ANONYMITY AND JEWISHNESS AS FORMS OF ALIENATION:
ISRAEL RABON’S THE STREET

Brygida Gasztold

Politechnika Koszalińska
Koszalin, Polska
bgasztold@gmail.com

Key words: Yiddish literature, Jewishness, post-WWI Poland, alienation, anonymity

Israel Rabon (1900-1941) was one of the most interesting Yiddish writers in interwar Poland. He was born in a Polish village of Gowarczów, near Radom, to an impoverished family. His real name was Israel Rubin, but when he started his literary career, he changed his surname to Rabon so as not to be confused with another author named Rubin. Following his father’s death, the family moved to Baluty – the poverty stricken district of Łódź, mostly inhabited by the Jewish poor because of the limits on settling in Łódź-proper. In 1915, when the area of Baluty was annexed by metropolitan Łódź, it was already home to half the city’s Jews. Cheap housing and a lack of running water and sewerage made it a hazardous place to live for those who had no other options. Soon, its very name – Baluty became a local byword for poverty. Rabon’s mother worked as a used goods peddler, but with general unemployment after World War I and mounting antisemitism, she struggled hard to provide for her four children. Just like other young Jewish boys, Rabon received heder education, which was, however, not enough for an intellectually curious boy. His inquiring mind led him to try his hand at poetry, which resulted in having his first verses published in Lazer Kahan’s Lodzer Folksblat at the age of fifteen. Rabon studied German, Russian, and French and translated poems by Rilke, Rimbaud, and Baudelaire. He also translated from Polish into Yiddish, for example poems by Jan Kasprowicz. When the World War I broke out, he was drafted into the Polish army and he fought Bolsheviks in Eastern Poland. Having been released from the army, Rabon came back to Łódź where he lived until the outbreak of the World War II.

Rabon’s first book of poems, Under the Fence of the World, was published in 1928, and the second, Gray Spring, in 1933. Out of economic necessity, his pen was for hire; he wrote trashy novels and detective stories. He recast Polish and German fiction into Yiddish, and produced a number of potboilers under a variety of pseudo-
nym. This kind of Yiddish popular genre was called *shund* (trash) and was largely de-
rided by the literary establishment. Serious writers who wrote popular novels as serials in
newspapers often hid behind pen names, such as, for example, Shomer (the pseudo-
nym of Nokhem Meyer Shaykevitch). Rabon published *shund*, but signed some of his
work with his own name, giving it a measure of legitimacy. He was not an advocate of
this popular genre, but saw its place within the broader scope of Yiddish literature.

According to Beatrice Lang Caplan, “he justified the presence of such popular works
within the overall literary system as a sign that Yiddish literature was a full-blown lit-
erature comparable with its European counterparts” [2014]. In his thirties, he moved to
Warsaw and became editor of the monthly literary journal *Os* (“Letter”). Rabon is the
author of two novels, *The Street* (1928) and *Balut* (1934). His last collection of poems,
entitled *Lider* (1937), was awarded the Warsaw P.E.N. Club prize. He is remembered
as a remarkable poet, an innovative novelist, an insightful literary critic, and a gifted
editor. “Topics such as sadness, loneliness and death, which appear all too often in his
poetry, receive a clearly distinctive expression in Rabon’s work, when in his poetic
diction the grotesque elements prevail” [Shmeruk 1986: VIII]. When World War II broke
out, he escaped from Łódź to Vilno where he found a job as editor of *Unterveg*. In
1941, he was imprisoned and then murdered by the Nazis, most probably in Ponary,
where the Jews from Vilno were executed.

Israel Rabon’s novel *The Street* (*Di Gas*) was published in Yiddish in 1928, then in
1985 it was translated into English by Leonard Wolf, and in 1991 the Polish edition
appeared. *The Street* tells a story about an unnamed narrator who was recently dis-
charged from the Polish Army. Unsure what to do with himself, he spontaneously de-
cides to go to Łódź, where he wanders about the streets trying to survive. After a series
of unsuccessful attempts to find work and shelter, he decides to leave Łódź and go to
look for a job in Katowice. The novel ends with the weary narrator toiling in the
grave-like coal mines of Katowice. The heart of Rabon’s gritty account is the blight of
post-war society. There is no distinctive plot, but in the manner of a picaresque novel,
the storyline is composed of a number of vignettes, which are linked by the personal
voice of the narrator/protagonist. The random sequence of events mirrors the protago-
nist’s aimlessly drifting through life. Moving from one episode to another, the hero
experiences the callousness of human relations, which were corrupted by the trauma of
war. However, unlike the typical representative of the genre, he is neither of low social
class, nor roguish. Rabon’s narrative does not trace character development, nor do the
readers observe any significant changes in his portrayal, as his role is to usher readers
into the gloomy and hostile world of post-war society. *The Street* is an interesting ex-
ample of Yiddish avant-garde writing, which probes nihilism and despair pervading
the less privileged parts of the Polish society between the wars.

Anonymity as a form of alienation

Rabon’s protagonist is representative of the fate of many Polish people who tried
to restore their lives after the trauma of war. A note from a compassionate woman
supports this claim: “When I hear you speak, it seems to me that in your voice I hear
the voices of all who are homeless, those who wander from city to city and who weep in the rain. Are you aware that you are their voice?” [Rabon 1985: 134]. At the same time, his characterization is unique, highlighting those elements which set him off from a typical member of the lower-class Polish society. A few details, which we get to know about him, are not stated explicitly, but are communicated through flashbacks and past episodes. Thus, we learn that he was raised in poverty. All his memories from childhood are permeated with the feelings of humiliation and deprivation. For example, he remembers how his mother had to beg in the street after a greedy doctor took all her money. His emaciated body, protruding cheekbones, and a ghost-like appearance signal the toll which the hardships of war have taken on him. When he is discharged, his fate becomes similar to those of many other young men who suffered unemployment and poverty in the struggling Polish economy, which was destroyed by the war. Neither can he count on the help of the family, as they are all dead, nor can he return home, as their flat has already been rented to other tenants. Devoid of support not only from his family and community, but also from the country he fought for, he is left alone in the world, which is represented in the novel by the city.

There are also traits which defy his portrayal only as a victim of abject poverty, since his expectations are much more sophisticated than an average worker’s. Deprivation has not always been his lot, as we know that he has managed to learn a profession – he was a bookkeeper. He does not seem to regard himself as a member of the working class and his behavior signals an educated and cultured person. For example, with the little money he has got, he buys a newspaper to read instead of food and he gives a big tip to the barber’s apprentice. These acts of random generosity are against common sense or, as Udel puts it, “against the dictates of rational or enlightened self-interest” [Udel 2015: 10]. He knows about poetry and cites Baudelaire, he is ashamed of being dirty, and thoughts about turning to a life of crime make him blush with shame. When he finally gets a job carrying a circus placard, he worries about his reputation: “I knew nobody so I had no worries that I would be seen doing this not entirely respectable work” [Rabon 1985: 46]. Faced daily with the danger of dying of starvation, he still laments his declining social status. Hence, he does not seem to be concerned merely with survival, but he also pays attention to the quality of his life. His looks as well as his gruesome experiences in the streets of Łódź suggest a working class background, especially since he is one of many discharged soldiers who share his fate. His frame of mind, however, suggests someone who is aware of his deteriorated position in the world. One might assume that he could have enjoyed a better life if world events had taken a more optimistic turn, and he had not joined the army. Thus, the experience of war is presented as responsible for shattering his dreams and thwarting his prospects of a comfortable life. The discordance between his far-fetched expectations and the grim post-war reality highlights the protagonist’s sense of alienation, not only from the world around, but also from his inner self.

Rabon chooses an unnamed, male narrative voice to tell his story. Readers do not get to know his age, family, or social background except for his Jewish origin, which is also scarcely mentioned. The idea of being inconspicuous is reflected in his appearance, as he says about himself: “I looked neither young nor old” [Rabon 1985: 85]. His description, featuring “a torn soldier’s coat” [Rabon 1985: 85], could
match that of any discharged soldier and points at those general features which signal misery and suffering resulting from war. The textual absence of personal information situates the narrator in a communal void, which parallels his alienation not only from the society, but from the world at large. The choice of an anonymous, first-person narrator connects his voice to other voices, which are both a response to and a representation of the overall atmosphere of gloom in the post-war world. An anonymous narrator becomes a symbolic figure representative of mankind, which communicates both the atrocities of war, with their debilitating effect on the human psyche, and the unfamiliarity of the post-war world. The unnamed protagonist acts as a spokesman for the whole generation whose lives have been tainted by the horrors of war. Yet, he does not identify himself with the world around, but stays indifferent. “I was not much concerned” [Rabon 1985: 49], he admits, watching a crowd of weavers protesting in the street. Notably, his role is of a witness to the events, which he observes and comments on through his personalized voice. This kind of detachment serves to present him as less biased and more believable in his observations. Bechtel argues that “[t]he entire novel can be read as a literary manifesto against the reduction of the individual to any precast identities” [Bechtel 2001: 98]. His claim is supported by Jason’s words: “Today you are in Lemberg, tomorrow in Łódź, the day after in Budapest. Today you are a Jew, tomorrow a Czech. The week after, you’re a Dutchman or a Latvian. Why settle down in one place?” [Rabon 1985: 98]. Anonymity and namelessness locate the person of the narrator/protagonist as not focal to the narrative, even though he provides a link between the successive episodes. Instead, the impersonal nature of the narrator extends the distance between the author and the reader, allowing the features of the fictional world to come to light. Hence, the main focus of the novel is the nature of the presented world, to be more exact, the grim reality of inter-war Poland.

**Jewishness as a form of alienation**

Apart from the protagonist’s anonymity, his Jewishness is another factor which provides a form of detachment, and which informs the protagonist’s position against the social fabric of the post-war Polish society. Not only does his ethnicity enrich his characterization, but it also draws attention to the situation of ethnic minorities in inter-war Poland. However, the protagonist is not portrayed as explicitly Jewish since his appearance is devoid of the stereotypical markers of Jewishness, such as an aquiline nose, dark hair, or side-locks: “My face was lean, bony, pale. I had grown considerable beard. The long, wild hair of my head, from which dirty hanks stuck out, joined in a line with the beard” [Rabon 1985: 85]. Even though his body is emaciated and shows the signs of deprivation, these features are presented as the result of the hardships of war, not an ethnic characteristic. Neither his appearance nor speech habits signal a Jew. Hence, Jewishness, understood as bodily difference, is not at the center of the protagonist’s characterization, and the manner in which he is portrayed shows an overtly acculturated person, especially that he has a good command of the Polish language and knowledge about Polish reality. Even though the concept of
Jewishness remains a vital part of his ethnic origin, it does not seem to solely define his identity. His awareness of ethnic distinctiveness is revealed through the way he can recognize Jewish traits in others. For example, he describes Wiktor Vogelnest as a typical Jew, with true Jewish eyes, which are black and hazy, with drooping eyelids, but at the same time penetrating and evaluating, and a long Jewish nose, which contrasts with his perfect Polish diction.

The idea of Jewishness as religious/ethnic difference is not central to the novel since the protagonist does not go to the synagogue, fails to observe Sabbath, or keep kosher. There are no signs of a distinct Jewish presence, religious or cultural, in the world he inhabits. It is especially interesting since the action takes place in Łódź, where in 1921 the Jews comprised “34.5% of its total population” [Shmeruk 1986: XXXVI] and developed a thriving and vibrant community. Chone Shmeruk notices the inconsistency between this reality and Rabon’s fictional world.

Not only is there no mention of a synagogue, of a Jewish charitable society, or of any Jewish organizations in this “Jewish” city from whom the released Jewish soldier, if he really wanted to, could have gotten help—but there is no mention among the city’s residents of the traditional Jewish family [Shmeruk 1986: XXXVII]. The clue to explaining this line of thought might be in the protagonist’s past. The readers get to know that although he was raised in Judaism, something happened to him at the age of fourteen and he stopped believing in “devils and spirits.” His fluency in the Polish language and an extensive knowledge of history and culture suggest that the subsequent part of his life must have largely consisted in secular education. As Shmeruk observes, “[t]hese changes can explain […] his unwillingness to return to the shtetl upon his release from the army” [Shmeruk 1986: XXXVI]. Rabon’s protagonist exemplifies an idea of assimilated Jewishness, which has long taken root in Polish soil and whose core has been largely eroded, but has not disappeared entirely. Such a characterization might be aimed at deepening the protagonist’s sense of alienation. The fact that he is an assimilated Jew should enable him to blend into Polish society easily; however, his unsuccessful attempts at finding a job and accommodation signal otherwise. No longer part of his ancestral culture, nor fully accepted by Polish society, the protagonist is shown as suffering from double alienation.

The protagonist’s Jewishness is presented as a sensitive issue in social contacts, which may suggest its disruptive potential for the coexistence of various ethnic and religious groups. Even though he is portrayed as an assimilated and acculturated person, the fact that he is reluctant to publicly reveal his ethnic background suggests its problematic nature. His remark that if the shoemaker learnt that he was a Jew, he would not allow him in, testifies to the existence of antisemitic sentiments in Polish society. However, the fact that such remarks and behaviors are presented as sporadic, not standard, signals its persistence in Polish society, but at the same time marginalizes its significance.

Rabon depicts the idea of Jewishness in its variety, presenting both its positive and negative representations. Miriam Udel confirms that “[m]ore maskilically inflected works typical of the pre- or proto-modernist Yiddish novel implicitly sigh over the shortcomings of modern Jewry, attempting to ameliorate social pathologies with varying admixtures of patience and annoyance. Rabon, on the other hand, shares with Sho-
lem Aleichem, Joseph Roth, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and other fully realized modernists a willingness to let the Jews be as they are, without trying to reform them” [Udel 2015: 5]. While introducing Bornsteyn, a fellow Jewish soldier, the author engages a stereotype of Jewish proclivity to engage in fraudulent business, which was common in the popular imagination. The manner in which Bornsteyn is portrayed evokes a notorious image of a greedy and conniving Jew. His entire military career is built not on acts of bravery on the battlefield, but on his malevolent mercantile skills. Bornsteyn becomes popular as the regiment’s clandestine supplier, dealing in whatever he can as long as it brings profit: shoes, new caps, bread, sausages, cheese, and cigarettes. He trades in the trenches, during marches, and even when bullets are swirling around him. It must have paid off because when the protagonist sees him again, he is struck by his elegant blue suit, a new hat, and the overall aura of prosperity. Bornsteyn looks at his former companion with contempt and is reluctant to help him, even though the protagonist reminds him of the time when a slice of bread and some chicken meat that he shared with him saved his life. Their encounter reveals the power dynamics within the Jewish community, with the concept of financial success (again, echoing the stereotypical connection between Jews and money) as the dividing force between the more and the less fortunate. At the same time, Bornsteyn’s portrayal answers the clichéd depictions of a Jew as devious and scheming, even to their own kind. The Jew as a trader who is obsessed with profit at any cost has been a popular antisemitic figure in Eastern Europe. The writer uses the familiar trope to emphasize his protagonist’s detachment from such conduct, and presents him as a victim of insatiable avarice.

Rabon uses another stereotype, that of Jewish bodily difference, to suggest the degenerate nature of certain Jews: the Jewish owner of the flophouse, who is contemptuously referred to as a little Jew, has a yellowish beard and penetrating eyes; a pockmarked Jew with short legs works in the circus, and the protagonist’s former friend, Bornsteyn, has the piercing and shifty little eyes of a cunning fox. The emphasis on the unfavorable bodily features serves two purposes: firstly, their function is to reflect the inner corruption of the characters, which renders them totally, in terms of body and mind, undesirable. Secondly, they allude to the nineteenth century stereotypes of Jewish bodily difference, which was used to justify their inferior position in relationship to Christians as generic.

The concept of bodily deformity is applied to the whole fictional world, not only to its Jewish participants, and functions as a symbolic rendition of the moral and factual decadence of the post-war world. The shoemaker’s eyes are shown as repulsive, pertaining rather to a monster than a human being: “Never in all my days have I seen such eyes in a human face. His crossed eyeballs protruded from their sockets. They were framed with a thin dark line of dirty blood. The lower eyelashes of his left eye were gummed against the eyeball and gave of a glitter that appeared on the upturned eye like tiny, hardly perceptible dots” [Rabon 1985: 20]. Children are described as undernourished, hungry-looking, with sickly red cheeks, and filmed-over eyes: “a weak child with slender, rachitic legs, looked stunned, pale, and apathetic” [Rabon 1985: 12]. The clients of the Municipal Beggar’s House are portrayed as lacking human features: “He was pale, swollen, closely shorn and shaved. He looked like a woman […] His crooked legs stuck out from under the thin bedclothes […] His thin lips, like a couple
of dirty white bones, opened and closed slowly, slowly, revealing two rows of short, rusty-looking teeth, as if rusty black nails had been driven into his blue gums” [Rabon 1985: 155]. Another one is humpbacked: “Below that forehead his face was narrow, his cheeks sunken, his nose long, pointed, and crooked […] He had a wolf’s long thin neck. His Adam’s apple was thick, filthy, and protrusive, like a hardened swelling” [Rabon 1985: 155]. They neither look human nor act as human beings: “A round-faced, snout-nosed, low-browed, narrow-chested boy of twelve with stunned hands and feet, such as idiots are born with, was crawling about the floor on all fours, using his hands like paws” [Rabon 1985: 156]. The depiction of bodily deformity, in all its repulsive details, and the frequent references to animal-like resemblance and behavior serve to dehumanize the presented world, by stripping its inhabitants of the positive aspects of humanity. What emerges from this description is a world reflected in a distorting mirror, which is populated by grotesque figures.

*The Street* also offers examples of positive Jewish characters, who share with the protagonist a sympathetic portrayal: the Jew from Komarno who leaves with the protagonist for Katowice since both fail to find home and work in Łódź, the poet Vogelnest who commits suicide since his artistic sensitivity makes it too hard for him to bear the hardships of life, the circus athlete Yazon who comes from a shtetl in Lithuania, and the painter in the shelter. What links these characters to the protagonist is the fact that they are all uprooted from traditional Jewish culture and from Judaism. All of them at some point, and for various reasons, either, like the protagonist, left shtetl life, or abandoned traditional ways to venture into the world of goyim. It is not a coincidence that they meet in Łódź, since in the 1920’s Łódź was called a Jewish city. Shmeruk observes that “[t]heir dissociation from Jewish society did not open up another society for them in the city and in their double alienation they find a connection and a shared language only among themselves” [Shmeruk 1986: XXXVIII]. Moreover, their occupations represent an idea of creative freedom which defies the concept of full social integration. Being a poet, an artist, or a painter stands in stark contrast to the grim image of lower class poverty depicted in the streets of Łódź. In a time of economic hardships, when people struggle to satisfy basic human needs, creative professions seem at best redundant. Misunderstood and unappreciated by the general society, the protagonist’s acquaintances represent social misfits who deliberately answer the call to an artistic vocation. Even if they can find temporary comfort in each other’s company, or lend a sympathetic ear to each other’s troubles, their ethnicity positions them in Polish society as double outsiders, whereas the idea of artistic/occupational autonomy provides another layer of detachment to their portrayal.

Apart from intra-ethnic contacts, Rabon’s novel presents the protagonist in inter-ethnic encounters, revealing both positive and negative aspects of the nature of interwar Polish multi-ethnicity. Polish compassion and kindness towards the protagonist is exposed when he approaches a woman in the street and offers her to carry her basket of laundry. First, she mistakes him for a mugger, but later accepts his help and gives him food. She takes pity on a hungry and weary stranger without inquiring about his origins. Later in the novel, he returns the favor and gives her some money: “There was a warmth in her eyes as she looked at me. I felt like kissing her
hands, and her dark grey hair” [Rabon 1985: 138]. In another episode, the protagonist is offered accommodation in a Polish home. After the cinema reading, “[w]hen I suggested that I needed a place to spend the night, several hands went up. They literally fought to get me. I spent the night in the home of a respectable Gentile family. They gave me a bed all to myself. I was treated with the greatest respect, and they wouldn’t let me go until I had eaten breakfast” [Rabon 1985: 116]. Both examples demonstrate the idea of human kindness, which does not only battle poverty and social exclusion, but also crosses ethnic and religious divides. On the other hand, it is not clear whether these acts of compassion result from the fact that the character’s Otherness/Jewishness is largely muffled, which enables him to pass as a Pole.

Apart from the positive examples of interethnic relationships in Polish society, The Street illustrates a direct expression of ethnic othering. For example, a little boy – Fabianik – is ridiculed because he was fathered by a German soldier. Other children call him a Schwab and refuse to play with him. To avoid being verbally and physically abused, the young victim of ethnic prejudice has to hide: “So darkness drew him, and shadows, and things of the night, and concealment. There was no touch of the sun in his features, no trace of daylight, of brightness” [Rabon 1985: 14]. Other children’s cruelty and maltreatment is reflected in the boy’s countenance, robbing his life of any joy. Thus, the novel presents inter-war Polish society in its multiethnic variety and suggests the tensions which might appear where ethnically or religiously-driven boundaries crisscross. In the case of Rabon’s novel, it is the lowest parts of Polish society which are signaled as especially prone to ethnic prejudice. A daily struggle for survival, a fierce competition for low-paying jobs and affordable housing is not the best environment in which to foster mutual trust and understanding. On the other hand, the common hardships might be seen as a unifying, rather than dividing factor in building a united front against bourgeois exploitation. Communist propaganda used the concept of the common enemy to propagate its slogans and gather the workers under its ideological umbrella. The Street does not prioritize the idea of distinctive ethnicity, nor does it encourage the pursuit of communist ideals, but demonstrates how such approaches may antagonize people for being different.

Conclusion

Through acculturation, eastern European Jewish writers adopted Russian, Polish, and German, apart from Hebrew and Yiddish, as their media of artistic expression. Therefore, even though The Street is written in Yiddish, which determines the target audience, there are also examples of other languages, which show interwar Poland as a multilingual society. Polish is used in the cinema while explaining the silent movie, by the youth in the tavern, by the clerk in the discharge office, by the shoemakers and the children, by workers on strike and the policemen, by the woman with the basket whose very name sounds familiar to the Polish ear, Wójcikowa, and in the recruitment office for work in France. Polish is the language of the street and official dealings. German is used by two asthma sufferers who find it hard to live with their sickness, whereas Russian is spoken by the congregation of “white” Russian immi-
grants in an Orthodox church. In this way, the problem of linguistic complexity is called upon and revealed as a possible hindrance to a successful social adaptation. In Shmeruk’s words: “the linguistic problem as an existential problem becomes an additional and difficult part of the basic situation of alienation” [Shmeruk 1986: XLII]. The scene in which the Polish poet of Jewish origin, Wiktor Vogelnest, sneaks in to the circus arena at night in order to recite his poetry dramatizes his position in the multietnic and multilingual context. The fact that he hides his voice from the general public suggests its problematic nature, as well as his uncertainty about its reception. While the choice of the circus as a venue for his clandestine performance shifts the tragedy of the scene towards the grotesque. By juxtaposing high art (poetry) with low (the circus), the author disputes the role of an artist, however he might be defined, and the concept of artistic creation in the post-war context.

Yiddish prose, represented by such writers of the period as Shimen Horontshik, Yehoshue Perle, and Fishl Bimko, was largely preoccupied with portraying the shtetl and exploring its community. Rabon’s novel The Street, however, is not a typical example of Yiddish prose of the period because it uses an urban setting and locates its characters on the margins of the multiethnic Polish society. Notably, Rabon’s second, unfinished novel, Balut, also depicts the industrial city of Łódź, but this time the author sets it in the center of the Jewish population. Yiddish literature is translated into English in order to preserve a communal, cultural history; however, The Street is not an ethnic-specific depiction of the East-European Jewish community, but a general story about the post-war world as characterized by the pervading sense of alienation. David Roskies supports this claim: “[t]here was nothing recognizably Yiddish in the style of world view of Israel Rabon” [Roskies 1984: 157]. The writer’s cosmopolitanism is evident in his lack of reference to distinctive Jewish cultural symbols, characters, and settings. In this way, the author achieves a degree of generalization, which communicates the horrors of war not ethnically or religiously, but universally.

Rabon’s portrayal of an industrial landscape of Łódź accords with other authors whose work explores interwar Jewish community, such as I.J. Singer’s The Brothers Ashkenazy (1936), Itzhak Katzenelson, Moshe Broderzon, Chaim Krol, H.L. Fuchs and Y.M. Neiman. Against the backdrop of World War I, Rabon’s narrative depicts the protagonist’s relentless battle with misery and lack of opportunities. The author uses the figure of the Polish-Jewish narrator to interrogate the idea of ethnicity, marginality, and exclusion in the urban context of interwar Poland. The act of storytelling makes him the agent of his own fate and the act of listening to stories of others alleviates his feeling of loneliness, however, the fact that at the end of the novel he withdraws and gives the floor to other characters suggests that “[a]ll that human connection proves fleeting and revocable” [Udel 2005: 18], leaving him a solitary figure amidst the world’s indifference. Anonymity and Jewishness are revealed to be the overarching threads guiding the narrator’s/protagonist’s depiction, which both affirm and unravel his portrayal, providing a compelling vision of alienated post-war humanity.

---

1 According to Chone Shmeruk, “[o]n the second title page of the book there is the designation ‘Volume One.’ There is still no trace of the promised continuation” [Shmeruk 1986: XVI].

Bibliography


Summary

Anonymity and Jewishness as Forms of Alienation: Israel Rabon’s The Street

The article discusses Israel Rabon’s novel The Street (1985), which was originally published in Yiddish in 1928. The novel is set in post-World War I Łódź, Poland and narrates a series of events, whose central figure is an anonymous narrator—a discharged war veteran who aimlessly drifts through life. The textual absence of personal information situates the narrator in a communal void, which parallels his alienation not only from the society, but from the world at large. The heart of the narrator’s account is the blight of post-war society, which is corrupted by the trauma of war. Rabon’s protagonist is representative of the fate of many Polish people who tried to restore their lives in the struggling Polish economy, which was destroyed by the war. The experience of war is presented as responsible for shattering their dreams and thwarting their prospects of a comfortable life. The discordance between the protagonist’s far-fetched expectations and the grim post-war reality highlights his sense of alienation, not only from the world around, but also from his inner self. Jewishness is another factor which provides a form of detachment, and which informs the protagonist’s position against the social fabric of the post-war Polish society. He is presented as an assimilated Jew whose religiosity has largely been eroded. No longer part of ancestral culture, nor fully accepted by Polish society, he is shown as suffering from double alienation. The Street is not an ethnic-specific depiction of the East-European Jewish community, but a general story about the post-war world as characterized by the pervading sense of alienation.

Key words: Yiddish literature, Jewishness, post-WWI Poland, alienation, anonymity