly in Russia? And with this final cry, the proceedings came to an end.

THE VERDICT

The judges retired and deliberated for one long stormy hour, and finally at 5:00 a.m. they reappeared with their judgment:

The court recognizes that Bialik in his article against Brainin went too far.

The court costs will be paid by both Mr. Brainin and Mr. Bialik. Mr. Brainin will pay 9/10 and Mr. Bialik will pay 1/10.

The grounds for the accusations:

The claimant, Mr. Brainin, is a well-known Zionist personality, one of the founders of the Zionist movement who attended the first Zionist congress in Basel in 1897. Both in America and in Europe he has for many decades worked hard, through word of mouth and by the written word, to forward the cause of the Hebrew language and culture.

In 1926 Mr. Brainin went to the Soviet Union and visited some of the Jewish colonies. Upon his return he wrote articles in newspapers describing his visit. These articles have been the cause for much criticism.

On the 31st of May 1929, there was a meeting of Hebrew writers in Tel Aviv to discuss the condition of the Jews in Russia. An article describing the meeting appeared in the newspaper *Haaretz*, signed by the defendant, Mr. Bialik. This article has sickened the claimant and he seeks satisfaction for his humiliation at this court of honour.

The defendant agrees that due to some error in the text it appeared that Bialik called Brainin a traitor. In fact what Bialik meant was that Brainin's actions were treacherous.

The way Brainin chose to report on his trip in his articles did great

damage to the interest of the Jews and Zionists of Russia and to the idea of Zionism and the Hebrew language. He knew the true condition of Zionism, the Jewish religion and the Hebrew language and yet did not say anything. He had the information but he did not publish it. He made things appear better than they were. In the "Shalom Aleichem" Club in Berlin, when he could have told the truth, he lauded the regime in Russia instead.

The court finds the defendant's arguments correct and true.

The court further finds that the Jews of Russia were made very hopeful by a visit of such a prominent Hebraist and Zionist. They hoped that he would reveal the true situation of the Jews in Russia. He had access to people in power and he could have intervened on their behalf. On his return to America and Europe, he could have told the Zionist organizations of those countries about the real state of affairs in Russia and they in turn could have brought pressure on the Soviet regime.

The people in Moscow furnished him with all the facts. He knew about the state of the Hebrew language, that it was forbidden under the pain of exile to Siberia or worse, that the Jewish religion could be taught in Greater Russia to groups of three children only, that Hebrew and Zionism were equated by the regime with nationalist activities and were deemed counter-revolutionary. Yet he expressed enthusiasm with regard to Jewish colonization in the Crimea, presenting it out of context from the greater picture of the Jewish situation in Russia.

The facts of the case are repeated:

Brainin did not inform the members of the American delegation who were accompanying him in Russia about the true state of affairs of the Jews.

Brainin had the opportunity of speaking to Jews about their condition but did not report on it.

He did his best to intercede on behalf of the Jewish teachers.

There is no evidence to show that he did not try to intercede on behalf of Zionist activists.

The Zionists in Moscow furnished Brainin with evidence regarding the state of Jews in Russia, he accepted it and promised to deliver it abroad, having the unique opportunity of leaving the country without being searched or censored. To this day he has kept the material to himself and did not show it to others.

At the "Shalom Aleichem" Club in Berlin while reporting on his trip to Russia he did not raise the problems of Hebrew and Zionism but instead talked about Jewish colonization. He also said that he was against suppressing any language, whether it was Hebrew in Russia or Yiddish in Palestine.

He did not issue any denials to the reports of the Communist press in America of his trip when they came out against Hebrew and Zionism.

Brainin knew the truth but deliberately chose to conceal it. He said only positive things about the situation of the Jews in Russia. He could have enlightened people about the true situation but he covered up the truth.

Summing up:

Brainin was the perfect witness, a noted Zionist and Hebraist who was ideally situated to report on the true situation of the Jews in Russia. People depended on his judgment. He saw how things were and yet he purposefully concealed the truth, thereby enhancing the image of Communist Russia in the world. His behaviour brought trouble and danger to the Jews in Russia.

It must be admitted that Brainin did not believe in the usefulness of loud protest but thought that by concealing the truth he could achieve some positive results in the future. This does not decrease

his responsibility. He had no right to decide on this course of action by himself. Not passing on the information he got from the Jewish organizations in Russia makes him guilty. No one expected him to be a hero, but as a foreigner he was in no real danger. At the banquet he behaved in an unmanly fashion. He was intent on endearing himself before his Russian masters. His behaviour after he left the Russian border is completely inexcusable.

Bialik, as the representative of the Jewish public, had the right and the duty to publish the letter that he did in the name of the Writers Committee. Brainin's crime was that he combined the Jewish colonization issue with the larger Jewish problem in Russia. He expressed a biased, one-sided personal opinion and thereby misrepresented the truth.

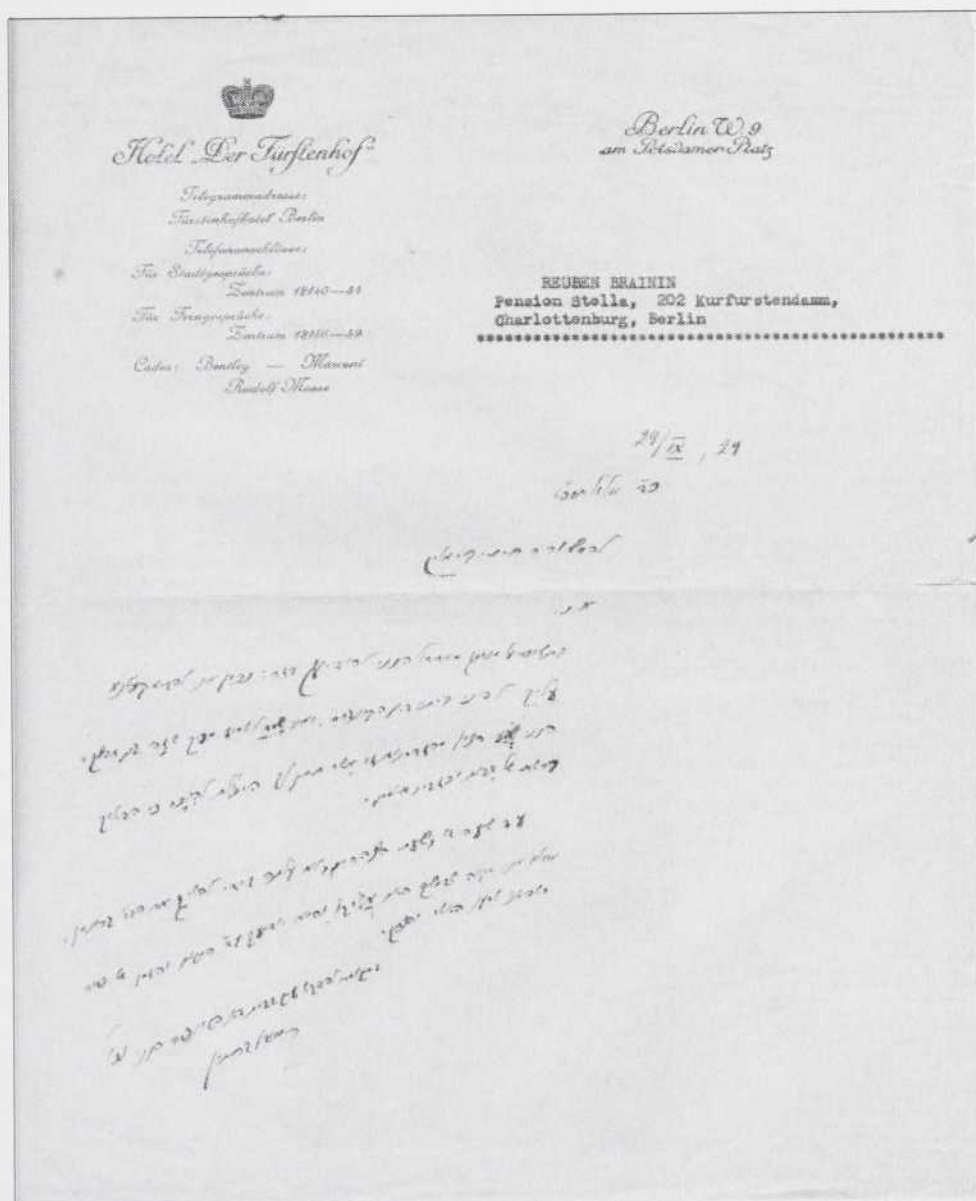
Was Bialik justified in his attack? Regrettably, the court finds that he overstepped the boundaries of good taste. The German translation of Bialik's article may not be an accurate account of the original. It is sharper in tone, in it Bialik does not only say that Brainin was a traitor but that his actions were treacherous too. This accusation remains unproven.

The court further finds not only on behalf of Brainin but also on behalf of all Jews that it is wrong to engage in a battle of ideas which uses such weapons. A personality like Bialik should know better, he should be an example for others. The court finds the proceedings distasteful. However, they agree with some of the accusations against Brainin. Blame is therefore assessed on both sides. The way the court has decided to divide the cost of the trial between Bialik and Brainin represents the court's opinion of their guilt.

The court costs amounted to 135 marks or about 35 (U.S.) dollars. Brainin was responsible for the payment of 9/10 of this amount, or 31 dollars; while Bialik was assessed 1/10, or four dollars.¹⁵

¹⁵ The minutes and verdict of the Berlin Court of Honour, in German, are in the Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem, File L/14/12.

The letter that launched the Court of Honour, September 29, 1929.
(Jewish Public Library Archives, Montreal)



29/IX,29
24 of Elul 5689

To the poet H.N. Bialik

Dear Sir,

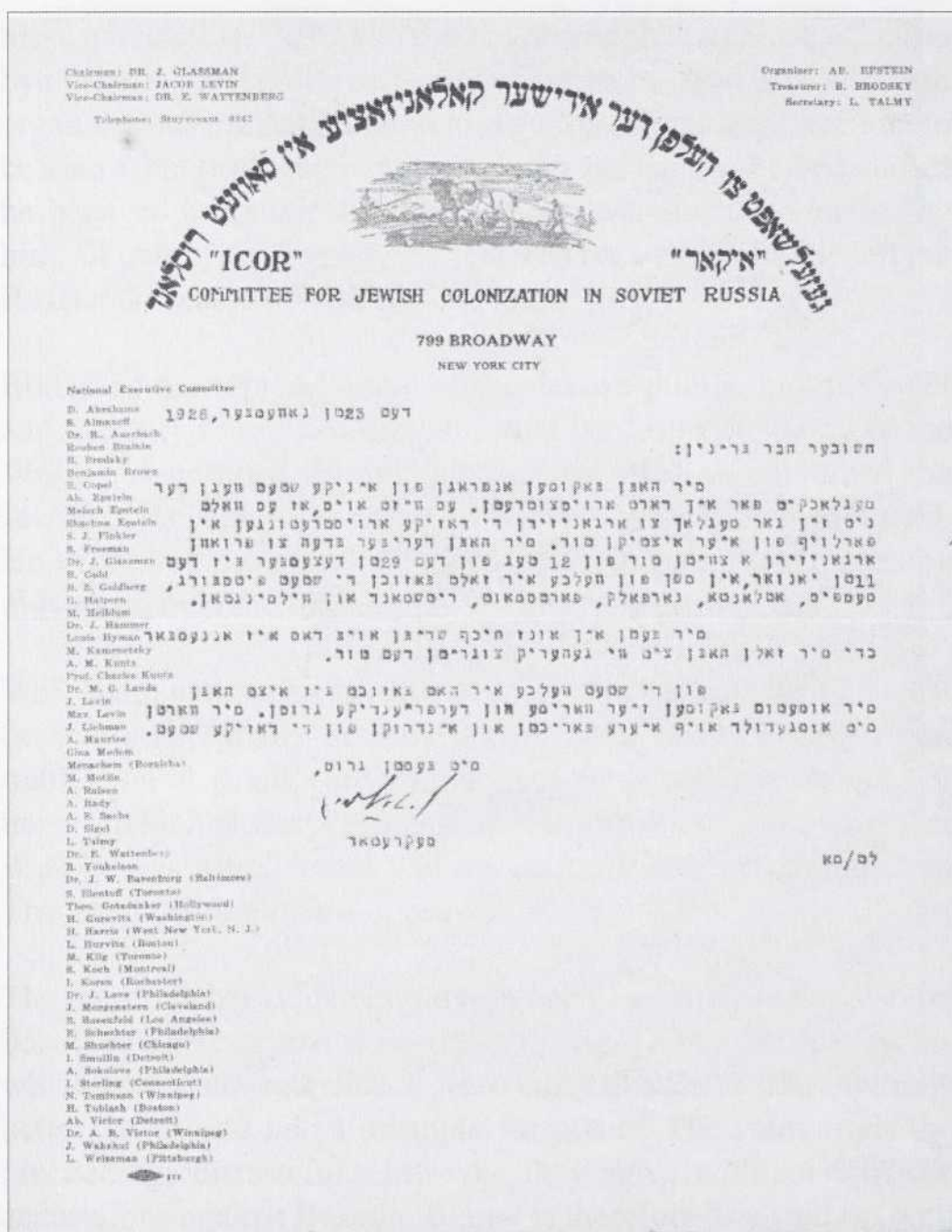
In answer to your letter of yesterday I hereby inform you that I am willing to bring a complaint against you to the court of congress and I am happy to hear from you that this is also your wish. I am content to have this opportunity which will enable you to see how you have been pushed into a net of rumors and awful lies.

Up to this hour, noon, I have not been able to reach Dr. Gronemann, but I hope that during this day I will succeed and he will inform you as to the place and time of our joint trial, which will clarify the situation for the sake of honesty and justice.

With the hope of meeting you at the court of congress, I remain, etc.

Reuven Brainin

— Hebrew translation by Naomi Caruso



The half-circular design on the letterhead is ICOR's name in Yiddish, "Gezelshaft tzu helfen der yidisher colonizatsie in soviet rusland."

The letter, dated November 23, 1928, and addressed to the "esteemed comrade Brainin," proposes a second lecture tour for Brainin of 12 days, starting December 29 until January 11, to Petersburg, Memphis, Atlanta, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Richmond and Wilmington. The feedback from his previous tour has been very good and so Brainin's affirmative reply is awaited impatiently. It is signed, with best regards, L. Talmi, secretary.

Brainin's name appears near the top of the list of ICOR members on the letterhead.
 — Yiddish translation by Naomi Caruso

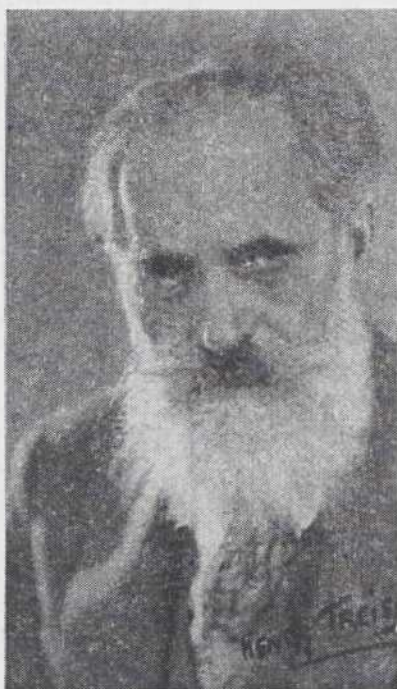
(Jewish Public Library Archives, Montreal)

ווערט א מיטגליד פון איקאר

פילט אויס די אפליקאציע און שיקט דאס צו צום סעקרעטאר פון

ראובן בריינין ברענטש, דזשאמייקא

א. ראמאנאפסקי, 107-13 ניו יארק עוועניו, דזשאמייקא



ראובן בריינין

אייער נאמען _____

אדרעס _____

296

A translation from the Yiddish of the cover of an ICOR pamphlet:

Be a member of ICOR by completing the application
and sending it to the secretary of the
REUVEN BRAININ BRANCH, JAMAICA
A. Romanofsky, 107-13 New York Avenue, Jamaica

— Yiddish translation by Naomi Caruso

(Jewish Public Library Archives, Montreal)

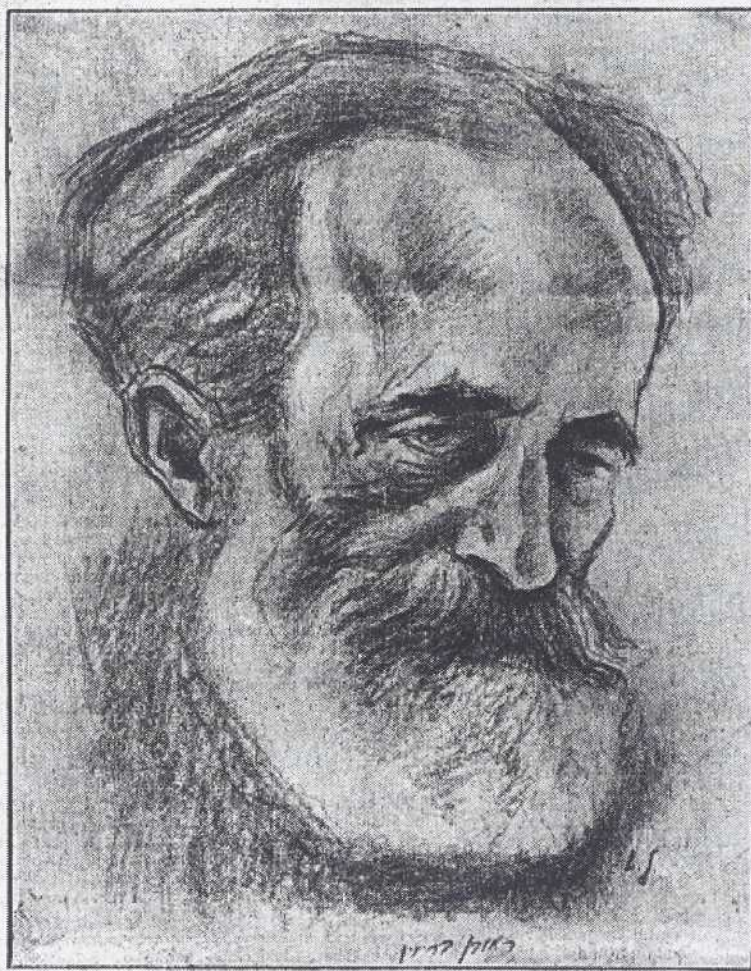
ȘTIRI

DIN LUMEA EVREEASCĂ

PUBLICAȚIE SĂPTĂMÂNALĂ A ORGANIZAȚIEI SIONISTE DIN ROMANIA

TELEFON No. 6086 " REDACTIA SI ADMINISTRATIA: BUCUREȘTI, STR. CAROL No. 109 (COLT NEGRU VOCA) " TELEFON No. 6086

Abonamente 30 M. rde. 1926 La 5 Exemplare Anul IV No. 172 Abonamentul 200 lei pe an 5 M. rde. 1926



RUBEN BRAININ

DESEN DE L. SINGER

DE VORBĂ
CU RUBEN
BRAININ
de F. ADERCA

LORDUL ALLENBY
CONVERTIT ȘI ELA
S-I O N I S M

FRĂȚII THARAUD
DESPRE ATITU-
DINEA LOR FAȚA
DE EVREI

ELENISM ȘI JUDAISM
de BENIAMIN SEGEL

Dr. WEIZMANN A
PLECAT ÎN
PALESTINA

„LUNA ORGANI-
ZĂRII” PENTRU
IDEIA SIONISTĂ
de dr. A. MIBASHAN

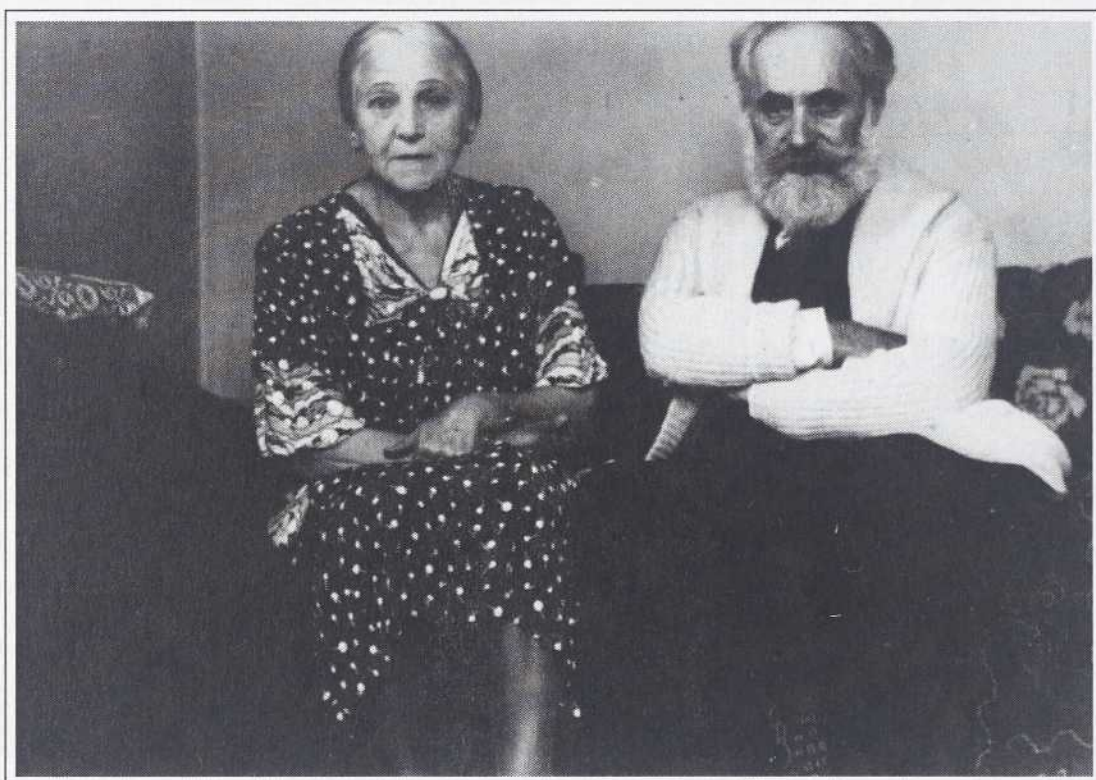
ÎNTELEGEREA DIN-
TRE EXECUTIVA
SIONISTĂ ȘI VAAD
L E U M I

News of the Jewish World, the weekly newspaper of the Zionist Organization of Romania, ran an interview and cover portrait of Brainin on March 20, 1926.
(Canadian Jewish Congress Charities Committee National Archives)



Brainin on his visit to Palestine, 1926.

The Hebrew text reads: Writer Reuven Brainin, at Beit Ha'Am [House of the People] in Tel Aviv, January 22, 1926. Photo by Rashkes.
(Jewish Public Library Archives, Montreal)



Reuven Brainin and his wife, Masha, in "one of the last photos of them," according to relative Mort Shulman, who donated the photo, taken circa 1932.
(Canadian Jewish Congress Charities Committee National Archives)

PART TWO

Of the 106 volumes of Brainin's diary, only 64, covering the years 1897-1930, follow the conventional diary style of daily entries. Included in these are general writings, which fall into three categories:

1. Essays about various Jewish and non-Jewish personalities, which are included under the general heading "People of my generation";
2. Essays on politics, philosophy and the arts with titles such as: "Personal liberty versus national liberty," "Humour and satire in our new literature" or "The mood after the second Duma"; and
3. Reminiscences of his early life.

Many of these writings appeared later in print under the title "The Complete Works of Reuven ben Mordechai Brainin" and were published by the committee to celebrate his 60th birthday. Only three volumes were ever published. The first volume came out in 1922, the third in 1940. (As noted in the first chapter, the original plan called for a 30 volume publication.)

The remaining 42 diary volumes contain reading lists, notes for a Herzl biography and notes for future articles, lists of letters that he had written, address books, expense accounts and some manuscripts.

The first group is written in school-type copybooks measuring approximately 15 cm by 21 cm, while the others are in various-sized smaller notebooks. All the volumes are handwritten in Hebrew.

The 61 excerpts which appear here were chosen because they cover the same years that appear in the first chapter and were found to

be the most representative of what Brainin felt during those crucial years. They follow the process of his transformation from a popular confident Zionist who dedicated his life to the Hebrew language to a bewildered and misunderstood Communist Yiddishist who found himself isolated and shunned by the reigning Jewish intelligentsia of the day.

Brainin's Hebrew in the diaries is fluent and descriptive but at the same time, as it was written almost a century ago, it is also archaic and stilted. The priority when translating was to keep the voice and the meaning intact rather than to translate the text word by word. All translation work is interpretive and subjective, and it is quite possible that the voice of the translator is heard here too. All one can hope for is that both voices successfully converge in conveying the true spirit of these texts.

DIARY EXCERPTS

1925

April 3, New York, 1925

The entry describes a meeting with Karl Kunz, an old friend who was a dedicated Communist. Brainin first met Kunz in 1891, when they were both attending university in Vienna.

In 1917 Kunz had been Lenin's secretary for three months. He had since traveled extensively, including a visit to Eretz Israel for six weeks, which led him to conclude that Palestine would never be a socialist country; it would instead have a bourgeois character, acquisitive and capitalistic.

At this time he was returning to the U.S.S.R. for the third time, giving up his life in the U.S. He was taking with him 25 Americans who were all deeply committed to the Communist cause. He planned to establish a university in one of the Jewish colonies, which would be a model for other colonies to follow.

"I try to awaken in my friend the Jewish romanticism, our love and affection for our homeland, our faith in the idealism of our prophets, but Jews only interest Kunz as human beings, not as 'a people.' He is against nationalism, and the Zionist experiment according to him will not succeed. It is too conservative at heart and is derived from the culture of imperialist England. An abyss separates our opinions, our worldview and our emotions."

May 9, New York, 1925

Brainin describes his habits of non-stop smoking, drinking tea and keeping irregular hours. He likes his current apartment, where he has two rooms for his library and work, which is looked after by an Irish maid. He admits to spending too much time writing in the diary instead of doing his work of editing *Hatoren*. He loves walking the streets of New York, buying books and thinking about life. He is often invited to public events with other Yiddish and

Hebrew writers where everyone shows him respect and treats him politely. He comments on how well he looks and how vigorous he feels and that the men and women he meets are amazed at how handsome he is. The reason he mentions all this is for the benefit of future family members. His body thrives because his mind is active.

He then addresses a letter to an imaginary friend:

My imaginary friend,

I have no gang; I don't seek to be close or friendly with the Hebrew writers. I could write a whole book on the demeaning, idiotic and despicable manner in which Hebrew writers have behaved towards me. I state this here only for the sake of the next generation, for the sake of historical truth. Yet I have never once expressed my anger in print about the injustices done to me by the "wise men of the pen" and I have never demanded openly anything from those who have ignored my name, those who have deprived me of my rightful place on the literary stage while various literary gnats and scribblers who have done zero on behalf of our people or their fellow professionals are being praised to high heaven. I scorn these people in my heart and refuse to waste any ink on them.

[He goes on to say that he is preparing letters in which he will reveal the literary scandals he has suffered, though the scandals have never affected his soul or his literary plans.]

Journalists are the vilest and most dangerous of people. One should sweep them away with a broom; eradicate them from the gardens of literature together with all other sundry counterfeiters. They belong in jail or in an insane asylum.

May 20, 1925, New York

He wants to go to Europe for two months but has no money. He has many rich friends but he would never ask any for help. One of them is the Ex-Lax tycoon Israel Matz, who finances *Hatoren*. Brainin knows he lives too much in the moment but has no strength to change his life.

Then follows this entry about Bialik:

I read in full the speech that Bialik, the poet, made at Har Hatzofim on the occasion of the opening of the Hebrew University, and the speech is full of empty figures of speech. It is flowery, inane and outdated and has no real content. It lacks a concept, a point of view or beauty; it has neither an outer shell nor contains a hard seed. It is just a pathetic grouping of nonsense words, a speech that is irrelevant to the time and place for which it was intended.

Zionist thinkers of a certain ilk, especially those with means, together with the writers who lack originality or sensibility, have elevated Bialik to the rank of a god and covered him with gold. His great standing in the world begs a psychological investigation of our people in the present time. If a great poet and a brilliant prophet had really arisen in our midst, one who is not tied down to Shmaryahu Levin, Chaim Weizmann or Usishkin,¹⁶ one who is not a huckster or a merchant, he would have long been chased out from Eretz Israel and would now be one of those who are persecuted for the harm they bring to the Zionist business and the harsh criticism they fling at our Zionist leaders.

¹⁶ Shmaryahu Levin (1867-1935), Chaim Weizmann (1874-1952) and Menachem Usishkin (1863-1941) were all leading Zionists of the time. The most famous of course was Weizmann, who in February 1949 became Israel's first president. Levin came to Palestine in 1924 and together with Bialik founded the Dvir publishing house.

A nation like ours, which is made up of buyers and sellers, needs a poet who is a merchant like themselves, a householder,¹⁷ a peddler-poet who knows the value of money.

June 28, 1925, Washington, DC

He is attending a Zionist congress in Washington as a journalist.

Present are the leaders, 'the misleaders of the congress,' the delegates, a herd that agrees with everything and suffers all the nonsense without complaining, officials who only think of themselves and forget the true meaning of Zionism, and journalists who are not bothered by what happens around them in the hall but report the proceedings according to their editors' point of view. They have neither a literary conscience nor a Zionist one.

I, as a Hebrew writer and a Zionist who sees in the movement the redemption and revival of our people, I suffer spiritual anguish from the reigning superficiality. I have tried several times to fight against this tendency and against the 'machine' of Zionist officialdom but I find myself too weak, too angry and too unhappy to stand up and speak with my natural voice, which is generally strong and heard clearly all over the hall. My heart begins to palpitate when I think of standing up and speaking out, I could be in mortal danger. Still I would overlook the danger to my life for the sake of the truth and to be able to stop the downward slide of the conference but I am incapable of standing upright. My body and mind have been weakened by not getting enough sleep, by restlessness and by the heavy schedule of meetings held in corridors and in conference rooms as well as by being

¹⁷ The Yiddish term for householder "baalbais" can also mean "boss," someone who has made it in life.

upset over the deviousness of the Zionist machine and the utter stupidity of the delegates.

I see through the delegates like through clear glass. I feel how they hate and envy one another and how each one aspires to profit from the other's downfall. I know that each one is hoping and waiting for his friend's defeat, for one misstep, for one misspoken word. That is why I sit in my seat feeling distressed, going up to my room at every opportunity to read and be alone. I realize that in my room I am different from who I am in the hall. Different in how I feel, how I think. I feel empowered alone while amid the gang of Zionists, in the hall, my whole being is diminished, even though no one but me notices this.

They persist in criticizing me, yet I have never collected one penny for my work as a Hebrew activist. Every single Hebrew undertaking in the U.S. is done by me or through my help but the *Hadoar*¹⁸ owners keep silent about that and keep this information away from the public.

I keep my many-sided Hebrew literary work away from the public eye and refuse on principle to publish but I want the truth to be known, because if I keep silent in my diary regarding this matter it could be construed as an admission that I stopped working on behalf of Hebrew in America, which would be falsifying history, this pathetic matron.

During the conference he speaks out on behalf of women's rights and receives a standing ovation. His words make a deep impression on the public. He is chosen as vice-president of the Zionist Organization of America and after a secret ballot is also elected as

¹⁸ *Hadoar* (*The Post*) was the longest-running Hebrew newspaper in New York. It began publication in 1921, first as a daily, then a weekly and finally a bi-weekly, and ceased publication 83 years later, in 2004. In 1924, when the paper turned into a weekly, Menachem Ribolov (1895-1953) became its editor and remained in that position until his death.

a delegate to the next Zionist congress in Vienna. He receives more votes than any of the other candidates.

The conference costs him \$100, which he pays out of his own "impoverished" pocket.

David Shapiro, who owns *Der Tog*¹⁹ and is worth five million dollars, gives him a cheque for a substantial amount to cover his traveling expenses to Europe and from there commissions him to go to Eretz Israel, where he wants him to write articles for *Der Tog*. (Shapiro has no interest in the Hebrew language).

For 40 years he, Brainin, has been the flag bearer of the Zionist and nationalist movement, making thousands of speeches at large and small meetings, in many countries and cities. He dedicated all his life and strength to the cause, all for free. And not only was he never invited to Eretz Israel but he was actively prevented from going there because he was not a loyal slave to the Zionist leaders and did not agree with the conventional wisdom of the officials. He refuses to be their tool and will report only the truth. He is so full of joy to be going and finds that the wait for the yearned-for day seems to last an eternity.

1926

February 28, 1926, Tel Aviv Purim, Brainin's 64th birthday

"The problem of our national existence is more complicated now than it was 40 years ago. My desire to work on behalf of my people and our literature is now more urgent. My soul cries in secret when it sees how the national will to act has weakened, how the grandeur has been lost, how our writers have repudiated God and how we lied and made our life a sham. Yet I aspire to greatness, all my ambitions are intact, and I intend to do great deeds!"

¹⁹ *Der Tog* (*The Day*) was a Yiddish newspaper in New York, founded in 1914 as an organ of liberal Jewish opinion. It reached its height in 1916.

June 27, 1926, Homel, U.S.S.R.

Brainin and his wife, Masha (nee Amsterdam), meet with his wife's family, who live in Homel. They are exemplary Communists who find the status quo to their liking.

Brainin writes: "I tried to awaken some doubts and second thoughts in Mr. Amsterdam's heart, but the surroundings put all his doubts to rest. Maybe under my influence he will see the light."

September–October 1926, Paris

Returning from Russia, Brainin and his wife visit Paris and Vienna. The diary entries describe hotel rooms, nice meals, shopping trips and encounters with family and friends. Brainin meets rich exiled Russians in Paris who have no sympathy with the new Soviet regime and are sure of its quick demise. He tells them that the regime is there to stay and he argues for Jewish colonization in Russia. He insists that there is not only one way to solve the Jewish problem but he finds that the Zionists have closed their minds and refuse to consider facts and the economic situation. They are hot blooded, quick to anger and simple-minded. He meets with Leo Motzkin and Zalman Shneur²⁰ at a dinner organized in his honour, where he is lauded for his worldwide contributions to the Hebrew language. They tell him that "he is the first and only Hebrew writer who wanders from land to land to see how his brethren are faring,

²⁰ Leo Motzkin (1867-1933) was an active Zionist and close friend of Herzl's since the first Zionist congress in Basel in 1897. He traveled widely, working on behalf of a national home in Palestine. After 1918 he settled in Paris, where he headed the Jewish delegation at the peace conference in Versailles, which later became the World Jewish Congress, a permanent institution to defend Jews against anti-Semitism. He died at the start of the Nazi era in the midst of the developing crisis of the German Jews. Zalman Shneur (1886-1959) was a poet, novelist and journalist in both Hebrew and Yiddish. He met Bialik early on in Odessa and became a lifelong friend. A restless and tortured man, he wandered around Europe, Palestine and finally New York, never finding peace anywhere. Like Brainin, he was very critical of Zionism and the Hebrew language.

and wherever he goes he reawakens and encourages the Hebrew movement.”

November 6, 1926, New York

“The executive of the Zionist Organization would welcome me with open arms if only I admitted that I was wrong in how I viewed the issue of Jewish colonization in Russia. I told them I would never do such a thing. I wrote for *Der Tog* what I thought benefited my people. I wrote the truth and battled for the rescue of my brothers’ souls regardless of what the despicable conniving Lipsky claims.”²¹

November 7, 1926

Brainin is the sole speaker at an overflowing Carnegie Hall meeting. His topic is his impressions of his trip to Eretz Israel, Italy and Russia. A lengthy ovation greets him from both Zionists and Communists. In spite of his criticism of the Zionist leadership his standing within the general public has increased. Newspaper articles in many languages praise his account of his tour of Russia.

Hadoar is full of lies and confusing accusations against him, and those who are on his side are too stupid to know how to defend him properly.

November 8, 1926

A reception is held for Chaim Weizmann, and Brainin, who has tickets to sit on the stage with him, declines. At the end of the speeches, many Zionists try to greet him and speak with him, but

²¹ Louis Lipsky (1876-1963) and Ribolov were perceived by Brainin to be his two worst enemies. Lipsky represented the Zionist establishment and Ribolov the Hebrew establishment. In 1901 Lipsky began as the editor of the first Hebrew publication in New York, *The Maccabean*, which later became *The New Palestine*. In 1914 he started his rise in the Zionist establishment, first as the salaried secretary of the Federation of American Zionists, then in 1917 as its chairman and from 1922-1930 as its president.

he avoids them and slips away. No one has the courage to fight Lipsky for his attacks on Brainin.

November 10, 1926

Brainin meets Weizmann at the Commodore Hotel for a private, heart-to-heart talk, although it is difficult to know when Weizmann is sincere and when he is acting as a politician.

"I asked him what he thought about the difficulties the leaders of American Zionism were causing me because I dared speak out in public about Jewish colonization in Russia."

"What is my opinion?" Weizmann exclaimed, "They are all bandits! They are doing the same to me because of my efforts to establish the Jewish agency in America to which they object because they fear Louis Marshall²² will take away some of their power."

"Why don't you remove them from their positions?" I asked.

"I would spill out the dirty water if I could replace it with some pure water," he replied.

"I recognized that Weizmann did not have the courage to fight the scoundrels. He is dishonest with them and they are dishonest with him. Neither party is willing to burn the bridges behind them."

Brainin has financial troubles and moves out of his apartment and into the Prince George Hotel to save money. He asks Shapiro for a pay increase but Shapiro offers him the editor's job instead. Brainin refuses; he does not want the added responsibility.

Brainin is refusing to speak in public until the Hebrew writers in New York mount a united front against *Hadoar*. A Poalei Zion

²² Louis Marshall (1856-1929) was a successful American Jewish lawyer who fought for human rights on behalf of all minority groups. He was a prominent leader of American Jewry and one of the founders of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Agency, in 1914.

delegation²³ who hate what is happening in Zionist circles ask him to reconsider. They are willing to wage war against Lipsky.

November 15, 1926

Joseph Rosen, the head of the Agro-Joint²⁴ in Russia, arranges a meeting between Brainin, Felix Warburg and David Brown. He wants Brainin to convince the two to join the newly founded Jewish Agency, which aims to secure both a Jewish home in Palestine and Jewish colonization in Russia. By doing this, Brainin would contribute to restoring the morale of the American Zionists. Rosen will reward him by helping to publish his works. For Brainin this is a crucial decision. If he agrees, the Zionists will drag him through the mud, but he also knows how important the Jewish colonies in Russia are because they offer the prospect of creating an independent Soviet republic whose culture would be Jewish, free of outside interference, and would thereby save half a million Jews. His Zionist heart gains the upper hand. David Brown, a millionaire from Detroit, tells Brainin that there is no contradiction between working on behalf of Russian Jews and Zionism. Brainin can make up his own job description, working when he wants, doing what he wants, at a salary that he himself would decide on. Brainin hesitates even though he hasn't got a penny to his name and no prospects to speak of.

They want him to head the opposition to the established American Zionist Organization led by Lipsky and his cohorts. They want a new organization that will purge the rotten leadership and will open the way for the Jewish Agency, which is the only hope for the establishment of a Jewish home in Eretz Israel. But Brainin is not convinced that they have the backbone to fight the Zionist

²³ Poalei Zion (The Workers of Zion) was a Yiddish Marxist-leaning, Zionist socialist party founded in 1900 in Odessa by Ber Borochov. David Ben Gurion and Itzhak Ben Zvi were among its members.

²⁴ Agro-Joint was a division of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Agency dedicated to agricultural activities on behalf of Jewish settlers in the Russian colonies.

establishment and he refuses to waste his time. He wants to preserve his strength for his literary work.

November 27, 1926

"Most of my friends and admirers, who used to be so numerous in the past, hide away from me now. I am a pariah, ostracized by everyone. Do they fear in their shortsighted and contemptible opinion that I have perhaps become a Communist? Or do they find it difficult to forgive me for revealing in public my position of being in favour of Jewish colonization in Russia?"

Alone and confined to a small hotel room, he complains bitterly that he has neither an office nor a newspaper and has lost all his influence. Everyone envies the attention he received in Palestine and Europe.

He speaks at a public meeting convened by the Y.L. Peretz Writers Association to encourage Jewish settlements in the Crimea. Three thousand people attend. At the end of his speech he gets a standing ovation.

Here is part of his speech:

"If I were the policy maker of the Zionists in England I would tell the English government: 'Look at what the Soviets have done on behalf of Jewish colonization. They have given free land, free lumber and millions in cash and loans. They sincerely intend to establish a Jewish republic, not just for show or temporarily for political expediency but as a permanent policy. Look what a difference between you and them!' I have two loves, Zion and the Crimea!"

Privately he continues: "I don't regret so much being abandoned by the Hebraists nor am I very happy about the closeness and friendliness of the Communists. I don't value either group very highly. I know their true worth. I shall continue to make speeches and conduct myself according to how my head and integrity dictate.

I feel the full weight of fate on me. With my own hands I have dug an abyss between the American Zionist leadership and myself. In spite of meaning well and my good intentions I have acquired many enemies among the small-minded Zionist officials and writers. This is now my fate. I only seek the truth, I refuse to sell my people out, I will not say something is good when it is not, or call white black. I have become a riddle in people's eyes. They all ask: 'What has happened to our Brainin?'"

December 5, 1926

Hatoren ceases publication.

December 8, 1926

He is beside himself with worry. He suffers from panic attacks, bad nerves, loneliness, and insomnia and can only eat light meals. He consoles himself that in the end some good will come out of all this misery.

December 9, 1926

He is waiting all day in his hotel room for Dr. Joseph Rosen to phone about the fate of *Hatoren*. He is incapable of focusing on anything. His son Joseph is his only consolation.

December 10, 1926

He finally hears from Dr. Rosen that there is no reprieve for *Hatoren*. "I see no source for any future income at this time."

December 11, 1926

"I have repeated to myself all day today: 'I must remain calm and maintain inner serenity even during such difficult days.' I have been training myself at this last stage of my life to view life (or death!) philosophically. I am learning the skill of giving way, the skill of being content with little, with zero. No matter what happens

I will never bend my erect carriage, bow my head in shame or flatter anyone. I put my trust in God only."

December 13, 1926

He sits in his son's office making phone calls. He is still the head of the education committee of the Herzeliyah high school for girls.

He buys books and goes to the theatre. [*Handwriting greatly impaired.*]

December 18, 1926

"The brother of Karl Kunz, my old-time friend, visited me today. He begged me to attend an ICOR²⁵ meeting to benefit Jewish colonization in Russia. The meeting's organizers are Communists who are currently trying to curry favour with me. I turned him down in spite of all his pleading and begging."

December 19, 1926

Brainin attends a meeting of the executive steering committee of the Zionist Organization of America. On the agenda is the "Brainin Affair." He is being taken to task in his capacity as vice-president of the Zionist Organization for sharing the same dais as Olgin,²⁶ head of the Communist party of America.

²⁵ ICOR was the Yiddish acronym of the Association for Jewish Colonization in Russia, which was founded by Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears and Roebuck in 1926. Rosenwald, who was not a Communist sympathizer, believed that Russia's plan to establish Jewish colonies as a solution to the Russian Jewish problem was worth supporting. ICOR's main aim was humanitarian although it had Communist members. In 1929, ICOR organized a scientific delegation made up of American specialists to investigate the potential of colonizing Birobidzhan.

²⁶ M.J. Olgin (1878-1939) was the main Yiddish spokesman for Stalinism in the U.S. He came to America in 1915 from Russia, where he was a member of the Communist underground, already well known for his writings. In 1917 his book *Soul of the Russian Revolution* appeared in English. He obtained a

He is accused of associating only with Bundists²⁷ or Communists since the day he has returned to America from his long trip abroad and that this behaviour hurts Zionism.

Louis Lipsky had earlier demanded in an article he wrote in *The New Palestine* that Brainin be removed from his post of vice-president and give up his seat on the executive, and now in front of 60 people Lipsky reiterates this.

“But the accusation was general, it did not specify in detail what exactly I was accused of. It did not state where and what I did that was not suitable for a man in my position in the Zionist organization. I then spoke for more than thirty minutes and instead of apologizing or justifying myself I put Lipsky and his gang on the accused stand and told them that instead of thanking me for behaving in Russia as a Zionist and this in spite of the dangers that such behaviour entailed, they choose to fling stones at me and blacken my name.”

Dr. Koralnik, B. Shelvin and Dr. Stephen Wise,²⁸ who are also present, lend their support to Brainin.

Dr. Wise stands up and says: “Everything Brainin does he does as a Zionist and as a spiritual leader and as someone who towers over the others and God forbid you should reproach him and

doctorate from Columbia University in 1922, was one of the founders of the American Workers Party and the editor of its Yiddish newspaper the *Freiheit* (*Freedom*) until his death.

²⁷ The Bund, the General Jewish Labour Union of Lithuania, Poland and Russia, was founded in Vilna in 1897 to preserve Jewish culture and the Yiddish language within the context of socialism in each country where the Jews dwelt. It was liquidated in Russia after 1917 but continued to run Yiddish schools, youth movements, newspapers and women's groups in Poland. It was virulently anti-Zionist. Vladimir Medem (1879-1923), who came to the U.S. in 1920, was its chief theoretician.

²⁸ Stephen Wise (1874-1949), well known Reform rabbi and Zionist who, as assistant to Louis Brandeis, supported the Balfour Declaration but later withdrew from Zionist activity because of his disillusionment with American Zionism.

criticize him baselessly. Do not push away this thoughtful man of spirit who has sacrificed all his years to the ideals of Jewish redemption and Zionist work."

Those who speak against him accuse him of "behaving in a way that dishonours Zionists and Zionism and associating with evildoers and the enemies of Zion."

They insist that he promise not to participate in any Communist meetings and refrain from associating with Olgin and his gang. They also claim that they never intended to remove him from his vice-presidency. Brainin refuses to give any guarantees for his behaviour in the future.

"A Zionist like me does not need to ask permission what, where or when he should speak. I refuse to abide by any authority. They are the real guilty ones who have sinned against Zionism, against the truth and against me, not I. In conclusion, the Zionist leadership has suffered here a stunning defeat. I have witnessed today its stupidity, its scorn and its cruelty. It made me feel utter disgust. But instead of dishonour I feel vindicated, and instead of heaping scorn on me they were forced in the end to sing my praise. A deep abyss separates me from them."

Jean Fischer, the head of the Zionist Organization in Belgium and a member of Chaim Weizmann's coterie in New York, complains to Brainin about Lipsky and his gang, but he too is a reactionary. All the General Zionists²⁹ are interested in only one thing, collecting money, and they have no compunction as to what means they use to do that.

"Every method and trick is acceptable to them. They have rebuffed and silenced all intelligent, spiritual people who have a conscience or any Zionist who has questions or doubts. In America, Poalei

²⁹ General Zionists was the name of a Zionist-Liberal, right-leaning political party which was founded in Krakov in 1931. It was still active in Israel until it merged with the Likud.

Zion and Tzeirei Zion both yearn for the General Zionists' feedbag."

December 20, 1926

The YMHA invites Brainin to speak. He is received with joy and admiration. One of the women he meets declares: "Brainin is so youthful. I have never heard any of our younger people express without fear or deceit such truths about all sides of the question. To have heard him speak is a big event for us."

After the lecture he is asked whether he is a Zionist or a Bolshevik and he replies: "If your kind of Zionism is what this movement stands for, then I am a Bolshevik. I am sure that if we establish our nation in Eretz Israel, it will be modeled on the Soviet republic. If it isn't I would stand in the forefront of the battle to make it such. In my opinion Bolsheviks too have the right to be Zionists. The new nation in Eretz Israel will be for all Jews."

December 27, 1926

Eizemann, the millionaire, is investing in Bialik's and Shmaryahu Levin's publishing company, Dvir. He has managed so far to raise \$70,000. Brainin's comments: "Bialik is forever demanding money and again money and a lot of money." David Frishman's³⁰ widow, Lilli, complains how rudely Bialik has behaved towards her and her husband. Eizemann is surprised by her words because he esteems Bialik more than Isaiah the prophet and Albert Einstein.

The Joint³¹ wants Brainin to undertake a series of 15 lectures on the topic of Jewish colonization in Russia. Brainin refuses. "I find

³⁰ David Frishman (1859-1922) was a cultured, well educated man of letters who began his writing in Hebrew, then in German. His work appeared in all the leading Hebrew journals of the time. He was not a public person; language, culture and literature were his main interests. He often quarreled with other writers about their lack of style. He was the editor of the Hebrew journal *Hatekufa* (*The Age*).

³¹ The Joint, see note 5.

it impossible to work with the coarse bandits of the Joint. If the Joint will merge with the Jewish Agency, the way Weizmann wants them to, they will only harm and corrupt Zionism and the idea of the Revival. Negotiations have gone on for a month and are a waste of time and a disappointment. Ribolov, the editor of *Hadoar*, is the supreme leader of the Hebrew world in America. There is no place to print any protests; all Hebrew writers fear that Ribolov will attack them too."

December 30, 1926

For the coming year, 1927, Brainin gets a new offer from *Der Tog*. He will work twice as much for double the salary. He writes that *Der Tog*'s editorial board disgusts him and had he asked for more money he would have received more, but "I am incapable of discussing money matters. I find it beneath me and always try to avoid such dealings.

"At the Havruta banquet³² (Peter Wiernik, the editor of the *Jewish Morning Journal*, is the chairman),³³ Weizmann sat me down next to him and ingratiated himself by asking when will we meet and discuss things. My answer was: 'My esteemed Dr. Weizmann, I have no need to see you and discuss things with you. You missed your opportunity; there was a time when I could have saved you from some pitfalls and disasters that you have encountered here in America but you avoided me. Now there is no more need to meet with you. If you still insist, please phone me and we shall set an appointment at your convenience.' He apologized profusely that he has no free time, that he is being torn to pieces from all sides (and that is true!) and begged me to forgive him."

Brainin writes an article in *Der Tog*, entitled "The Eminent Actor,"

³² Havruta is an Aramaic word meaning friendship, togetherness. In this context it probably refers to a fraternity.

³³ Peter Wiernik was the editor of the *Jewish Morning Journal*, in Yiddish the *Morgen Jurnel*, which began publishing in 1901 and was the most secular of the Yiddish newspapers in America.

in which he demands that Judge Brandeis³⁴ be reinstated in Zionist circles. The article is against Lipsky and his gang and will reawaken the fight between them. "I almost feel pleasure in throwing the truth in the faces of the destroyers of Zionism. The international press has not stopped talking about me."

1927

January 4, 1927

Brainin meets Weizmann privately.

"I spoke openly of the difficult situation that exists in the Zionist world and criticized him that instead of consulting with intellectuals and real Zionists he chose to deal with smug burghers who are far removed from true Zionism and have no understanding of its real essence and aspirations. I did not refrain from telling him that he bears a great deal of the responsibility, for he does things in halves, in thirds, in quarters. His strategy is only aimed at the moment and when in the next moment circumstances change, he finds ways to get around that.

"Weizmann accepted my criticism with love and friendship, or at least pretended that he accepted it so and apologized and justified himself.

"Hebrew writers have no forum today from where they can make their voices heard."

³⁴ Louis D. Brandeis (1856-1941) was a leading reform lawyer and Zionist, and the first Jew nominated to the Supreme Court, by Woodrow Wilson in 1916, where he stayed for 23 years until his retirement in 1939. In 1920 a conflict arose between him and the American Zionist Organization over his wish to strike a new executive body which would focus solely on the economic development of the settlements in Palestine, employing people with sound business experience. The conflict caused Brandeis to resign from all his Zionist activities.

January 5, 1927

"Achad Ha'am³⁵ is being eulogized but Brainin is boycotted!"

At a big Keren Hayesod meeting, Brainin meets Lipsky, who attacks him for the article in *Der Tog*. After the meeting, several Zionists approach Brainin, very careful not to show him too much respect, the way they used to before his perceived big sin. They are careful not to antagonize the leadership or they might be suspect too. He refuses to shake hands with one of the Zionist "sheep," whose hand remains hanging in the air. The onlookers express surprise and Brainin tells them: "I do not accept a dirty hand. My own hand is cleaner than clean and I refuse to soil it through this touch."

January 7, 1927

Brainin is asked again to head the opposition against the current leadership of the American Zionists.

He moves to a larger room on the 12th floor of the hotel. He is busy all day moving his books, journals and the many papers that he has accumulated.

April 23, 1927

A letter to my invisible friend,

I have been a Zionist since the day I knew my mind; now

³⁵ Achad Ha'am ("one of the people"), the nom de plume of Asher Ginsberg (1856-1927), who had just died, was the editor of *Hashiloach* (*The Release*), the most influential Hebrew journal in Eastern Europe for Zionism and Hebrew literature. He was best known for his essays, which emphasized the importance of the continuity of Jewish culture to ensure the survival of Judaism and deter assimilation, rather than Zionism, which worked toward establishing a Jewish state. He believed Jews could go on living in exile once they obtained equal rights and Zion would be "the spiritual centre" for the Diaspora. His ideas led to much debate and were very controversial and influential among Jewish intellectuals.

I have ceased being one. I used to be like a tree and the leaves were my opinions; now the leaves have all fallen off and only the bare trunk remains.

Zionism in its present form has destroyed us; it has misled us and made us stray from the path, the right path. We are groping in the darkness with only the misleading dim light of the Keren Hayesod to guide us.

I pound my chest: I have sinned, I have transgressed, and I have aided and abetted the guilty ones who have pushed us in the wrong direction. We have abandoned God and have been following Satan.

They, the Zionists, have lured thousands of young men who we call pioneers but who in truth are nothing but victims, pathetic sacrificial lambs, being led to the altar of an idea.

Who will be the builders of Zion? It will never be built without spiritual enthusiasm; its ruins will never be restored without faith and religion. It will not be long before these pioneers will open their eyes and realize that they have been led to disaster.

Those who seek a nation filled with initiative will not find it in Eretz Israel. Very few choose to go there these days. Most of those who do are pushed into going. When these too will see that they have not a shadow of a chance of succeeding, then the "ascenders" will turn into "descenders"³⁶ as they flee Eretz Israel to escape the famine.

Who are the ones who are capable of building Eretz Israel? Only genuine Zionist believers or religious believers, those

³⁶ Ascenders and those who descend (in Hebrew, "olim" and "yordim") had very definite meanings in the context of immigration and emigration. The first was positive; the second, very negative.

who are willing to bear every deprivation just so that they can participate in the building of our nation. And what is their number? Their number is bound to grow fewer because they come to build but end up running after politics. So on the one hand we have pioneers who stray from religion and on the other hand we have religious ones who turn into shnorrrers. The pioneers will eventually rebel because they cannot remain all their life dependent on the charity of American Jewry, and the Zionist executive will finally recognize that they failed to educate the younger generation properly. But meanwhile the Hebrew people will still be walking in darkness.

1928

January 8, 1928

Brainin attends a lecture given by Dr. I.N. Steinberg, who used to be the justice minister in Lenin's first cabinet. The Jewish anarchists and Joseph Cohen, the editor of the *Frei Arbeiter Shtime*, organize it.³⁷ The hall is full. Brainin is asked to sit on stage; he refuses and sits in the first row instead. "I did not want to sit on the stage in honour of Steinberg, and stood my ground. My motive was that I did not want to associate my name with enemies of the Soviet government in Russia."

Steinberg spoke excellent Yiddish; his topic was politics and morality.

The next passage in the entry concerns Brainin's wife. He complains bitterly that she is driving him to distraction. She is a demanding and selfish woman, always wanting more things. She craves money, comforts and new dresses. She is sick in her mind,

³⁷ *Frei Arbeiter Shtime* (*Free Voice of Labour*) was the longest-running Yiddish anarchist newspaper in America. It began publishing in 1890 and ran for 87 years, until 1977.

behaves terribly, and is cruel and evil. He has always described her as an angel. How can he now admit to the truth?

January 11, 1928

Brainin is present at the founding of Avro Industry, an organization that aims to build colonies based on industry for Jews in Russia. Forty people are at the meeting, including doctors, lawyers and other well-to-do people. The writer Nina Medem³⁸ is also present. The intention is to sell \$700,000 worth of shares. In his speech, Brainin suggests how and what to do to assure that this new body would have a solid base. He is especially keen to establish a university in the colonies where agriculture and industry would be taught in addition to other disciplines. Students would support themselves by working on farms adjacent to the university.

Brainin's article "Giants who became dwarfs" appears in *Der Tog* and stirs a great deal of interest. In the article, Brainin cuts Bialik and Shneur down to size and shows how they are moving backwards. He, at the same time, is feeling full of courage and youthful fire.

January 16, 1928

He is tired of writing articles. The topics that interest him do not interest the reading public. Everything is stale and nauseating. He cannot stand Jewish public life, everyone lies and everyone hates him. To discredit him they use vile tactics. He calls them "the pen murderers."

"I have an uncontrollable urge to shake up Jewish public opinion, to throw stones, to scare the geese, to explode a bomb, to tear off the mask of hypocrisy."

Shapiro, the owner of *Der Tog*, tells Brainin: "I am told everywhere I go that Brainin has become a Communist. Is that true?" Brainin

³⁸ Nina Medem was the wife of Vladimir Medem. See note 27.

replies: "Of course it is true. I am a Communist and so what?"

January 29, 1928

Brainin is invited to speak at the Young Men's Hebrew Association (YMHA) in Patterson, New Jersey. He talks for an hour and a half in front of a full house on "Ideological movements in world Jewry." This is how he is introduced: "Here before you stands the world's greatest Jewish editor of our generation. Brainin is his name. Is there anyone who has any connection with Judaism and literature who has not heard that name?"

He then adds: "I behave like a man who does not depend on other people's opinion and one who has no shortage of money, and the truth is that I haven't got a penny."

February 19, 1928

He boasts that he is at the height of his fame, riding high on ICOR's crest and yet has not been disowned by the Zionists.

He attends a meeting of the executive of the Zionist Histadrut. On the agenda is the near-bankruptcy of the settlements in Eretz Israel which have already swallowed up millions of dollars. More shares will be offered to raise new funds.

February 20, 1928

"Since I have become famous among vast numbers of Jews because of my attitude to Soviet Russia and my courage to reveal my opinions in public in a straightforward manner, in spite of my enemies and ill-wishers' opposition, I have been thinking at times that this newly gained fame is a bad sign. I search through my actions and my ways and examine closely the deepest recesses of my soul and think that perhaps something has gone awry in me and some rot has penetrated me. Not so. I can now state that in fact my newly held attitude about Russian Jews and Soviet Russia and the change in my values that I have experienced are indications of

an elevated state of my soul.

"I had constructed a false security wall around me by surrounding myself with insincere nationalists and corrupt overfed burghers. This caused my conscience a great deal of trouble and many hard sacrifices. And the great Jewish public felt that, and without any effort on my part, almost against my will, I have acquired their confidence and love and when I hear today my praises expressed by these wise men of the masses and those they worship and compare it with what our 'aristocrats' and 'leading lights' say about me, I feel deeply ashamed.

"Yet I perceive my current fame as an obstacle. First, I don't believe that their praise is sincere and that they really like me. Second, I suspect people who use praise like that, and for good reason. It is precisely because of my shortcomings and weaknesses that they bestow such praise on me. They [the "leading lights"] cannot bear the truth of one who fights for the truth, and so I declare openly that I prefer the masses of Jews to their preachers, leaders and learned ones.

"Still, I confess that this great fame does not contribute to one's mental health and I yearn for my younger days when I wasn't one of the famous ones.

"I love being solitary. I search in every hour, every day, every place, the pleasure of sitting alone in my room surrounded only by literature. That's when I am truly happy. Yet this happiness does not satisfy me for long. After sitting a few days in my study I go out to the people, to the masses to have contact with them.

"It is sheer egoism to lock oneself in a room and stay removed from events when the situation is so dire, when the masses clamour for solutions, solutions for their lives. In such pregnant times, on the verge of giving birth to new world orders, I overcome my instinct for solitude and mix with the masses, whom I love, because they in spite of their shortcomings do not cause as much harm as do our intelligentsia.

“What a contrast between the executive committees of the Agro Industrial Co. and the Zionists. The Zionists envy one another, they openly talk of peace but in secret they undermine their colleagues, they are nothing but sated burghers who hate the truth. But those working for the Agro Industry and our committee (whose aim is to support the Jewish settlements in Soviet Russia and to combine science with mining and industry with agriculture), they seek only the truth, not honour or power. They all work for no pay, which necessitates many sacrifices. They are all socialists and the atmosphere is moral, clean and pure. No one is afraid of using his mind and telling the truth.”

[There were rumours that Brainin was getting a share from the 20 million dollars that Agro-Joint was raising on behalf of Russian Jews. Brainin here denies ever getting a penny for his work.]

March 3, 1928

“The belief in the presence of God and inner godliness are increasing within me. It has become clear to me that I erred in my calculations regarding universal Zionism. It has also become obvious that I made a mistake when I thought that the Hebrew language was a living language that had a future. Dedicating my whole life to the Hebrew language, while the rest of my people betrayed, abandoned and forgot her and only a handful of idlers stuck by her, gratified me and brought me satisfaction.

“I am now searching for a new direction in life, a new way to work for my people and my literary work. I keep experimenting and looking but I have yet to find the straight path that would suit me, one which I could follow with full security and confidence, and the inner turmoil is devastating my body and health.

“From the day I came back from Soviet Russia, or more accurately from my long voyage, which covered three continents, Africa, Europe and Asia, from that day, October 18, 1926, a complete new phase has begun in my life. My firm financial base has slid from under me because of the demise of my journal *Hatoren*. My world

view has expanded and deepened, I broke out of the narrow confines of my nationalistic approach and released my spirit. I examined my idealism in the light of my intellect, purified it in the crucible of my passionate emotions and found that it melted away. My grief and pain are immense.

"It is difficult enough to bid farewell to a hump that one has grown accustomed to. It is harder to give up a spiritual idealism that entertained the soul and satisfied the spirit. But the ideals have grown old, have changed shape and have rusted. My heart is now filled with new content, with new ideals that are more humane. Dead is the spirit, long live the spirit! I am still infected by the diseases of my second childhood but I hope I shall recover, pull myself together and become a man. I have learnt over these past 18 months the art of giving in, of rationalizing; it is an art, not work. I force myself through willpower to adapt to the new milieu, to enter new interest groups from which I distanced myself in my previous life, to learn new wisdoms and meet with the new obstacles that crop up along my new path in life.

"I am pressured more and more, from within and from without, towards the left. I do not want to stay in the middle of the road. But my new road is a minefield. I face this all alone, I haven't got one friend, one soul, not one amongst the thousands, who is really close to me.

"The public persona in me is only a guest. Public service is mere opportunism. And yet the energy within me that for some reason has not found expression in my literary work is looking for an outlet in community work on behalf of our nation."

Brainin continues here to identify himself as a writer first. He dreams of writing a great scientific or literary project but in reality, much to his frustration, during his 17 years in the U.S. he has occupied himself mostly with community work.

March 7, 1928

ICOR is sending a cable to the Russian government in reaction to the announced Birobidzhan plan.³⁹ They will not publicize the plan until they obtain more details. Brainin signs the cable too, even though he is not as excited by the plan as the others are. His signature will raise a big noise among the Zionist officials. "But as I believe wholeheartedly that this represents the rescue of the Russian Jews from hunger and assimilation, I cannot remain on the sidelines."

He speaks in Boston in front of an audience consisting mostly of radicals but there are some religious Jews present as well. He talks about the situation of the Jews in Eastern and Western Europe, about Russia and the Birobidzhan plan. An ovation greets his words.

"I believe that a Jewish republic in Russia can only help the realization of the Zionist dream. Russian Jews have no other choice. The positive aspects of the agricultural movement have originated from Zionism. If it weren't for Zionism and its moral victories, Jewish colonies in Russia would never have been possible."

"I am careful not to be disrespectful of Zionism and its leaders. I find the transition from the bourgeois Zionist milieu in which I grew up to the radical and Communist workers milieu (most of whom are uneducated and ignorant although for the most part kind and well meaning) not a simple matter. But it is clear to me and I have no doubts whatsoever that my new path is the right one. I am presently the people's hero. Everywhere I go people argue and

³⁹ Birobidzhan was a region in the far eastern border of Manchuria that the Soviet regime designated to become an autonomous Jewish republic. In 1927 a feasibility plan was conducted, and by 1928 the first settlers arrived. In 1934 the district was granted official status. A semblance of Jewish life existed there until 1948, when the regime clamped down on all Jewish activity. By 1959 only one tenth of the population remained Jewish. A book dealing with the subject has recently been written by Henry Srebrnik, entitled *Jerusalem on the Amur: Birobidzhan and the Canadian Jewish Communist Movement 1924-1951*, forthcoming from McGill-Queen's Press.

discuss my qualities. Everyone acknowledges and appreciates the revolution that has transformed my spirit. The public idolizes me and is furious with Ribolov for having dishonoured me last year.”

While in Boston Brainin offers to speak to the Zionist Organization there for free, but they turn him down.

March 15, 1928

Berl Locker⁴⁰ and Krause, the secretary of Poalei Zion’s central office, ask Brainin to help them with fundraising for their London office on behalf of the settlers in Eretz Israel. The question of Russia does not arise.

“They are fundraisers like all Zionists. Work for the Zionist cause has not elevated the people who dedicated their whole life to it. Quite the contrary; it has diminished them and enslaved their spirits.”

March 17, 1928

Brainin is in Philadelphia for ICOR. He refuses to be lodged by them and chooses his own hotel.

In his talk he reiterates that his visit to Eretz Israel had strengthened and increased his love for Zionism but that the settlements there cannot rescue the Jews of Eastern Europe. Jewish colonization in Russia is the only hope for the Jews to avoid physical and spiritual extermination.

“We will have a Jewish republic in Russia where Hebrew will be taught and Judaism will be revived. I am a strong believer in the vital life force of our people once they stand on their own.”

⁴⁰ Berl Locker (1887-1972) was a well-known Zionist activist. At the time of Brainin’s disenchantment with the Zionist movement, Locker was the head of the political bureau of the Jewish Agency in London.

March 23–May 3, 1928

Brainin and his wife visit Montreal.

June 9, 1928

Back in New York, Brainin complains bitterly about his finances and his wife's constant nagging. His only income is from *Der Tog* and the occasional lecture he gives, but in the summer he has no lectures lined up. His wife demands three times more money than he has. She needs it for makeup, dresses, shoes, etc. She wants him to work more; she does not care where the money comes from. "She says, 'These are my needs, I must have them.'" When he tells her that his wallet is empty she gets hysterical and falls sick into bed. He borrows money even though he knows that he has no way of repaying and everyone thinks that he is rich. "I had no money worries until July 1925. My income was steady, I had *Der Tog*, *Hatoren*, *Hatikva*, and I got paid for my books that were published in the U.S."

September 2, 1928

"Dvir Publishing is doing well under Bialik's direction. My judgment of him was wrong. I recognized his serious shortcomings but did not duly appreciate his great assets. I am now ready to change my mind."

Brainin works for seven weeks, compiling with the help of two secretaries a catalogue of Israel Matz's library.

His trips across the U.S. on behalf of ICOR bear fruit. Money is collected for Jewish colonies in Russia, and the prestige of ICOR increases in the eyes of the Jewish American public because of the authority of his name.

His wife returns from Montreal complaining of heart and circulatory ailments. His sister is ill too. "The only hero around here, in this family, the one who lifts everyone's spirits, is I."

November 1928

In the November 12 issue of the Palestinian paper *Hameretz*, Glicksman, the editor, claims that Brainin received money from Lord Melchett⁴¹ on behalf of the Jewish colonies in Russia. "This is utterly false. The Hebrew press in the Holy Land can now too boast of publishing 'yellow journalism,' though I would have preferred 'red.' It at least is a livelier colour."

1929

January 7, 1929

Brainin attends a meeting of the ICOR executive. Birobidzhan is on the agenda. The discussion involves details of the technical delegation that will be sent to Russia, the purchase of tractors, etc. "It seems to me that the organizers of this plan are still groping in the dark. They are lost and mislead others; they are stumbling and cause others to stumble too. While here in America, obstacles are put in the way of everything that ICOR, which is the only advocate of the plan, tries to do. I personally have invested huge efforts in this propaganda work and have made some powerful enemies. This does not bother me, provided there is some hope of establishing for the Russian Jews an independent, socialist republic of their own, and there is hope... (but it will require many sacrifices)."

January 12, 1929

Brainin is invited to be the guest of honour at the second annual banquet of the Hebrew-speaking Jewish doctors. He knows most of them, even if he has not seen some of them in a while. "Most of them have become richer but not wiser. They are clueless when it comes to politics."

⁴¹ Lord Melchett, or Ludwig Mond (1839-1909), was a German-born Jewish chemist who moved to England in 1880 and became one of the richest industrialists in the country. He was a noted philanthropist and very active in the Zionist movement in the U.K.

He receives a telegram from Johannesburg to come to South Africa for propaganda purposes.

January 15, 1929

He speaks at the general meeting of ICOR. His speech is interrupted several times by applause. The "clever ones" receive him with enthusiasm and gratitude. There are simple workingmen in the audience who tell him that the day he joined ICOR was a joyful day for all of them.

"Each time I speak before members of ICOR, whether Communists or leftists, they receive me with exceptional enthusiasm and admiration, and I feel strings of friendship and devotion woven in the hall between myself and them."

Another tirade against his wife. She is demanding money and is embittering his life. She never ceases to complain or make biting remarks about how she yearns to go to balls, the theatre and other amusement places, and she claims to be a socialist and a Communist! She finds all the wives she meets ignorant and ugly but their husbands handsome and hard-working and very generous to their wives. She never fails to tell him which author is frequently in print, labouring for his wife's sake and earning a great deal of money. One cannot upset her because she is sick. She causes him "the tortures of hell."

January 20, 1929

He spends the day at a plenary session of the ICOR executive, giving a report on his six-week lecture tour of the Western U.S. on their behalf. He makes a deep impression on those present. He explains his views of how he intends to make necessary and significant changes in the working process of ICOR. "Everyone agrees that I have raised ICOR to a higher level. I widened and deepened its scope in America, and my influence on the members is immense."

January 22, 1929

The Havruta meets again, and the guest of honour is Dr. Joseph Rosen, the director of the Agro-Joint in Russia, who spends the evening telling Brainin of his opposition to the Birobidzhan plan. He does not understand the significance of the plan, Brainin concludes. He is just a vestige of the old school who lacks the intuitive spark that can send a man to the moon. He is the type who prefers having a bird in the hand rather than an eagle in the sky.

In his speech, Brainin raises the topic to a historical and social level, while others who follow lower it to stupid inanities and talk about the Russians' behaviour towards the Jews.

"Keren Hayesod wants to bring three million Jews out of Russia and take them to Eretz Israel or anywhere but Russia because they believe they have no hope there. What nonsense! What despicable demagoguery, what idle and empty talk. It is difficult to explain to loudmouthed idiots the matter of Jewish colonization in Russia or the nature of the Russian Revolution."

January 24, 1929

Brainin undertakes to travel to South Africa on behalf of ICOR. (He mentions here ICOR's secretary, who probably organized that trip: "[Leon] Talmi is a Communist from head to toe, not a soft man, rather harsh but a diligent worker.") But first Brainin is off to Atlanta to open ICOR's fundraising campaign. In Atlanta he moves to the best hotel in town rather than the one to which he was assigned: "My eyes could not believe what the corridor looked like."

ICOR members in Atlanta are all simple people; they are Communists, local workers, and grocers from black neighborhoods, low-income earners.

Brainin feels alienated and alone. He does not belong to the fat, bourgeois, American Zionists, all inept politicians with whom he

feels no spiritual tie. He also feels bitter about the situation in Zion and the leadership in London. "Is this what I have sacrificed all my time, my soul and strength for? Given all I owned and all I had within me? Zionism has become a kind of idolatry, a work based on lies.

There is no clear plan, economic, social or political. The socialist idea has been pushed away and no one is opposed to the charity box rattlers. The settlers too have become chatterboxes, scribblers, heroes who fight culture. They stand in the way of the redemption; they leave the country with no intention of returning while the leaders want to add more Jews to Eretz Israel. Their attitude to Soviet Russia and Jewish colonization makes my stomach turn."

Brainin leaves with his son Joseph for South Africa on March 8. He returns to New York October 26, 1930.

April 26, 1929, Johannesburg

"The Jews in South Africa are enemies of Russia and haters of Jewish colonization. Living conditions here are difficult, not like in America or Europe. Most of the Jews originate from the district of Kaunas (Kovno), in Lithuania; there aren't too many educated scholars among them. They are here to work hard and make money, dealing mostly with precious stones. No one has heard of my name here. I knew that it was not going to be an easy trip but I was curious to visit foreign lands and see how the Jews lived here.

"I also came to awaken Jewish hearts to the plight of their brothers in Russia. Everyone here is a Zionist, of course in name only, because Zionism requires monetary donations, nothing else. It also makes them feel patriotic towards Britain. They are incapable of independent thought or of changing the direction of their impoverished opinions. I am sick and in despair but no one feels sorry for me. Overnight I have grown old here. My constant feeling is of revulsion, nausea and utter boredom; still, by making an effort and with the little strength that I have left I manage to overcome all the obstacles and hindrances and gain new converts to the cause

of Jewish colonization in Soviet Russia.

"The Zionists here, namely the executive committee and the leaders, are all scoundrels. They insist that the Jews give money only to Eretz Israel. One Jew in Eretz is more valuable to them than a million Jews elsewhere. In truth it is not even the Jew in Eretz who is so dear to them but their total power over South African Jewry. They are neither Jews nor people but Zionists with a zain, not with a zadi."⁴²

September 16, 1929

Brainin and his son arrive in Southampton from Johannesburg with nine pieces of luggage and take a first-class train to London. There too they find that everyone is violently opposed to Soviet Russia.

September 21, 1929, Berlin

Brainin walks through the streets of Berlin, remembering the past. He is filled with regret for those days when he was someone to reckon with. He had a following then, friends and admirers; he was in the centre of things. And now? His old friends have either moved away or died. The face of the city has changed; it all looks so new.

September 23, 1929

"In the reading room of the Jewish community centre on Fasanstrasse, I find many publications that are filled with articles and news about me. Some accuse me but some take my side. My success in South Africa has angered the band of Zionist journalists and editors. Their articles are filled with crude lies and unsubstantiated rumours plucked from the air. The writers them-

⁴² "Zionists with a zain, not a zadi," Brainin refers here to the Hebrew spelling of Zionists. In Hebrew the first letter is "zadi." When changed to a "zain" (the letter "z" in English), the meaning of the word changes to "f—ers."

selves know that they are lying when they claim falsely that the Russian Communists sent me to South Africa and that the aim of my trip was to defend Communism."

October 7, 1929

The date of the Court of Honour has no entry in the diary.

October 29, 1929, Berlin, Heineplatz Pension

"Newspapers in Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, German arrive every day, filled with news and articles about my trial against H.N. Bialik and every article and news item is filled with lies. Things are reported that I never said and what I did stress and say before the Court of Honour of the Zionist Congress is maliciously twisted. Everyday I am confronted by a bomb, a stinking bomb.

"These despicable journalists, who are totally devoid of talent and even the simplest knowledge of the craft of writing straightforward, tasteful articles, send to their Zionist publications 'the merchandise' that is demanded of them and they distribute these 'articles,' fattened by lies, rumours, cruelty, stupidity, forgeries and abuse all over the world, even to Argentina, and these are then translated into a broken, castrated Hebrew and fill the papers in Eretz Israel and the *Haatid* paper of the young Polish Zionists. The editors of the Israeli papers print the translations exactly as they receive them, without erasing or correcting even one expression, no matter how idiotic or how obviously false it is.

"I have always known the quality and nature of our journalists but I would not have believed or imagined that they were capable of such underhanded behaviour. Zionist journalism in all its many languages has hit rock bottom and has corrupted and sullied all its workers.

"Journalists from non-Zionist papers were the only ones who revealed Bialik's true character and reported accurately, without any Zionist embellishments, some of what Bialik and I had said at

the trial. There were admirable words put forth by 'the powerful lion,'⁴³ even if Bialik appeared at the trial more in the guise of a bullying Cossack rather than a spiritual man, one who was playing to the gallery and whose aim was to ingratiate himself to the bunch of idlers who believed they accomplished much by making up lies and stories about Soviet Russia and by bullying behind their backs the wise men of the Communist Party.

"I try hard every day to distract myself and ignore Bialik's behaviour and forget about the trial and all the bad things that were done to me by the Hebrew writers. They symbolize for me the mental deterioration of this false Zionism, which is based on three things: collecting funds, disseminating falsehoods and viciously attacking every smart person, every Zionist and every Hebrew writer who dares think and express things that are contrary to the way of thinking of the gang, the clique of the Odessa group or any other group."

October 30, 1929, Berlin

"TO THE HEBREW LANGUAGE

Oh woman, old woman of ancient times

I gave you my whole life,

My blood, my marrow and my brain I sacrificed for your dried-up bones.

In the days when I hungered for bread I always provided and nurtured you.

I deprived myself of sleep to revive you.

⁴³ Brainin, by saying "Aryeh ba'al guf," which means a powerfully built lion, is alluding here both to the title of a short story that Bialik wrote in Odessa about a Jewish peasant named Aryeh who had a powerful body and to Bialik himself.

I gave up everything but I never gave you up.

I smoothed the wrinkles on your brow, I taught you how to speak fluently and well, without faltering or stammering, how to walk straight without stumbling or falling.

When I was young, you were already old.

When you found your second youth I became old.

My love for you was romantic.

I gave you everything without ever asking for anything in return.

Whatever I found that was the best, the most superior and the most valuable I offered it to you as a gift.

I laboured for you with faith and devotion. You were my goddess, my fetish, and I your enslaved priest.

And you? What did you give me? Not a thing!

Yet in spite of that I am sorry to see how these days, boys are abusing you.

They, who have never loved you in the past, now feel free to violate you, to taint your honour and soil your pure reputation. They have removed your coat of many colours and your jewels, trampled on your noble soul and became wealthy at your expense.

Those who lust after you but really hate you in their hearts have heaped scorn on me. You have become in the hands of these new friends of yours a destructive sword that is out to destroy all fertile ground in our cultural field. You are the Satan who stands in the way of all progressive ideas. According to them you defend every abomination, every crime and misdeed and hate all bright and fresh new ideas.

It pains me to see you come to this! Oh, my darling old lady, after

forty or fifty years you have become the mistress of every deformed, stupid, idiotic gossip monger! So help my soul!"

October 31, 1929, Berlin

"I have been spending several hours every day on my literary work. I am dictating to Mrs. Kalish a very long article on the subject of the trial that recently took place between me and Bialik. It is difficult for me to start working on more serious literary work as long as I have not rid myself of the task of proving to the world the guilt of the gang of scribes who intended to blacken my name by inventing such fictitious stories filled with obvious lies."

December 16, 1929, Vienna

"'Once I got to know human nature I began to love dogs.' If my memory does not deceive me, I think Schopenhauer said this. And I say: Once I got to know the Zionists, especially the Zionist officials, their servants and leaders, and since I have witnessed their corrupt and despicable ways I have come to sincerely love the Communists (they are the dogs of hope). In reality the Communists are not at all dogs or sly foxes, and there are among them excellent men who sacrifice their lives for their ideal."

1930

December 12, 1930, New York

The bank where Brainin deposited his money fails, leaving him with two dollars in his pocket. He has just recently moved into a new apartment in the western part of the Bronx. All the rich men of his acquaintance have also lost their money. He and his wife subsist on what he earns by writing two articles a week for *Der Tog*.

December 26, 1930

Brainin sits in his new apartment, the address of which he has not told a soul, and does not see anyone. For the Yiddish *Der Tog*, he is writing articles describing his travels in Russia. His newly set-up library makes him happy.

[In the summer of 1930 Brainin made a second visit to Russia as the correspondent for *Der Tog*. His diary does not seem to mention it.]

1931

January 6, 1931

Harry Wolfson of Harvard University, Dr. Nissan Turov, Israel Shapiro, the librarian from the National library in Washington, and B. Shelvin pay a visit to Brainin in his new apartment. They are united in their hatred of Russia because of its attitude to the Jews. Out of politeness they refrain from expressing their opposition to Brainin's views. "Russia is hated by them with a blind fury. People who approach everything with depth and seriousness show frivolity and complete superficiality when talking about Russia and its future; the capitalist press influences them all. I stand alone in my way of thinking and in the opinions I have when it comes to the survival of Judaism, its nature and the question of socialism."

January 8, 1931

Der Tog decreases Brainin's pay.

February 14, 1931

"I can see but am not seen, I am a pariah, and no one cares about my opinions or my health. Last year I was still active; right now both my tongue and my pen stutter. My hope and consolation are that I caught an illness and soon, with God's help, I shall recover."

March 1, 1931

[Handwriting almost illegible]

"Bernard Shaw and Romain Rolland have come out as friends of Russia, putting their faith in her to rescue and save our suffering humanity. And opposing them, preparing her downfall, are terrible reactionaries who wish to buttress the power of fascism in the world. And yet, not one of their friends or writing students chooses to ostracize them or attack them or make their life miserable because of their friendship to Soviet Russia. While here? As soon as I said in public that the Bolsheviks tend to favour the Jews and the pogroms there ceased, I became a criminal in the eyes of the wise men of Israel, who pinned on me the label of traitor. And I did this out of the great love I feel for my people and my hatred of the murders and exploitation that the poor suffer...."

SUMMING UP

It is fascinating to see how fervently Brainin still believed in Zionism and the Hebrew language in 1925. He was concerned only with the methods used by the Zionist establishment to achieve its aims and the servile way the Hebrew press followed the establishment's dictates. This concern gradually escalated into outright rage. Brainin's view of the "cause" was an idealistic and romantic one. He could not abide the infighting and posturing of the officials, not accepting or understanding the need for a pragmatic and strategic approach to deal with the real world.

At the beginning of 1926 he was still a Zionist at heart, but by the end of the year he had gathered firsthand experience about what was happening in the real world. He visited Palestine and saw the sorry state of the settlers; he visited Russia and saw the vast number of Jews who needed an existential solution. He assessed the inertia of the English government and compared it with the openmindedness of the Soviet regime. So he came to the conclusion, which he declared openly and unabashedly, that he was both a Zionist and a Communist.

Back in New York his financial situation became hopeless. His journal *Hatoren* folded and he could not get work from other Hebrew publications. He felt that Zionism and Hebrew, the two constants in his life, the two building blocks which defined who he was, had let him down. He was groping in the dark and felt very vulnerable, but when ICOR came calling he turned them down, and when the Joint wanted him to speak on Jewish colonization in Russia he refused. But he admitted that even though he defined himself as a literary person first and foremost, he could not stay away for long from either community work or the public.

In 1927, his moral crisis was at its worst. Zionism had disappointed him greatly, as had the Hebrew writers. His soul was in turmoil.

The year 1928 saw the resolution of the crisis. Brainin declared himself a Communist and actively supported Jewish colonization in Russia. After a painful inner struggle he had accepted a new dichotomy in his life. Instead of Zionism he chose Communism and elevated ICOR by his presence into a more respectable organization, and instead of Hebrew he now wrote in Yiddish. The added bonus was that he regained his lost status. Once again he had influence and much admiration from a new group of people, even if they were not exactly his type, who thought of him as a hero. He felt reinvigorated.

But sadly the euphoria did not last long. The trip to South Africa that he undertook for ICOR exhausted him both physically and mentally. Opposition to his pro-Russian stance assailed him everywhere he went. He became embroiled in polemic warfare, which trapped him in convoluted lies. By the end of 1929, his new-found *raison d'être* was shattered. The Zionist-Hebrew cabal could not accept the new Brainin. They unleashed against him their greatest weapon yet. They denounced him as a traitor to his own people and added insult to injury by having him summon them to a court of honour to defend himself. Brainin was devastated by this attack and never recovered from it.

The year 1930 saw the whole country in a depression. Brainin lost the little income that he still had. He was completely isolated, and, even worse, his health was deteriorating. By the last entry in 1931 he could barely write.

CONCLUSION

The Court of Honour had all the ingredients of great drama. On the one side was Brainin, the flawed hero, a "has-been" icon, riddled by self-doubt, vain and weak, hungry for acclaim and the limelight. Pitted against him, Bialik, the knight in shining armour, an acclaimed hero of his people, a self-assured and confident man, used to elbowing his way through life without much concern for good manners or niceties.

Both loved the Jewish people passionately and sincerely and only wanted what was good for them. It was not a crime for Brainin in the 1920s to believe that Communist Russia could provide a solution for the three million Jews residing there. It was unrealistic for Bialik to hope that those three million Jews could find a haven in Palestine. Neither could imagine the trials and tribulations that history had in store for the world in the upcoming ten years.

In retrospect, both Brainin and Bialik were proven partly correct and partly wrong, depending on one's point of view. Bialik was partly wrong about his predictions for the future of Russian Jews. The three million Jews who stayed in Russia may have lost their Jewish identity but did not lose their lives due to the Nazi Holocaust. Brainin was wrong about the hopelessness of ever establishing a Jewish homeland. Both would have been delighted with the current state of their beloved Hebrew language. Neither one, however, lived to see these outcomes.

On July 4, 1934, Bialik suffered a fatal heart attack while in hospital in Vienna, a few days after undergoing an operation to remove some kidney stones. He was 61 years old.

Brainin lived another ten years in a gradually worsening state of health. Incredibly, in the summer of 1930, he paid a second visit to Russia, and in articles that he sent to *Der Tog* in November of that year he described his "truth" about the situation of the Jews yet again. He wrote that he visited jails and encountered no Zionists

in any of them. He saw “no arrests, no exile, no punishment for being a Zionist, publicly or otherwise, because how can one talk of Zionist persecution when there are no Zionists left?” Why were there no Zionists? Not because of the secret police, but because life in Russia had improved and because it was no longer possible to go to Palestine. The reasons? England’s policy and the “horrific slaughters” that took place there.⁴⁴

L. Tsentsiper wrote in 1931 that if Brainin was found 90% guilty after the trial in Berlin, after reading his articles in *Der Tog*, he was 100% guilty.

Tsentsiper contended it was obvious that Brainin had become a spokesman for the Russian secret police and consequently could not be allowed to remain within the ranks of the Zionist organization. He felt that Brainin should therefore be excommunicated and cease to serve as a tool in the hands of the enemy. The 17th Zionist congress, coming up in Basel, should put an end to the “Brainin Affair.”⁴⁵

In the last two years of his life, Brainin was paralyzed and bedridden. He was living with his son Joseph in New York, and his only way of communication was by pointing his finger at a board that had the alphabet printed on it.

He died in November 1939, at the age of 77.

⁴⁴ “Horrific slaughters” refers to the disturbances that erupted in August 1929 in Jerusalem between Arabs and Jews over access to the Western Wall. There were 133 Jews killed, mostly by Arabs, while 116 Arabs were killed, mostly by the British police.

⁴⁵ The article, written by L. Tsentsiper some time in 1931 (the exact name of the publication and date do not appear on the clipping), can be found in the Canadian Jewish Congress Charities Committee National Archives, series ZB, Reuben Brainin Collection, Box 1, file 1.

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