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Always Far from the Center: Ḥayyim Lenski and Hebrew Poetry in Russia between the Wars

The name Ḥayyim Lenski may be unfamiliar to most English readers. Lenski is not as famous as other great Hebrew poets of his generation, nor has his work ever enjoyed true international repute. Only few English translations of his poems exist. Yet, there is no doubt that Lenski was among the interwar period's greatest talent. His lyrical corpus amounts to approximately 200 compositions, including poems, ballads, sonnets, and translations of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Mikhail Lermontov, and Aleksandr Pushkin. He even translated (from Russian) an adaptation of the *Jangal-maa*, a popular epic of the Mansi people—an indigenous population of Western Siberia—which he rendered in Hebrew with the name *Sefer ha-Tundra* (The Tundra Book). Lenski conceived his Hebrew works in almost complete isolation, due to the tragic circumstances of his life and the fact that, by the mid-1920s, when he began to compose the main core of his oeuvre, the center of Hebrew poetry had already moved from Russia and Central Europe to Palestine.

From the Life of a Shlimazel

Life was not kind to Ḥayyim Lenski (**fig. 1**). It was beset by a series of misfortunes and tragic events, which began immediately after his birth in 1905 in Slonim, a town in the Grodno region, in today's Belarus.[1] His mother, Shayna Shteynson, apparently left the family when Lenski was still a small

1 To date, the most complete biography of Lenski can be found in Vered Ariel-Nahari, Haim Lenski—An Eclectic Modernist. Individualistic Modernism vis-à-vis Poetic Transition (unpublished PhD thesis, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv 2012), 9–85 (Heb.). For some biographical information in English, see Hamutal Bar-Yosef, Was Haim Lenski a "Shlimazel"?, in: Jews and Jewish Topics in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe 15 (1991), no. 2, 48–54.

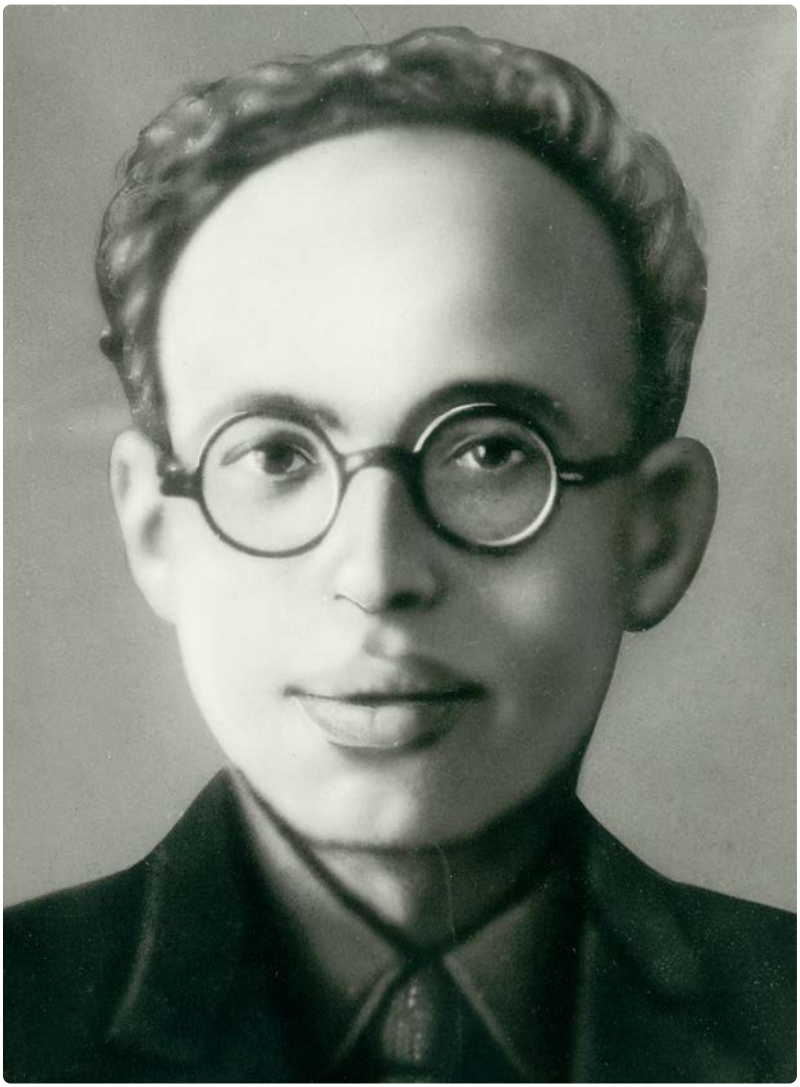


Fig. 1: Ḥayyim Lenski, ca. 1939.

baby, after long and violent fights with her husband, Ḥayyim's father, Mordechai Yankel. Lenski would see his mother again only once. The child was brought to the house of his paternal grandparents in the village of Derechin, where he was raised in poverty. Lenski grew up speaking Yiddish and, regardless of the economic restraints of the family—his grandfather being a woodcutter and water carrier—he reported having been sent to the best cheder in town, where Tanakh was the focus of his studies. His father, who spoke to him in Russian, lived with them in Derechin for only

a brief period of time, while working as a private teacher, before he decided to move eastward. During World War I, the village was occupied by the German army. The young Lenski attended German schools and it was probably there that he acquired the language. He would declare himself a passionate reader of Goethe, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Heinrich Heine later in life.

In 1921, Lenski's grandparents died. The sixteen-year-old was sent to learn the profession of shoemaker at his aunt's house, but with no success. He decided to move to Vilna, where he was accepted as a student at the newly established Hebrew Teachers' Seminary under the patronage of the local branch of Tarbut, a Zionist educational organization. Graduates from this institution would later remember their first impression of Lenski: a young boy looking much older than his real age, wearing a long grey-brown coat similar to the ones provided by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, and unable to afford even a simple meal.[2] Although Lenski did not prove to be particularly devoted to his studies, he spent much time in the famous Strashun Library and was taken under the wing of the director of the seminary, Yehoshua Gutman. During his second year, his economic and personal situation slightly improved, and he even published his first lyrics in the students' anthology *Leket* (Collection). In 1923, Lenski interrupted his studies. First he returned to Derechin (which had become Dereczyn in the Second Polish Republic) and later, in fall that year, he decided to move to Baku, then part of the Soviet Union. He had been invited by his father, who was working there as an engineer.

Lenski illegally crossed the Russian border, was arrested by the Soviet police and imprisoned in Samara, and finally managed to escape, reaching Baku in February the following year. However, the time with his father ended in an argument and Ḥayyim decided to leave Mordechai Yankel's place. Lenski made a living as a newspaper man and private Hebrew tutor, but soon chose to move again westwards, first to Moscow and then to Leningrad (St. Petersburg), where he finally found decent employment in a steel factory with the help of the He-Ḥaluẓ training group Amal. The beginning of his correspondence with the poet Ḥayyim Naḥman Bialik also dates to this time. Bialik encouraged him to continue writing, proposed to adopt the Sephardic accent, and generously lent his hand to publish some of Lenski's lyrics in the Hebrew journals and literary supplements of Palestine.

2 This is an account by Moshe Shmueli, in: Ḥayim Lenski, Me-ever nehar ha-Leteh [Across the River Lethe], ed. by Shlomo Grodzensky, Tel Aviv 1960, 209.

Joining a local group of Hebrew writers in Leningrad, among them the literary critique Yosef Matov (Saaroni), the poet Shimon Tarbukov (Ha-Bone)—married to the poet Yokheved Bat-Miriam—and the chemist Alexander Zarchin, Lenski found, for the very first time, a sense of community. The group held very idiosyncratic political views, but Lenski never showed particular interest in politics and later described himself as an anarchist. Although in some correspondence he expressed the aspiration to obtain a visa to Palestine, he was also never seriously committed to Zionism. Facing a ban of Hebrew in the Soviet Union, Lenski's poems were sent to Palestine during the 1930s, where they appeared in journals such as *Mo'znayim* (Scales), *Ketuvim* (Writings), *Gilyonot* (Sheets), or *Gazit* (Hewn Stone). Unfortunately, Lenski published very little, and very rarely did he manage to receive adequate payment for his contributions. When, toward the end of 1939, *Davar* published a first anthology of his poetry in Palestine, the news did not reach him. His correspondence with people in Palestine had stopped in 1937, and many readers believed the author had passed away.

Following a deterioration of the political situation in the Soviet Union, Lenski was subjected to frequent interrogation by the secret police and was ultimately arrested in November 1934 for his use of the Hebrew language, which was considered bourgeois and anti-revolutionary. He was sentenced to five years imprisonment and hard labor in Siberia. During his years in prison, Lenski kept writing and sending poems to his wife, Batya, whom he had married in 1929. She in turn would ship them to Palestine. Lenski even tried to reach the writer Maksim Gor'kiy, asking for his intercession.[3] Upon his release from the camps in November 1939, Lenski, who as a political prisoner had been banned from returning to his former house, took temporary residence in Malaya Vishera, a town 190 kilometers away from Leningrad. Thanks to his contacts and friends, however, he managed to spend most of his time in Leningrad regardless of the ban. In the meantime, his relationship with his wife worsened—apparently following Lenski's turn toward religious observance. To this time dates also his acquaintance with Vladimir Ioffe (1898–1979), director of the Leningrad Pasteur Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology and himself a passionate Hebraist, whose help would become vital for Lenski's lasting legacy.

3 The content of the letter, which probably never reached its addressee, has been relayed by Joseph Berger Barzilai. For an English translation of the letter, see Yehoshua A. Gilboa, A Language Silenced. The Suppression of Hebrew Literature and Culture in the Soviet Union, New York 1982, 258 f.

Lenski's Death and the Survival of His Works

It was on Ioffe's invitation that, in late 1940, Lenski drafted at least two manuscripts. The first consisted of a collection of his lyrics from 1925 to 1940—of which about two thirds had never been published; the second was his outstanding translation of Lermontov's epic poem *Mtsyri* (The Novice).[4] Less than one year later, in the summer of 1941, Lenski was stopped again by the police, this time on a general order to intercept all previous political prisoners following the Nazi invasion in late June that year. Lenski was sentenced to ten years of solitary confinement and, again, to hard labor in Siberia. There is no reliable information about his life and whereabouts after July 1942. According to official reports, Lenski's death supposedly occurred on 22 March 1943, most probably as a result of starvation, in a Gulag in the Krasnoyarsk region.

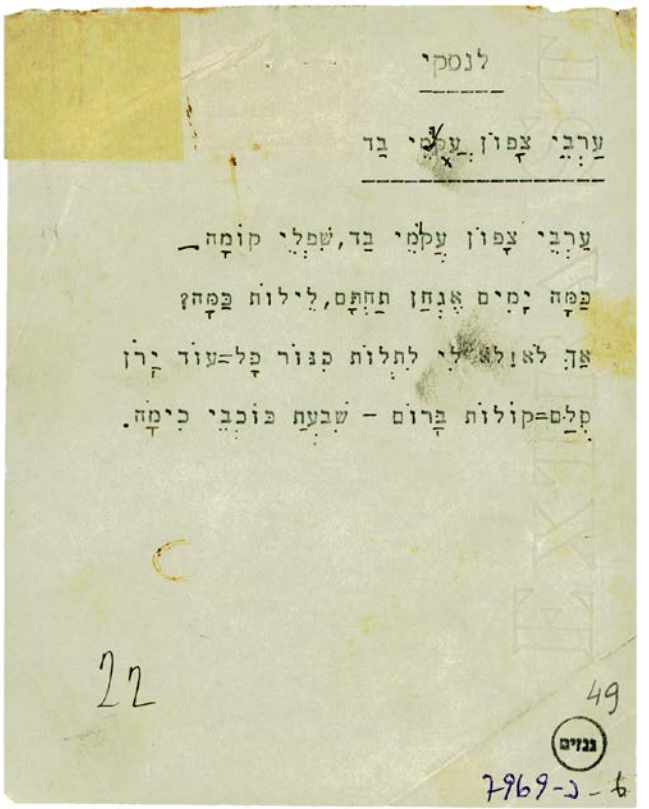
The Ioffe family kept Lenski's manuscripts safe at their own risk for almost twenty years, until 1958, when they finally succeeded in smuggling them out of the Soviet Union to Israel (**fig. 2**, **3**, and **4**). Here, the voice of the dead poet was finally made heard. The 1960 edition of Lenski's poems was followed by another four, the last one, from 2016, being the most complete.[5]

Poetry and Language

Lenski's tragic life, the almost mythological characterization of him by his contemporaries, the circumstances of his arrest, together with the miraculous survival of his works all paint the portrait of an ill-fated writer, a martyr dying for his commitment to poetry and to the Hebrew language, in which he deliberately chose to write despite its illegality and regardless of the fact that it was neither his native tongue nor the language of his environment at any given moment. Yet, it would be futile to look for traces of self-pity or resentment in Lenski's poems. On the contrary, irony is the main cypher in most of his works. At the same time, his lyrics often reflect an inclination toward demythologization paired with his anarchist sympathies.

4 A third manuscript, possibly including his ballads and poems, did not survive, or perhaps Lenski never managed to draft it.

5 For a detailed review and an evaluation of this last edition, see Jonathan Vardi, Im shire Ḥayim Lenski be-mahadurah ḥadashah [With Ḥayyim Lenski's Poems in a New Edition], in: Deḥak. Ketav-et le sifrut tova [Stress. A Journal for Literature] 7 (2016), 807–839.


לנסקי

עַרְבֵי צְפוֹן עַלְמֵי בַד

עַרְבֵי צְפוֹן עַלְמֵי בַד, שִׁפְלֵי קוֹמָה –
בַּמֶּה יָמִים אֶגְחַן תַּחְתָּם, לֵילוֹת בַּמֶּה?
אַךְ לֹא לִי לִתְלוֹת כִּנּוֹר עַל-עוֹד יָרֵן
קוֹלַם-קוֹלוֹת בָּרוֹם – שִׁבְעַת כּוֹכְבֵי כִּימָה.

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Fig. 2: Typescript of the poem *Northern Willows with Crooked Branches* by Ḥayyim Lenski, undated.

In particular, Lenski's opposition to epic tones stands out in his Leningrad cycle, which includes the ten so-called *Sonetot Petropolis* (Petropolis Sonnets) and two poems: *Delator* (Informer)—to a great extent satirical—and *Galba*. Written between 1928 and 1933, these compositions attest to Lenski's anti-imperialist views and to his attempt to undermine the myth of the metropolis in the name of his own foreignness (as, for example, in the first sonnet: "I am a son of Lithuania, and young brother of the Białowieża's dove. […] What do I have to do then with the banks of the river Neva?"). It is no surprise that the Neva, the river flowing through the city of St. Petersburg, is called by the Hebrew word *"ye'or"* (river), hinting at the biblical rivers of Jewish exile. Yet, Lenski identifies the homeland he is longing for as the village where he grew up, a place near the forests and far from the big city and from imperial grandeur.[6] Of the ten sonnets composing the Leningrad cycle, only two—the fifth and the sixth—were published during Lenski's lifetime, in November 1930, in the journal *Mo'znayim*. The poem *Delator* appeared in the literary supplement of *Davar* on 12 May 1933, and *Galba* in the journal *Gazit* in 1934.

Even where Lenski abandons his wit in favor of more nostalgic tones—in the description of the countryside of his homeland in the autobiographical poem *Lita* (Lithuania), for example—his references to nature and elegiac tropes are never pathetic or loaded with metaphysical undertones. On the contrary, they remain very concrete.

6 On this aspect, see Rafi Tsirkin-Sadan, The Curse of the Forbidden City. Haim Lensky's St. Petersburg Sonatas and the Images of St. Petersburg in Russian and Hebrew Literature, in: Meḥkerei Yerushalayim be-sifrut ivrit/Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature 30 (2019), 121–142 (Heb.).

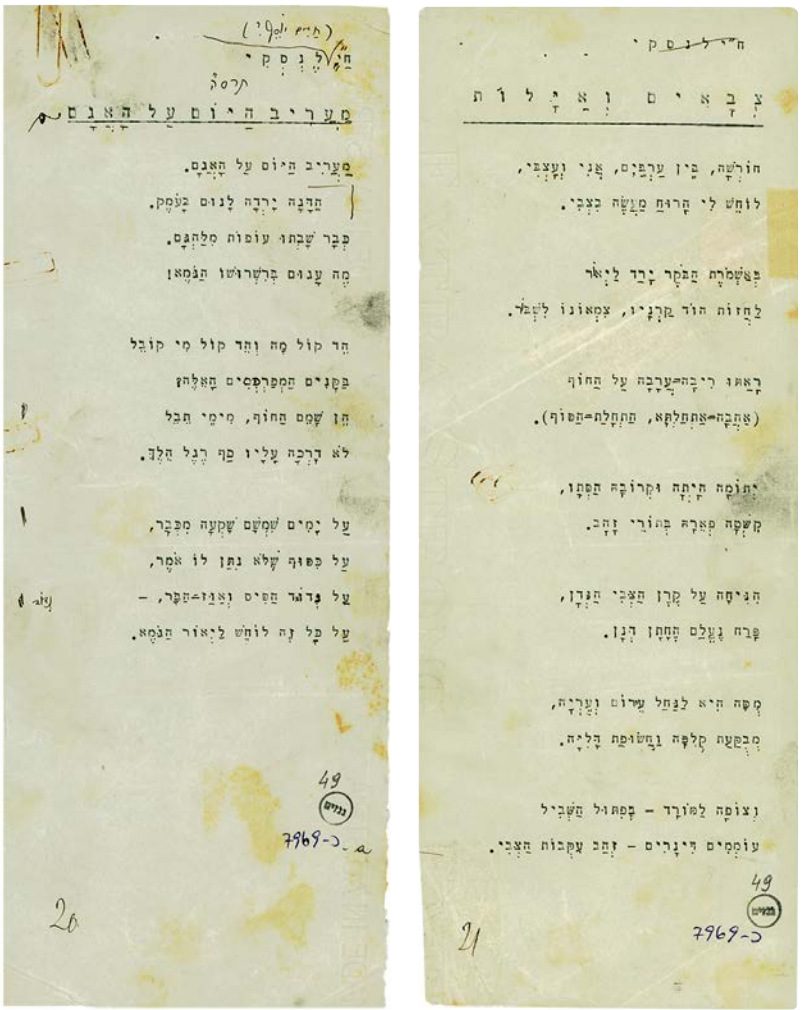

Fig. 3: Typescript of the poem *The Evening Falls by the Lake*. The poem was written by Ḥayyim Lenski in January/February 1935.

Fig. 4: First page from the typescript of the poem *Gazelles and Does* by Ḥayyim Lenski. The title reminds of a verse from the Song of Songs (2:7). The poem was first published in the journal *Mo'znayim* (7 April 1932).

Besides taking inspiration from numerous lyrical forms of Russian folklore, his poems and lyrics present a unique mixture of high and complex Hebrew—his "southern language," as he would call it—and Yiddish idioms, as well as, at times, direct quotations in other languages (German, Russian, or Polish). Lenski's work reveals his constant dialogue with the Russian and European coeval literary currents, making them an essential component of his very peculiar modernist poetics.[7]

7 See, for example, Vered Ariel-Nahari, Haim Lenski. Seemingly Romantic, Essentially Modernist, in: Alina Molisak/Shoshana Ronen (eds.), The Trilingual Literature of Polish Jews from Different Perspectives. In Memory of I. L. Peretz, Newcastle upon Tyne 2017, 88–97.

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