

Sebastian Schirrmeister

Two Roads to the Land: A Contiguous Reading of Two Anti-War Novels by Avigdor Hameiri and M. Y. Ben-Gavriël

Abstract: Drawing on Dan Miron’s concept of “literary contiguity,” this article arranges an encounter between two documentary novels about the experience of the First World War, both told from the perspective of a Jewish officer. Although rather different with regard to their place in the Modern Hebrew canon, the well-known novel *The Great Madness* (1929) by Avigdor Hameiri and the unknown novel *Gold in the Streets* (1946) by M. Y. Ben-Gavriël reveal numerous topical and aesthetic intersections when read alongside each other. The joint analysis shows that besides their pacifism and general criticism of the logic of the nation-state, both novels share a common geographical and ideological trajectory. Their interpretation of the events depicted during the “Great War” envisages the Land of Israel as the ultimate destination of their protagonists.

DOI 10.1515/naha-2015-0004

What did the Carpathians have to do with the walls of Jerusalem?
Avigdor Hameiri, *The Great Madness*

What do you want in Europe? Europe is madness, Europe is murder.
M. Y. Ben-Gavriël, *Gold in the Streets*

I. An “odd couple”

Avigdor Hameiri’s debut novel *The Great Madness* (*Ha-Shigga’on Ha-Ggadol*), published in 1929, then in a shortened version in 1930, and in a third edition in 1946, supposedly constitutes “the first bestseller published in pre-state Israel.”¹

¹ Tamar S. Druker, “Rabbi Akiva and Zev Bacher in the Trenches: Language, Identity, and War in Avigdor Hameiri’s *The Great Madness*,” *Hebrew Studies* 53 (2012): 257–273, 257.

Sebastian Schirrmeister: Universität Hamburg, Institut für Germanistik, Von-Melle-Park 6, 20146 Hamburg, E-Mail: sebastian.schirrmeister@uni-hamburg.de

Hameiri's documentary account of a Jewish Austro-Hungarian officer's experiences in the First World War was preceded by several volumes of war poetry and short stories on the same topic and followed by the sequel *In Lower Hell* (*Ba-Ggehinnom Shel Matta*), about his years of imprisonment in Siberia. However no other text in Hameiri's considerable literary oeuvre elicited such critical acclaim among its contemporaries as *The Great Madness*, which continues to generate historical and literary scholarship to this day. Among the Hebrew literature on the First World War, *The Great Madness* stands out as the only novel that conveys both Zionist and pacifist ideas, and displays little interest in fostering concepts such as "patriotism" or "heroism." Rather, it ridicules the pathos of these concepts and portrays war as such as a "colossal madhouse,"² inaccessible to human reasoning. The novel was adapted into a play by its author, which premiered in Tel Aviv in 1936, and was translated into German and Hungarian in 1931,³ and even twice into English. It has also, on more than one occasion, been compared to Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which was likewise published in 1929.⁴ The numerous comparisons and references to its German counterpart and the implicit suspicion of plagiarism urged the publisher of the 1946 edition to highlight the fact that the first chapters of the novel were printed in the Hebrew newspaper *Haaretz* as early as 1925 – several years before the publication of Remarque's renowned novel.⁵

2 Avigdor Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, trans. Yael Lotan (Haifa: Or-Ron, 1984), I. All quotations are from this edition, which is referred to as TGM. For the purpose of this essay the translation by Yael Lotan proved to be preferable to the earlier 1952 translation by Jacob Freedman, less for its aesthetic value and more for the fact that the latter is unfortunately based on the shortened Hebrew edition of 1930 and is therefore missing several chapters.

3 An authorized German translation *Der große Wahnsinn* by Sem Wolf was published in the Viennese Zionist periodical *Die Stimme: Jüdische Zeitung* in 37 installments from August 20, 1931 to July 14, 1932. It includes 22 chapters of the novel. The Hungarian translation *A nagy örület* by Kalman Löwenkopf was published in Bratislava in 1931 and has recently been reprinted (Budapest: Mult es Jovo, 2009).

4 See, for example, the references to Remarque in Yael Lotan, introduction to *The Great Madness*, by Avigdor Hameiri, trans. Yael Lotan (Haifa: Or-Ron, 1984), III–VI; and in Asaf Mond, "1929: Shana Be-Ḥayyav Shel Avigdor Hameiri, Remarque Shellanu," *Zemannim* 118 (Spring 2012): 102–115.

5 The publisher's preface reads as follows: "The first editions of this book were met with unparalleled success in Hebrew literature. This is the place to refute the nitpickers and to state that about one half of *The Great Madness* was printed in *Haaretz* (under the title *The Great Paradox*) long before books on the war appeared in world literature." See Avigdor Hameiri, *Ha-Shigga'on Ha-Ggadol* (Tel Aviv: Shabrak, 1946), 5. In fact, only eight of the first nine chapters of the novel (less than a quarter) appeared in installments in *Haaretz* between September 29, 1925 and January 1, 1926.

This essay does not seek to add to the existing comparisons of Hameiri and Remarque. Instead, it aspires to arrange a literary encounter between *The Great Madness* and the comparatively unknown novel *Gold in the Streets* (*Zahav Ba-Ḥuzot*) by the likewise little known author M. Y. Ben-Gavriël (born Eugen Hoeflich, 1891–1965). It furthermore seeks to examine to what extent these two unequal novels are, on the one hand, similar in terms of content, structure and artistic means of expression, and on the other hand, how they complement each other with regard to the totality of the “Great War” and the complex situation of Jewish soldiers serving in the Austro-Hungarian army.

Were it possible to measure the “canonicity” of a literary text, *The Great Madness* and *Gold in the Streets* would certainly occupy opposite ends of the scale within the canon of Modern Hebrew literature. In 1946, when *Gold in the Streets* was published for the first (and only) time in Hebrew, *The Great Madness* was already on its third edition. Strictly speaking *Gold in the Streets* does not belong to Hebrew literature at all, since it was written in German and published in Hebrew translation. It is one of many novels, stories and essays that Ben-Gavriël wrote in Jerusalem during the 1930s and 1940s and for which he tried in vain to find a publisher. His diaries during these years are full of doubts, complaints and expressions of growing despair regarding his literary career, which had begun promisingly in Europe with a travel book and two volumes of expressionist poetry and short prose.⁶ Just like *Gold in the Streets*, his early writings are all inspired by the experience of the First World War, and especially by a period of several months in 1917, when the twenty-five-year-old Eugen Hoeflich from Vienna was stationed as an Austrian officer with the Turkish army in Jerusalem. After his immigration to Palestine in 1927, however, besides newspaper articles and essays only one of his novels was published in Hebrew translation. In 1930 *Foxes in Jerusalem* (*Shu'alim Bi-rushalayim*), an “adventure novel” about Bedouin tribes, Jewish-Arab conflicts and the economic interests of Western companies, met with unenthusiastic reviews, mainly because of the “feuilleton character” of the text and the clumsy (and anonymous) Hebrew translation.

Ben-Gavriël was well aware of the general expectations concerning the language of literary creation. In reaction to an article in the newspaper *Davar* he noted in April 1937, ten years after his immigration: “I just saw that ‘Davar’ is fiercely attacking me for still writing in German [...] Damn it, they’re right and no one senses the endless inner conflict of this situation better, but hell, I must

⁶ Namely *Der Weg in das Land* (1918), *Der rote Mond* (1920), and *Feuer im Osten* (1920). All three volumes were well received within literary circles in Europe.

be given the opportunity to say what I have to say.”⁷ To do so, Ben-Gavriël always needed a translator, a publisher and last but not least, a sufficient amount of paper, which was rationed by the authorities of the British Mandate. In April 1944 the room of his wife Miriam was crammed with paper for *Gold in the Streets*, but he still had no publisher.⁸ When the novel was eventually published, it received broad critical acclaim in the local press and was considered a worthy “contribution” to the Hebrew literature on the First World War, especially since it was mainly set in Jerusalem. Yet, it failed to make a lasting impact. It was never published in the German original,⁹ nor did it spark any scholarship, and therefore shares the fate of other novels by German-speaking writers that were published solely in Hebrew translation, such as *Operation Goliath* (*Mivza Goliyat*) by Alice Schwarz, a novel about the Israeli War of Independence.¹⁰ Thus, by engineering a dialogue between the two novels by Hameiri and Ben-Gavriël this essay also strives to spotlight the encounter and the complicated set of relations between German and Hebrew writers in the predominantly Hebrew *yishuv* of the pre-state period. A detailed study of such encounters within the broader historical context of an assumed “German-Hebrew contact zone” has repeatedly been called for by Na’ama Rokem.¹¹

In terms of a common understanding of Hebrew literature as a national literature – a monolingual continuum, a genealogy of emerging and vanishing generations, a struggle of opposing styles and “schools” within one homogeneous culture – the two novels in question make an odd couple. Obviously, they

7 Entry from April 21, 1937 in M. Y. Ben-Gavriël, *Diary VIII (1934–1947)* [German], Moshe Ya’aqov Ben-Gavriël Archive, file no. ARC Ms. Var. 365 1/8, National Library of Israel.

8 See entry from April 13, 1944 in Ben-Gavriël, *Diary VIII*: “There is an enormous amount of paper for ‘Jerusalem is being sold’ [early title of *Gold in the Streets*] in Miriam’s room. Miriam invested all her savings. But so far no publisher on the horizon!”

9 M. Y. Ben-Gavriël, *Jerusalem wird verkauft oder “Gold auf der Strasse”*: Ein Tatsachenroman (Tagebuch 1917), typed manuscript with handwritten corrections, 148 pages, Moshe Ya’aqov Ben-Gavriël Archive, file no. ARC Ms. Var. 365 2/17. As a side effect of this research, the novel will finally be published in German in September 2015 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Ben-Gavriël’s death. See M. Y. Ben-Gavriël, *Jerusalem wird verkauft oder Gold auf der Straße*, hrsg. und mit einem Nachwort von Sebastian Schirrmeyer (Wuppertal: Arco, 2015). All quotations are taken from this edition, that is referred to as GITS. The English translations are mine.

10 On this novel see Sebastian Schirrmeyer, “Krieg im ‘Jekkeland’: Der Haifa-Roman *Operation Goliath* von Alice Schwarz,” in *Jeckes in Haifa* (working title), ed. Anja Siegemund (Berlin: Neofelis, 2015) [in preparation].

11 See, for example, Na’ama Rokem, “German-Hebrew Encounters in the Poetry and Correspondence of Yehuda Amichai and Paul Celan,” *Prooftexts* 30, no. 1 (2010): 97–127, and the articles in *Prooftexts* 33, no. 1 (2013) – an entire issue devoted to the topic of German-Hebrew encounters in literature.

do not belong to the same literary continuum. Yet as long as it remains based on the assumption of distinct cultural entities as a framework for comparison, a conventional comparative approach does not provide the necessary means to carry out the intended joint analysis of two texts either. While Hameiri's novel is undoubtedly part of Hebrew literature, Ben-Gavriél's is not – or at least not in the first place. And although it was written in German it is also not part of German literature, given its detachment from literary production in Germany, the tireless efforts of its author to have it published in Hebrew, and the characteristics of a text clearly aimed at a Jewish (Hebrew speaking) public in Palestine.¹² There is however a larger, multilingual and transnational literary body to which both novels can be attributed. Both of them are undoubtedly part of Jewish literature. It is one of the recent turns in the longstanding discourse about how to define and conceptualize the multitude of Jewish literatures, which do not comply with national or linguistic boundaries, that serves as a point of departure for this essay.

II. Contiguities

Drawing on post-structural thinking (especially on Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and their non-linear model of the rhizome), Dan Miron has called into question a number of assumptions on which Hebrew literary criticism has customarily rested when narrating the history of its subject. Miron castigates the “normalcy obsession” that strives to render Israeli (Hebrew) literature a national literature “like any other” for missing the point and ignoring the uniqueness and the complex character of Jewish literatures and their dynamic synchronic as well as diachronic relations. He proposes that we replace the linear concepts of continuity and evolution with the “rather vague concept of literary contiguity,”¹³ which would allow us to analyze the “tangible contacts between the many players in the drama of the modern Jewish literary complex.”¹⁴ It is the

¹² This difficulty in categorizing German-Jewish literature written in Palestine and Israel has been repeatedly discussed and appears to challenge established terms and concepts of literary history. For a short survey on the topic see, Margarita Pazi, “Authors of German Language in Israel,” in *Insiders and Outsiders: Jewish and Gentile Culture in Germany and Austria*, ed. Dagmar C. Lorenz and Gabriele Weinberger (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 124–131.

¹³ Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 277. Miron's conceptual suggestions have met with harsh and justified criticism from various quarters. Nevertheless, “literary contiguity” appears to be a useful concept to evade the limitations of national thinking in literature and to invite scholarship on texts beyond the consensus of the canon.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 276.

vagueness of Miron's concept that renders it appropriate to an analysis of the novels in question here. For Miron,

contiguity must imply a kind of a light or diminished contact that would not throw us back into that trap [i.e., the matrix of continuity, S. Sch.]; a contact that avoids all permanencies, is in flux, can be seen as random, and yet as indicative of mobility – free and unfettered – within a space that is vast and open, but then also, in the final analysis, not infinite, because it is circumscribed by a borderline, which can be very fine and barely noticed or deeply and clearly etched. In our case, this is the borderline of Jewishness [...].¹⁵

Miron uses this concept in his own study to highlight contiguities between already canonized Jewish texts written in different languages (Franz Kafka and Sholem Aleichem), or within the bilingual work of the same author (Sh. Y. Abramovitch). I seek to stretch his idea of contiguity a little further beyond the edges of the canon, and argue that the novels of Hameiri and Ben-Gavriël too may be considered contiguous precisely in the sense of a “light contact,” which in this case originates in the shared experience of the Great War, told from a Jewish perspective.

The most obvious point of contact between *The Great Madness* and *Gold in the Streets* is the fact that the author of the former happens to be the translator of the latter. Ben-Gavriël and Hameiri had known each other for years,¹⁶ and it is apparent from two letters kept in Ben-Gavriël's archive that Hameiri was actively involved in the efforts to publish the novel. In February 1943 “Avigdor” reports to “my dear Ben” on his unsuccessful attempts to convince his own publisher Shabrak to sign at least a “fake agreement” for *Gold in the Streets* so that Ben-Gavriël would receive the desired paper ration from the British authorities.¹⁷ Three years later Hameiri could finally congratulate Ben-Gavriël upon the publication of the novel in his own Hebrew translation. Having read the book “not as a translator but as a simple reader,” he praises the text as “nice, clever and touching.” His letter of July 1946 is bursting with sophisticated puns and sarcastic remarks about the local cultural establishment and its arrogance, displaying no little contempt for his “own” business. By that time, Hameiri obviously considered himself a marginalized writer and expresses compassion for Ben-Gavriël's predicament. Facing the prospect of bad reviews or no review at all in the Hebrew press, he offers comfort in advance, explaining to his colleague: “You

¹⁵ Ibid., 307.

¹⁶ See, for example, an entry dated December 24, 1934 in Ben-Gavriël, *Diary VIII*: “Dropped by Avigdor Hameiri's place who translated my oratory to tell him that I offered it to [Jacob] Fichman for Moznayim.”

¹⁷ A. Hameiri to M. Y. Ben-Gavriël, February 18, 1943 [Hebrew], Moshe Ya'aqov Ben-Gavriël Archive, file no. ARC Ms. Var. 365 4/102.

do not belong to the family. Neither to the party nor to the ‘Landmannschaft,’¹⁸ poor fellow.” Hameiri concludes his reassuring letter with a rather curious sentence: “My daughter Esi, who managed to get out of our heroic hell in Jerusalem alive (and found me in the *lower hell* after two days and two nights of *great madness*) likewise extends her gratitude to you: Yesterday she finished reading your book with particular pleasure.”¹⁹ In this enigmatic sentence, Hameiri largely contributes to the argument of this essay. By means of syntax, he suggests a connection, a point of contact, some sort of contiguity between Ben-Gavriël’s novel he has just now translated and the two novels he wrote himself on the experience of war: *The Great Madness* and *In Lower Hell*.

On a linguistic level, Hameiri’s translation of Ben-Gavriël’s novel appears to have been an artistic reproduction of his own writing, which was likewise based on the necessity to translate the Hungarian or German orders and conversations of the battlefield into the Hebrew of his novel.²⁰ There is no review of *Gold in the Streets* that fails to refer to Hameiri’s excellent translation. Dov Vardi wrote in the *Palestine Post*: “The haughty-coarse soldier-talk of the Austro-Hungarian officer is well rendered. [...] No better translator could have been chosen than Hameiri.”²¹ It should be mentioned, however, that in his letter of July 1946 Hameiri hints at the existence of a previous (and obviously less talented) translator and expresses his regrets that the latter did not sue him for plagiarism. A case like this would have been “a suitable opportunity to tell our youth that the effort of a (paid) translator is not a woman’s love letter, whose ignorance of the tongue [*lashon*] can be fixed with the tongue [*lashon*] (and ignorance of the language [*safa*] with the lips [*sefatayim*]).”²²

A short glimpse into the biographies of the two authors provides an additional set of contiguities. Both Avigdor Hameiri (born Avigdor Feuerstein, 1890 in Odavidhaza in the Carpathians) and M. Y. Ben-Gavriël (born Eugen Hoeflich, 1891 in Vienna) belong to the “expressionist generation” that was born in the last two decades of the 19th century and grew up in a politically radicalized atmosphere in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. They were also both in their early twenties when the war began in 1914. Hoeflich’s father had come from Hungary to Vienna and abandoned Orthodox Judaism, so that unlike

¹⁸ An association or circle of people with the same geographic-cultural origin; Hameiri uses the German term in Hebrew transcription.

¹⁹ A. Hameiri to M. Y. Ben-Gavriël, July 28, 1946, Moshe Ya’aqov Ben-Gavriël Archive, file no. ARC Ms. Var. 365 4/102 [my emphasis].

²⁰ On this issue see Drukker, “Rabbi Akiva and Zev Bacher,” 261–262.

²¹ Dov Vardi, Review of *Zahav Bahutzoth* (Gold in the Streets), by M. Y. Ben Gavriel, *Palestine Post*, June 28, 1946.

²² A. Hameiri to M. Y. Ben-Gavriël, July 28, 1946 [Hebrew].

Feuerstein, Hoeflich received a purely secular education. Following Alon Rachamimov's remarks on the distinction between the Austrian and the Hungarian halves of Austro-Hungarian Jewry, the case of Hoeflich may be considered complementary to that of Feuerstein. Together they represent the two artistic foci of the empire, Budapest and Vienna.²³ Both authors began their literary careers as journalists and expressionist poets and subsequently became prolific writers in all literary genres. When he arrived in Palestine in 1921 with a group of Hebrew writers Avigdor Feuerstein became Avigdor Hameiri, just as Eugen Hoeflich became Moshe Ya'akov Ben-Gavriël (a former pen-name) when he immigrated in 1927 on his own. While Hameiri "was one of the most remarkable figures in modern Hebrew literature,"²⁴ whose extensive oeuvre is nevertheless largely forgotten today, Ben-Gavriël was an outsider even within the rather marginal context of German-speaking writers in Palestine. Having moved there by choice long before 1933, he distanced himself from "those emigrants" of the Fifth Aliyya. He was thus not entitled to the financial support provided by the Hit'aḥadut Olei Germany [Union of Immigrants from Germany], but was considered "a regular old Palestinian."²⁵ For the purpose of this essay, however, the most important biographic intersection between Avigdor Hameiri and M. Y. Ben-Gavriël is their shared experiences as young Jewish intellectuals serving as officers in the Austro-Hungarian forces during the First World War. For both these men, their formative experience of the Great War occupies a central place in their literary work and finds telling expression in the two novels at hand.

While the relation between author and translator as well as the biographical parallels are peripheral in terms of literary analysis, the most important continuity between *The Great Madness* and *Gold in the Streets* is to be found in the literary texts themselves and in their strategies for confronting the essential question of the artistic representation of war.

III. "Who could write such a book?" – Narrating the madness of war

The Great Madness covers a period of approximately two years. The narrative begins with the mobilization in Budapest in summer 1914 and ends when the

²³ See Alon Rachamimov, "My soul is the daughter of Shem, Ham and Japheth," *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts* 5 (2006): 135–157, 138.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

²⁵ See his bitter remarks in his diary, entry of November 6, 1940 in Ben-Gavriël, *Diary VIII*.

main protagonist Avigdor Feuerstein is taken captive by Russian soldiers in Galicia in autumn 1916. During the course of these two years, the narrator is gradually transformed from a civilian journalist and writer who frequents the night-time cafés of Budapest into an officer who bravely leads his soldiers into battle and abides by the logic of war while retaining a sarcastic and critical distance from the orders he receives and his own military actions. He returns wounded from an initial campaign in the Carpathian Mountains, and only thereafter receives military training in an officer candidate school. He is then sent to the Galician front – the setting of the last two thirds of the novel. The text contains compassionate descriptions of simple soldiers and their life (and death) in the trenches, while showing great contempt for high-ranking officers as well as for the nonchalant continuation of civilian (night) life in Budapest. Although in his preface Hameiri denies any conscious intention to do so, special attention is paid to the “Jewish Question” throughout the novel. In 1932 Hameiri published the sequel *In Lower Hell*, which centers on his years of captivity in Siberia from 1916–1919.

In a sense *Gold in the Streets* could likewise be read as a sequel to *The Great Madness*, a sequel that kicks off in September 1916 in a military hospital in Europe and leads the reader even further east to a different, more exotic scene of the same global conflict: Jerusalem. The protagonist and narrator Dan, a one-year volunteer, was almost killed by a shot in the belly at the Galician front and spent 18 months in hospital, where he begins to keep a diary. Shortly afterwards he is declared fit for service, promoted to Lieutenant and sent to serve in an Austrian medical corps in Jerusalem under the command of the Ottoman army. After a protracted journey to the east via Constantinople, Damascus and Aleppo, he reaches the army base at Ratisbonne monastery, where he meets his alter ego Lieutenant Walter Zinner. The two disillusioned Jewish soldiers in Austrian uniforms, who have undergone grenade showers and bayonet attacks in the trenches in Europe, helplessly observe the insanities of the war behind the front lines: German and Austrian military personnel living in luxury and making a fortune by exploiting their privileges and trading everything from gold to chocolate while the population of Jerusalem and the Turkish soldiers are starving to death. This is “the first time in history that the Holy City is looted not by the enemy but by the ally” (GITS, 5). Dead children and prostitution for a loaf of bread contrast with the rigid military etiquette, the uniforms, the banquets and ceremonies at the base. Toward the end of the novel, shortly before Zinner and Dan are recalled to Europe together with the rest of the so-called “unreliable elements” in autumn 1917, Zinner offers a concise comparison of the two aspects of the war:

Starving at the front with the comrades is hard, but not inhumane, since everybody is in the same situation [...]. But here, Dan my friend, we live on the dunghill of war on which we rot without hope and without defense since our hearts were not given the narcotic of bloodlust. Having to observe without being able to help, simply because there is no help. [...] We soldiers in Jerusalem, having some means of power at our disposal, we are like lamps in bright sunlight. We burn without lighting the way for anyone, we burn without sense, without purpose. And we see the gruesome face of war better than anywhere in the world of the slaughterers.” (GITS, 91)

In the same conversation, Zinner raises the issue of literary representation. A book should be written about their life in Jerusalem “for the world to know how awesome this war is. But: Who could write such a book?” (Ibd.)

In order to cope with the widely discussed “crisis of representation” generated by the enormity of this first total war, Hameiri and Ben-Gavriël (like many others who wrote about the Great War) did not transform their experiences into common patterns of prose fiction but resorted to a realistic, almost documentary depiction. Both novels are supposedly based on the war diaries of their authors²⁶ and may be termed “fictionalized memoirs,”²⁷ whose claim to authenticity is underlined by the subtitles “Notes of a Hebrew Officer” (Hameiri) and “A Factual Novel” (Ben-Gavriël), respectively. Hameiri even claims in his preface: “I have neither polished nor coarsened my notes, nor did I add to them or subtract from them” (TGM, II).

In line with the formal characteristics of a diary, the narratives are fragmented, episodic and arbitrary to some extent and do not add up to a straightforward plot. The episodic character of his text enabled Hameiri to publish parts of it in advance and to assemble the different editions from different elements without detracting from the story. Even though the text is not divided into chapters, the same concept is at work in *Gold in the Streets*. The loosely connected, anecdotal collection of events, incidents and hearsay stories led contemporary critics to the conclusion that the book – fascinating and important as it may be – should not be considered a novel.²⁸ A typical episode of this “Jerusalemite

²⁶ Neither of the two war diaries has been preserved. In 1917 Ben-Gavriël published a short passage from his diary about various places in the old city of Jerusalem with little reference to the war itself in Martin Buber’s periodical *Der Jude*. See Eugen Hoeflich, “Aus einem Jerusalemer Tagebuch” [From a Jerusalem Diary], *Der Jude* 2 (1917/1918): 448–451.

²⁷ For a short discussion of this term and the tension between fact and fiction in war literature see Glenda Abramson, *Hebrew Writing of the First World War* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2008), xvi–xvii.

²⁸ See, for example, Emanuel Bin-Gorion, “Im Re’iyya Rishona” [At First Sight], *Davar*, June 28, 1946.

Schwejkjada”²⁹ – as Gershon Svet called Ben-Gavriël’s novel – was published in the periodical *Galgal*. It relates a comic anecdote of how the narrator rescued the paintings of the Bezalel Museum from the Turkish army by hiding them in a cistern that had been emptied by means of a perforated hose and with the help of a company of Austrian soldiers stationed along the street who blocked the holes with their fingers.³⁰ In his later texts, Ben-Gavriël continued to employ this concept of constructing quasi novels from a number of anecdotes and unrelated incidents. In the 1950s and 1960s his light-weight, humorous stories from the Middle East became a well-known and fairly successful “literary brand” in Germany, until Ephraim Kishon took over the mantle of the comic voice from Israel.

Apart from the obvious autobiographic nature of both novels, their literary rendition is slightly different. Hameiri presents the reader with a plain “pacte autobiographique” (Philippe Lejeune). A first person narrator bearing the (former) name of the author suggests that the two are identical, and Hameiri confirms this presumed identity in his preface. Ben-Gavriël, on the other hand, who likewise reveals the autobiographic nature of the text in his preface, chose a different name for his narrator and in addition extended his experiences and thoughts to the character of Lieutenant Zinner, who is introduced by the narrator as “a strangely transformed reflection of me that uttered what I just felt myself” (GITS, 93). This “Doppelgänger” figure allows for extended dialogues rather than having the narrator talking or thinking to himself.

Besides these differences, the main protagonists of the two novels are very much alike. They are Jewish intellectuals who volunteered to serve in the Austro-Hungarian army and pursue the career of commissioned officer, although the paths of their promotion are rather odd. After being injured in battle, Dan wears the insignia of an officer candidate and displays them through several hospitals although he had been denied this rank for political reasons. Shortly before he is sent to Jerusalem, he is suddenly promoted to Lieutenant for a “heroic deed” at the Russian front that he has already forgotten (see below concerning “heroism”). Avigdor too is discriminated against and denied promotion until he is miraculously promoted three times within three days for repeatedly reading a poem he was ordered to write in the officer candidate school. At times displaying the features of a *Bildungsroman*, the two novels closely follow their

²⁹ Gershon Svet, “Shveykiyada Yerushalmit Mi-Ttekufat Milhemet Ha-Olam Ha-Rishona” [A Yerusalemite Schwejkjada from the Time of the First World War], *Haaretz*, August 14, 1946.

³⁰ “Keizad Nizal Bet Ha-Nnekhhot Bezal’el. Perek Min Ha-Ssefer Zahav Ba-Huzot” [How the Bezalel Museum was saved. A Chapter from the Book *Gold in the Streets*], *Galgal*, September 19, 1946. See also Ben-Gavriël, *Gold in the Streets*, 112–114.

protagonists' mental (and political) development during the course of their journey. It is remarkable yet consistent with the historical circumstances, that these journeys, which lead one of them to Galicia and into Russian captivity and the other to Constantinople and Jerusalem, are dictated by external powers and are not the product of conscious decisions on the part of the protagonists themselves. By volunteering for the army, they relinquish their freedom of action and are left only with the freedom of observation. Consequently, both novels comprise mainly subjective impressions of what their narrators see and hear in their immediate vicinity. News from other places or about the "bigger picture" of the war reaches them only in the form of stories and rumors of dubious credibility.

In her introduction to *Hebrew Writing of the First World War* Glenda Abramson notes that "a number of recurring motifs crossed the barriers of language and nationality in Great War literature."³¹ This holds true for Hameiri's and Ben-Gavriël's novels as well. The most prominent motif that the two texts employ to say something about the state of war in general and about the state of mind of their characters in particular is that of insanity. In various scenes Hameiri illustrates the "colossal madhouse" of war. A Croatian soldier in the Galician trenches, frustrated both in general and in sexual terms, yells out: "I'm going crazy here. I'm losing my mind, it's going all foggy. All I can see is women's bottoms..." (TGM, 185). The narrator Avigdor starts talking to a dog and seriously wonders, "Perhaps I am going out of my mind. I feel as if I am. The snow keeps coming down [...] The officers are vicious brutes... I am slowly going crazy" (TGM, 247). Although the characters of *Gold in the Streets* are not directly involved in the fighting, it appears that Jerusalem and the Ratisbonne monastery are but another wing of Hameiri's "colossal madhouse":

"Don't we live in a madhouse?" He nervously pressed his hands onto his head and restlessly paced back and forth in the room. "Every day brings something new, some new insanity or some new mess. Is there not a single normal man around here? No man who would realize the dreadfulness of our situation here in the midst of misery and hunger? Is there no man who would speak about something else than the price of gold? (GITS, 125)

And just as Hameiri mentions in his preface the prospect of a "return to general sanity" (TGM, II) at the end of the war, so does Dan invest all his energy in preparing for this moment: "Any action that does not help to preserve the last remnant of sanity for the future, is meaningless ..." (GITS, 213).

³¹ Abramson, *Hebrew Writing of the First World War*, xiv.

Despite their limited perspective and focus on the spread of a general madness, the two novels are amazingly rich in reflections on a number of ‘-isms’ – abstract concepts that appear to have lost the capacity to provide order and meaning to an unhinged world. More than once, they employ the same imagery and the same references in their reflections.

IV. “Altogether, what is the war for?” – Reflections on the incomprehensible

Nationalism and Patriotism

“And again I thought about that word with which they ignite all the wars in the world – patriotism” (TGM, 119). Whether in the midst of a nationalist demonstration in Budapest or while waiting in the trenches for a Russian attack, Avigdor Feuerstein cannot come to terms with the concept of “patriotism” or its close relative “nationalism.” Again and again he contemplates these terms, but everything he observes seems to prove them invalid. From within “this Austro-Hungarian melting-pot” (TGM, 116) he mocks the very idea of national and ethnic purity:

this Austro-Hungarian-Serbian-Ruthenian-Bosnian-Gypsy army, this marching Tower of Babel made up of twenty different nations, which had been living side by side, their identities increasingly blurred, for generations... In this polyglot army they kept babbling about purity of race – a pure Magyar, a pure Italian, a pure Romanian, and above all, a pure Austrian! No wonder that there was even a gypsy corporal, by name of Lacy Gantsche, who boasted of being a pure gypsy! (TGM, 222)

Hameiri even introduces a character named Johann Kretschery who speaks all the languages of the empire like a native while his ethnic origin remains mysteriously indeterminable (TGM, 256–257).

A different version of the Babel metaphor can be found in the scene of Dan’s arrival at Ratisbonne. The unit at the base constitutes another characteristic mixture of that same melting-pot. He is greeted in German with a Hungarian accent, while Jewish and Arab children rehearsing Croatian army songs mingle with Hungarian swear words and a popular Viennese tune (GITS, 81). Already on his way to Jerusalem he made the acquaintance of an “Austrian” officer, who has never set foot in Austria and speaks no German but rather almost every language of the Levant. He is a local and displays no patriotic sentiments. To him the Austrian uniform is merely a means of avoiding being drafted

into the Ottoman army. Just as Avigdor cannot understand why they are actually fighting the Russians, Dan is puzzled by the absurd and irrational alliances of the war, through which the Turkish allies “remain more foreign to us than the enemy” (GITS, 130), and the English soldier who is killed by a starving Turkish soldier at the front in Gaza “does not fall for the glory of his fatherland but because he had shoes on his feet and rusks and cigarettes in his pockets” (GITS, 182). Moreover, the impression of general arbitrariness is completed by the depiction of local Bedouin tribes not subject to the logic of national loyalty. The Bedouin form alliances with all parties and change sides on a weekly basis. As they herd their cattle between the lines, “the war falls silent in this sector and the sun looks cheerfully down on the grotesque idyll of two enemies armed to the teeth watching with loving care over the safety of the Bedouins” (GITS, 99). The only place of true loyalty is a latrine in the desert near Be’er Sheva, “the only one along the front with a tent. It was decorated with palm leaves and a portrait of the German emperor, so everybody who used it would come up with fraternal thoughts” (GITS, 192).

Heroism

The last of the ingenious “ten virtues of war” that Avigdor Feuerstein is required to articulate in the officer candidate school reads: “Makes our violent death a heroic one” (TGM, 57). The notion of heroism runs through Hameiri’s novel like a leitmotif, from the first ironic regret that “one can’t die heroically through the telephone” (TGM, 9), to the phenomenon of outstanding Jewish heroism in battle (TGM, 223). As Avner Holtzman has noted, *The Great Madness* oscillates between pacifism and Jewish heroism.³² But even the laudatory description of the latter in the novel’s final chapters is marked by the sarcastic deconstruction of the concept as such. Dying a hero and being awarded a medal posthumously remains nothing but “a great mockery” (TGM, 174).

For Dan the question of heroism turns out to be a matter of definition. Surprised by his sudden promotion for “heroic action in face of the enemy,” he recalls an incident in Galicia. Desperately looking for food in a village, he surprised some Russian soldiers about to cook a chicken: “That sight provided me with superhuman valor. I raised my rifle and demanded the immediate capitulation of the chicken. The good fellows did not understand but raised their hands

³² Avner Holtzman, “Ha-Romanim Ha-Tti’udiyim Shel Avigdor Hameiri,” [Avigdor Hameiri’s documentary novels] in: Avner Holtzman, *Ahavat Ziyon. Panim Ba-Ssifrut Ha-Ivrit Ha-Ḥadasha*, Jerusalem: Carmel 2006, 257–277, 268.

and in this way urged me to take them prisoners” (GITS, 8). This episode corresponds with another “heroic” story related by his comrade Takacs, who emphasizes the enormous gap between the joyful anticipation of a heroic death at the beginning of the war and the cruel, unheroic reality of the battlefield. He is decorated although he intended to desert and return to Vienna. In the darkness he became confused and ran toward the Russian lines, thereby involuntarily leading an attack and becoming a hero. The fact that the injury to his posterior was caused by friendly fire has no bearing on his decoration (GITS, 14–17).

In Jerusalem, where there is no “real” war, a different kind of heroism is required, which is not measured in military terms. Growing increasingly desperate, Lieutenant Zinner tries to feed the starving city himself and declares “that people are not obliged to act heroically, but I do know that I will fulfill my duty to the last moment. Not only concerning the army, but also the duties of my heart” (GITS, 190).

The “borderline of Jewishness”

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, both Hameiri and Ben-Gavriël decided to have their characters narrate their tales from a specifically Jewish perspective, which positions the novels within Miron’s “borderline of Jewishness.” Referring to Martin Buber, Miron defines Jewishness not in ethnic or religious terms but through the experience of “being a Jew in the world.”³³ The more specific case of “being a Jew in the war” is illustrated by the alleged inability of the Jewish characters to incorporate the two concepts discussed above, namely patriotism and heroism. “How can you know what a homeland means?” Hameiri’s narrator is asked, when the outbreak of war and of nationalist enthusiasm suddenly highlights his Jewishness in the eyes of his friends (TGM, 14). The same doubts about Jewish loyalty at times of war lead the Austrian command to order Dan and his Jewish comrades back to Europe as “unreliable elements” in the final paragraphs of *Gold in the Streets* (GITS, 212).

Earlier in Ben-Gavriël’s novel, the question of where to bury a fallen Jewish boy who worked as a translator for the German army almost results in revolt and catastrophe and creates a strong image of the inextricable conflicts of national affiliation.³⁴ The commanding officer in Ratisbonne does not inform the

³³ See Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity*, 307.

³⁴ Two additional literary versions of the same incident titled “Haschomer” and “Der Wächter” respectively can be found in Ben-Gavriël’s early volumes *Feuer im Osten* and *Der rote Mond*.

Jewish burial society, but orders, “that the fallen is to be buried next to the other fallen of the army, namely in the Christian cemetery on Mount Zion.” The Jewishness of the deceased and his known affiliation with the Shomer movement is negated by the logic of war: “The man died a soldier and has to be buried a soldier. No argument can change that fact” (GITS, 133). As the rumor spreads through the city, it sparks unrest, and another Jewish soldier in Ratisbonne even plans to steal the body to ensure its proper burial – in the Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives. Eventually the commanding officer spontaneously takes a short leave and the fallen soldier is given a military funeral in the Jewish cemetery.

But the question of Jewish national identification is double-edged. On the one hand it undermines the neatly ordered categories of friend and foe in war. In almost all battles there are Jewish soldiers on both sides and one of the characters in *The Great Madness*, an elderly Jewish reservist, has only one wish: to pray in “a *minyán* with the *yids* on that side” (TGM, 197), as he dreams of a community that transcends the existing boundaries of nationality. On the other hand, a growing Jewish national consciousness runs the risk of simply replacing one form of nationalism with another. This ambiguity finds expression in the subversive use of the Jewish anthem “Ha-Ttikva” as a manifestation of protest and revolt, a motif that is – commendably – employed in both novels. During his training Avigdor is commanded to climb a hill and sing the Hungarian anthem, but he climbs the hill and sings “Ha-Ttikva” instead. Owing to the ignorance of his commander, he is not punished but considered a bad singer (TGM, 58). In Jerusalem Lieutenant Zinner counts on the ignorance of his troops, teaches the melody to them and eventually has a whole company of Austrian soldiers march through the Holy City whistling the tune of “Ha-Ttikva.” The Turkish authorities, who banned the melody, are powerless in the face of the offense, since the responsible party is an ally (GITS, 203–204). However, the Jewish anthem is used only to irritate the existing order. Neither Hameiri nor Ben-Gavriël employs it as a plain affirmation of Jewish nationalism.

Besides this, both novels clearly demonstrate that “being a Jew in the world” means being surrounded by anti-Semites. Most of the officers in *The Great Madness* practice an overt form of anti-Semitism and harass Avigdor and his Jewish comrades at every opportunity. In the end, at least two of them turn out to be Jewish themselves, and this exposes anti-Semitism as an adoptable rhetoric practice.³⁵ Ben-Gavriël employed a slightly different strategy to target the anti-Semitism within the army. While various anti-Semitic statements made

³⁵ For example the colonel, who is forced to promote Avigdor three times in three days (TGM, 83), and Private first class Mady, who tries to desert and is executed by Avigdor’s men (TGM, 142).

by different people can be found throughout the novel, this attitude is mainly embodied in a single character: Lieutenant Karl Maria Glaser, the accountant of Ratisbonne. He is conducting the gold trade and all the threads of schemes and intrigues directed against the “good” soldiers within the base lead to him. Ben-Gavriël was obviously so fond of this petit bourgeois villain, that Glaser reappears in his novel *A House in Prague* as a stereotypical anti-Semite, whose son is a fervent Nazi and member of the S.A.³⁶

Generally speaking and particularly with regard to the configuration of the main characters, the “borderline of Jewishness” is far more clearly etched in *The Great Madness* than it is in *Gold in the Streets*. Yet both texts share a distinct “Jewish” trajectory in their overall movement.

V. Conclusion: The road to the land

Both Avigdor Hameiri and M. Y. Ben-Gavriël turned their individual experiences of the Great War into one of the central topics of their literary production. Read together, the two selected novels show the multifaceted insanity of the war on the Eastern European front as well as in the Middle Eastern rear, and illustrate the misery it inflicted on soldiers and civilians alike while allowing some immoral individuals to prosper. They highlight the impossibility of grasping the logic of political alliances, patriotic loyalty or internecine warfare in terms of human reason. But do they offer any way out of the madhouses they depict so visually? If one were to determine a general vector, a direction of movement in the two novels, it becomes apparent that both texts eventually point toward the same place: Jerusalem. Their narrators gradually detach themselves from their European homelands, and while the specific routes taken as well as the ideological assumptions differ, the war places both of them on “the road to the land”³⁷ – to the Land of Israel.

³⁶ *A House in Prague* (Bayit Bi-Pprag), a novel about the German occupation of Prague in 1939, was written at the same time and published in Hebrew translation in 1945. Only in 1958 did Ben-Gavriël find a German publisher for the text. *Das Haus in der Karpfengasse* became his most successful novel and was made into a film in 1965.

³⁷ *Der Weg in das Land: Palästinensische Aufzeichnungen* [The Road to the Land: Notes from Palestine] is the title of Eugen Hoeflich’s first publication in 1918. It is an early adaptation of Hoeflich’s notes from his experiences in the Middle East, a passionate travel book describing his route from Constantinople to Jerusalem without mentioning the war. The image of the “road to the land” and a general movement from Europe to “the East” constitutes a common motif in most of Ben-Gavriël’s writings, at least up to the 1950s.

In *The Great Madness* the ultimate destination of the journey is present from the very beginning. As the new recruit Avigdor Feuerstein is about to set out to fight the Cossacks in the Carpathian Mountains, he is confronted with the request of a Jewish general to pray for him in Jerusalem. Although he is himself an active Zionist, he is stunned. “What did the Carpathians have to do with the walls of Jerusalem?” (TGM, 23), is the closing sentence of the third chapter. A rabbi he visits in Galicia is likewise convinced that Avigdor will eventually reach Palestine. Toward the end of his ordeal on behalf of an estranged “fatherland,” an entire chapter titled “Madame Pompadour” (a codename for Josef Trumpeldor) is devoted to the discussion of Zionism and the prospect of a sovereign Jewish state, in the wake of rumors to the effect that not only the British but also the Germans have promised the Holy Land to the Jews spread among the Jewish soldiers. As the excitement reaches its climax, the narrator joyously divorces his “dear wife, Hungary” and replaces her with the idea of a Jewish State in Palestine (TGM, 237). Thus, from the very beginning, the novel draws an unmistakable line between the birthplace of the narrator (and author) and the land of his forefathers, even though it took several years in captivity and another novel until he finally got there.

By contrast to the narrator in *The Great Madness*, Ben-Gavriël’s Lieutenant Dan is not depicted as a Zionist. He meets the exiled Zionist David Yellin in Constantinople, learns about the deportation of the Zionists by Djemal Pascha, and comments on Zionist activity and bodies in Palestine such as the Shomer movement, but does not identify with the movement. Nevertheless, he undergoes a similar process of detachment from Europe and his home country. Already in Constantinople, he is prepared to do anything to avoid returning to Europe, “even if my part as an extra in this German-Turkish-Austrian tragicomedy will shake me to my very foundations” (GITS, 40). In line with Ben-Gavriël’s own political convictions, the disengagement of his protagonist from Europe coincides with a passionate turn toward Asia and its peoples, among which Dan counts the Jewish people. On his way to Palestine he encounters a Hindu prisoner, who fails to see the point of the war, and out of the blue he phrases his Pan-Asian credo: “If the Asian people were united, there would be no war in the world. They would dictate the peace” (GITS, 60–61).³⁸ Following this line of thought Dan later tries to convince Zinner finally to give up on Europe: “What

38 For a concise account of the Pan-Asian idea within the Zionist movement and Ben-Gavriël’s contribution, see Hanan Harif, “Asiatic Brothers, European Strangers: Eugen Hoeflich and Pan-Asian Zionism in Vienna,” in *Against the Grain: Jewish Intellectuals in Hard Times*, ed. Ezra Mendelsohn, Stefani Hoffman and Richard I. Cohen (New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 2014), 171–185.

do you want in Europe? Europe is madness, Europe is murder, technological murder of every kind, whether there's a war or not. But see: Here, in the east there is, at least potentially, still an opportunity for humanity. [...] Stay here, help here with all your skills, help to protect the East from European assimilation" (GITS, 209). Neither of the narrators in the novels had initially intended to take this road to the East. This development is presented as an inevitable outcome, an almost logical deduction from the events and patterns of the war. In accordance with that observation, the geographic dislocation and emotional detachment from the homeland, whose uniform is becoming ever more uncomfortable to the protagonists, is more evident in the novels than any affirmative process of relocation and arrival in Palestine.

Along the lines of an autobiographical reading, the two novels constitute an extended retrospection of that very road that led Hameiri and Ben-Gavriël to Palestine. Their estrangement from Europe as a whole is manifested in both their accounts of their separate visits to Europe in the 1930s. Adopting the standpoint of an adventurer, they employ the same "exotic" terminology to portray their own place of origin not only as an estranged but as a strange, wild and unexplored place. Upon his return from a trip to Europe in 1937, Ben-Gavriël painstakingly compiled an album from photographs, documents and texts and called it *Expedition to Europe*.³⁹ He even offered the album to some publishers.⁴⁰ But his acerbic depiction of "this adventurous expedition to the lands of the tippshim, gazlanim, shodedim and okhelei-ḥazirim"⁴¹ was too soon overtaken by history. And yet, despite the unequivocal narrative of Europe's deterioration, Ben-Gavriël's comments and the affectionate design of the album indicate a more complex relation to the former homeland than pure estrangement. Hameiri is far more explicit here. His episodic travel book *A Journey in Savage Europe*,⁴² which was the outcome of a prolonged stay in Europe in the early 1930s, discusses the complicated notion of "homeland" at great length. Passing familiar places on the train, Hameiri reflects on emotions, childhood memories, and desires – and on the absurdity of having two homelands. Out of the blue a stranger confronts him with the poem "My two souls" – a poem he himself wrote years before: "By the rivers of the East resides the one / A god of peace reflecting in her eye. – / And by the rivers of the West resides the other / Dream-

³⁹ M. Y. Ben-Gavriël, *Expedition nach Europa: Unternommen im Sommer 1937*, Moshe Ya'aqov Ben-Gavriël Archive, file no. ARC Ms. Var. 365 1/13.

⁴⁰ See entry dated November 11, 1937, in Ben-Gavriël, *Diary VIII*.

⁴¹ Meaning "the land of the stupid, of thieves, robbers and pig-eaters."

⁴² Avigdor Hameiri, *Massa Be-Eroppa Ha-Ppir'it* [A Journey in Savage Europe] (Tel Aviv: Va'ad Ha-Yovel, 1938).

ing a dream. // When the time of mercy dawns, when you lift up your eyes /
And see two shadows embrace on high, / Then know, that they are souls, souls
are there: / my souls are there.”⁴³

The poem corresponds with two major texts of the poetry of exile (Psalm 137 and Yehuda Halevy’s “My heart is in the East”), referring to a vast field of Jewish literature. For Hameiri, the European-Palestinian visitor to Europe, the specific quality of the poem lies in preserving the absurd ambiguity of homelands. It may therefore serve as a concluding image, according to which the road to the land may lead in one direction and be irreversible, but will always have two ends for those who travel it.

Acknowledgement: The research for this article was conducted during a doctoral fellowship at the Franz Rosenzweig Minerva Research Center at the Hebrew University Jerusalem in 2014. I am indebted to the center and its director Yfaat Weiss for the support and the fruitful academic atmosphere I had the privilege to enjoy.

⁴³ Ibid., 125.