

"Reconciling Two Great Loves": The First Jewish-Arab Literary Encounter in Israel

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

The three journalists together with Rashid Hussayn conceived of the idea of setting up a meeting between Arabic and Hebrew writers. After lengthy discussions (during which the novelist Aharon Megged, literary editor for Lamerhav, Ahdut HaAvodah's daily, and the poet Haim Gouri were introduced to the proposal), the time, place and list of participants were decided upon. At first Tammuz and his colleagues refused to allow writers affiliated with MAKI to be invited to the meeting; but they quickly realized that, without MAKI, the most influential Arab writers in Israel would be absent. Furthermore, all the Arab writers whom [Rashid] represented throughout the discussions were members of "The Union of Arab Writers and Intellectuals." Eventually, both communist and non-communist writers who were members of the Union received invitations. The list of participants did not include [Emil Habiby], a Knesset member representing MAKI, either because he was a political personality of too high a profile or because of his own reluctance to attend. It seems fair to say that Habiby's literary endeavors were rather low on his agenda at this point in his career, and he had not yet come to regard himself as a "novelist." Other Arab writers, such as [Michel Haddad], who was supposedly closely identified with the "Establishment" were also not invited.

What was the atmosphere that engulfed the meeting after the poems had been read? How did the Jewish writers react, considering that, for most of them, this was their first encounter with angry Israeli Arab poets and, for some of them, the first contact of any kind with Arabs living in Israel? According to the description published in Ha'Olam Hazeh shortly after the meeting (and whose source, apparently, was Rashid Hussayn himself), "the discussion was friendly and polite."⁽¹⁴⁾ But, the article continues, when Tammuz requested the participants to express their views on the three poems they had just heard, "the response was total silence. [Abraham Shlonsky] glanced at [Moshe Shamir]. Haim Gouri stared at the floor...everyone waited for his colleague to speak first." ("Abraham Halfi," Tammuz wrote,⁽¹⁵⁾ "told me afterwards that, except for silence, he did not see any other way to respond to what his ears had just heard")

A week later, on 31 October 1958, [Massa] published a lengthy letter by Gabriel Moked,⁽³⁸⁾ a critic, scholar, and Editor of the literary quarterly, Akhshav. Moked's reaction was decidedly against including poems such as Loubani's, Abu-Hanna's, and Rashid Hussayn's in a literary publication, for they reminded him of "a zealous, patriotic essay by an elementary or high school pupil in Mousmous or Umm al-Fahm [an Arab town south of Nazareth]." Judged by their poems' content, these poems were, in his opinion, "primitive and simplistic manifestoes." Moked is repulsed by their appearance in literary supplements. "What it means is that two different criteria are applied. It is as though we have set up a literary and intellectual nursery school for Arab writers in Israel." Regarding [Jabra Nicola Jabra]'s protest, Moked counters that he is not willing "to listen to nationalistic-Zhdanovistic preaching on the glory of popular, anti-colonial sloganeering."

FULL TEXT

"Reconciling Two Great Loves": The First Jewish-Arab Literary Encounter in Israel

I

SYMPOSIUMS AND GATHERINGS OF WRITERS from different cultures are in our days an almost routine affair. Various regional and international organizations (e.g., UNESCO, PEN clubs, etc.) bring together writers of different nationalities to read their works and discuss the joys, torments, and esoterica of creative writing. Artists often leisurely converse about the future of literature and the destiny of mankind.

The events related here do not fit into any of these serene categories. On the evening of 9 October 1958 in Tel-Aviv, Jewish writers of Hebrew and Arabic-writing Palestinians, all holders of Israeli citizenship, came together in the hope of finding a literary bridge between two alienated and hostile peoples. Willy-nilly, they had been penned in the same country for a decade. Now the time had arrived, they felt, for a first-hand acquaintance with each other within the framework of a literary dialogue.

However, the participants discovered, to their dismay, that an abyss separated them, and that the conditions for holding genuine talks were far from ripe. In more favorable times, perhaps a fruitful encounter could take place, but this would happen neither easily nor in the foreseeable future.

II

The most prominent personality behind the meeting was Rashid Hussayn, a young Palestinian poet whose small collection of poetry, entitled *At Dawn* [Ma'a al-Fajr], had been published in Nazareth in 1957. It was the first collection of his poetry and an early indication of the renaissance of Palestinian Arabic poetry in Israel. Rashid Hussayn was born in 1936 in the village of Mousmous (south of Nazareth). He was twelve years old when the State of Israel was established, and therefore he completed his high school education in Nazareth within the Israeli school system. He wrote his first poetry, while still a pupil, and selections were published in a thin volume compiled by the Nazarene poet Michel Haddad (1919-1997) under the title *A Variety of Arabic Poetry in Israel*.⁽¹⁾ With the appearance of *At Dawn*, and following his second book, *Missiles* [Sawarikh] (1958), Rashid immediately gained recognition as a talented and original poet. His verses, written in simple language, yet somewhat classical in form, reflected national issues (the tragedy of the Palestinian refugees, life under Israel's military government, land appropriations), as well as the subjects of love and youth's whims.⁽²⁾ At times his poems are directed at the Jewish people in Israel (as in "The Locked Door," discussed below), and poems about brotherhood (e.g. "To My Country's Children"⁽³⁾), expressing hope for a brighter future for the country's two peoples.

Rashid began working in Tel-Aviv early in 1958. He was employed by MAPAM (The United Workers Party) as an editor of its Arabic-language literary journal, *al-Fajr*, which had begun publication in 1957. His official title was "literary editor" but, for all practical purposes, he was the chief editor, while the "official" editor, Rusturn Bastouni, primarily a party activist, was relegated to the sidelines. *Al-Fajr* was a dynamic and ground-breaking journal. Despite its being published by a Zionist political party, the heads of the party's Arab Section (Simha Flappan and Joseph Waschiz) tended to overlook Rashid's blatant pro-Nasser overtones.

This was the heyday of the rise of Nasserism and Pan-Arabism following the 1956 Suez-Sinai War. Among the Arab citizens of Israel, many were drawn to the hypnotizing voice emanating from Cairo, despite the fervent rhetoric of the Israeli Communist Party (henceforth: MAKI), which was then the major political force on the Arab street. Later, after the Kassem Revolt in Iraq, and especially between 1959-1963, the gap widened between those attracted to Nasserism (among them Rashid Hussayn) and the MAKI leadership, which supported the Iraqi regime, Nasser's inveterate enemy. MAPAM tried to exploit the discontent of many Arabs with MAKI and to win them over to the

MAPAM camp by enabling young people who held clear nationalist leanings to play in its political field.

Nevertheless, during this period, both MAKI and the nationalists still had much in common. In mid-1958, an Arab "Popular Front" was established in Israel that included both groups. An organization of Arab writers and intellectuals was also set up under the auspices of MAKI, as a cultural branch of the "Front."⁽⁴⁾

This is not the place to survey the history of Arabic literature in Israel during the first decade of the state.⁽⁵⁾ However, it should be recalled that, during the 1948/49 War, the majority, of Palestinian intellectuals and writers fled the newly independent State of Israel by either crossing over to the Jordanian section of the country or becoming refugees in other Arab countries. Many Palestinian intellectuals who remained in Israel, such as Emil Habiby, Emil Touma, and Jabra Nicola, were communists from the Haifa region, and were joined by younger poets, such as Hanna Abu-Hanna and Issa Loubani, most of whom hailed from Nazareth and its environs.

In the early 1950s, for a very brief interval, they were also joined by a number of Jewish communist intellectuals who had arrived from Iraq (prominent among these was the novelist Sami Michael, who was, for a short period, a member of the staff of MAKI's weekly al-Ittihad). MAKI had begun publishing a monthly literary journal, al-Jaddid, in 1952, which was edited by Emil Habiby and Jabra Nicola. However, this journal (which survived until the early 1990s) retained from its inception an unequivocally ideological slant and an uncompromising political line that alienated many intellectuals reluctant to identify, with the anti-government Communist Party. At the time, a number of intellectuals were writing for the Israeli government's Arabic daily, al-Yawm, or for the low-keyed, bland monthly, al-Mujtama' [Society], published by Michel Haddad. But young people who had awakened to Palestinian or Arab nationalism were often suspicious of MAKI's journalism, deemed "too Israeli" for their tastes.

After the outbreak of the Suez-Sinai war in late 1956, and following the Kfar Kassem massacre on the same day that the Sinai war broke out, the theme of militant nationalism began to be more strongly expressed in local Arab poetry and a growing contact emerged between MAKI and nationalistically-awakened youth. This relationship reached its climax in May of 1958, when that year's May Day demonstrations turned bloody. It was in the wake of these demonstrations that the Popular Front was established.

III

At this stage Rashid Hussayn became the outstanding representative of non-aligned youth who were attracted to militant Arab nationalism. He himself did not, however, identify, with any single political group. On his arrival in Tel-Aviv to edit al-Fajr, he made friends in the literary and social circles in the city, and was regarded as a key Palestinian Arab Israeli with whom one could engage in a candid dialogue.

Rashid was a good-looking young man, swarthy and tall. He spoke flawed Hebrew, but it was fluent enough for conversation in his new Tel-Aviv surroundings. He remained in the city during weekdays, returning home on the weekends. Among other activities, he came into close contact with the editors of the Tel-Aviv-based weekly Ha'Olam Hazeh, Uri Avneri and Shalom Cohen (an Arabic speaker), and his circle of acquaintances widened. In September 1958, the newspaper Ha'Aretz published Rashid's lengthy article, "A Reply to K. Katzenelson,"⁽⁶⁾ which was a response to Kalman Katzenelson's accusations that Arabs residing in Israel were inherently disloyal to the state and that their place should be across Israel's borders. It was Rashid's first appearance in Hebrew. In its wake (possibly even before the article was published) contact was made with three top writers from Ha'Aretz: Benjamin Tammuz, one of the paper's literary editors; Zeev Schiff, who would later become the paper's senior military analyst; and Boaz Evron, a noted essayist.

The three journalists together with Rashid Hussayn conceived of the idea of setting up a meeting between Arabic and Hebrew writers. After lengthy discussions (during which the novelist Aharon Megged, literary editor for Lamerhav, Ahdut HaAvodah's daily, and the poet Haim Gouri were introduced to the proposal), the time, place and list of participants were decided upon. At first Tammuz and his colleagues refused to allow writers affiliated with MAKI to be invited to the meeting; but they quickly realized that, without MAKI, the most influential Arab writers in Israel would be absent. Furthermore, all the Arab writers whom Rashid represented throughout the discussions were members of "The Union of Arab Writers and Intellectuals." Eventually, both communist and non-communist writers who were members of the Union received invitations. The list of participants did not include Emil Habiby, a Knesset member representing MAKI, either because he was a political personality of too high a profile or because of his own reluctance to attend. It seems fair to say that Habiby's literary endeavors were rather low on his agenda at this point in his career, and he had not yet come to regard himself as a "novelist." Other Arab writers, such as Michel Haddad, who was supposedly closely identified with the "Establishment" were also not invited.

On the "Hebrew" side, most of the writers hailed from the "Progressive Literature" school – people close to MAPAM/HaKibbutz HaArtzi (Abraham Shlonsky, Moshe Shamir, T. Carmi) or Ahdut HaAvoda/HaKibbutz HaMe'uhad (Amir Gilboa, Aharon Megged, Haim Gouri, Ben-Zion Tomer); and a number of non-aligned writers, such as Avot Yeshurun, Abraham Halfi, and Shoshana Sherira. Absent were a number of leading writers identified with MAPAI, such as Yehudah Burla (President of the Hebrew Writers Union), Nathan Alterman, S. Yizhar, and Haim Hazaz, all of whom may not have received invitations in the first place. Of course, no writers from the "Right," such as Jonathan Ratosh or Aharon Amir, showed up. Ha'Aretz people adamantly refused to invite Jewish communist writers. Especially marked out for exclusion were Alexander Penn, the Communist Party's poet-sloganeer, and Haya Kadmon.

IV

On October 3, Benjamin Tammuz published a short editorial in the Literary Supplement of Ha'Aretz, emphasizing the need to recognize Arab writers in Israel and the importance of translating their works into Hebrew. He also called attention to the approaching conference and revealed a glimpse of the discussions that led up to it:

Every attempt to make contact with an Arab writer has been observed with suspicion if he is not from communist circles. It also appears that we are forbidden to object to this. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out, happily and with satisfaction that, through Ha'Aretz's initiative, several Arab novelists and poets have visited the editorial offices of this newspaper. These writers have expressed their belief in our candid desire to understand their world, their problems, and their uncertainties as artists and members of a national minority.

The first outcome of this contact has been a conference, soon to take place. The program is extremely modest: three Arab writers and three Hebrew writers will read from their works in the course of two sessions.

Some of the pieces by the Arab writers will be published in the "Culture and Literature" section of the paper next week; and as more material surfaces, the Arab novelist and poet in Israel will find his place on the pages of a Hebrew literary supplement.(7)

Shortly before the date of the conference, I was asked to translate three poems from Arabic into Hebrew. One poem was by Rashid Hussayn,(8) another by Hanna Abu-Hanna,(9) and the third by `Issa Loubani.(10) It turned out that these were the only texts recited during the meeting, and they formed the only literary focus for the ensuing discussion. The three Hebrew pieces that Tammuz mentioned were not read, whether from lack of time, the inability, of most of the Arab writers to comprehend the Hebrew, or perhaps because of the inaccessibility of

suitable Arabic translations of the Hebrew texts.

The meeting was held in Benjamin Tammuz's studio in Tel-Aviv. The Arab writers arrived earlier than the assigned hour of 20:30, while nearly all of the Hebrew writers came "a little late" according to the testimony of the host.(11) Before the meeting got under way, refreshments were served, which included thick black coffee with cardamom that Rashid Hussayn had prepared. Benjamin Tammuz read the three Arabic poems that had been translated – one was short, the other two long, almost mini-epics. The short poem was by Rashid Hussayn, and began with a prose dedication: "To my Jewish friend who asked me why I never portray the kibbutz and moshav in my poetry." One can detect here perhaps an echo of his friends in MAPAM, many of whom were kibbutz members. But even more clearly, one can recognize a reflection of the question put to Arab intellectuals over and over: why do Arab residents in the young state continuously clamor and complain? Why don't you write about the creative activity rampant all around you? Why don't you get up and do something "positive"?

Rashid's lyrical reply sidestepped the basic national issue, which was the countries Jewish-Arab struggle, and instead, with full invective, raised the question of the military government, which at that time was in total authority over the majority of Israeli Arabs. How can I be involved in "positive" pursuits if I am not permitted to walk freely in my own country, if a military administration blocks my every step, controls every movement? The opening stanza of the poem poses a series of questions to his Jewish friend:

You ask me to describe the beauty of the kibbutz and the moshav

And the Negev because the Yarkon River was re-channeled to the desert?

You forget, dear brother, you have locked me out.

Do you want me to be a liar and a ludicrous fool?

You have slammed the door in front of me

Yet you still expect me to extol

That which is hidden behind the door?

However, if Rashid Hussayn was satisfied with a stinging, yet courteous, address to his Jewish friends, then the two other poets, both card-carrying MAKI members, made no attempt to conduct a dialogue-in-verse with their Jewish neighbors. They had come to tell the story of "the land" the buzz-word in Palestinian-Arab poetry,(12) and they did it in a voice simultaneously elegiac and contentious. Hanna Abu-Hanna (b. 1930), a native of the village of Reineh near Nazareth, wove the lyrical tale of a young villager from the Galilee in love with a village girl called Salma. Their future happiness is overshadowed by the tragedy of the specter of exile from their lands and a lifetime of flight and wandering. The poem opens in a pastoral setting: wide expanses, maidens strolling with pitchers balanced on their heads; but this beauty conceals the approaching catastrophe and government confiscation of lands. The whole village is distraught and restless in the face of these evil tidings:

News. If true, then evil will embroil

The whole earth, and the village will crumble.

Will it be Salma's turn to seek flight?

Will they be separated from their ancestors' land?

That land be seen in summertime

Thirsty, clamoring?

By the end of the poem, the motif of struggle against land confiscation, a key slogan of MAKI in the Galilee, surfaces loud and clear:

Oh my country, the struggle of a proud and steadfast people

Who has learned from suffering the meaning of bravery.

Oh my country – a firebrand of glowing eyes

Searching for daybreak, and hastening its steps.

The third poem, "Tale of Struggle" blunter than the other two, is by `Issa Loubani, The poet was born in Mejeidel, an abandoned and razed village near Nazareth, where the Jewish development town Migdal HaEmek now stands. He and his family fled their home and became refugees in the neighboring city. Autobiographical vignettes are scattered throughout the poem, but the work is principally a call for struggle, which spares no words of reproof against those who perpetrated the Palestinian tragedy.(13) Despite the catastrophe, however, the proud and land-rooted people will never surrender, and their rights will be regained after bitter struggle:

Here in the Galilee heights, blossomed

And emerged our tale of horror and shame.

Villages by the hundreds, yes hundreds, on hill and mountainside

Nestling on mountain tops tall and proud

Had nurtured their souls with freedom and pride

But their rebellion will never slumber...

On their land the wicked dared

Stomp forth in the light of day.

They seek to force peasants to flee

To destroy what generations had built,

Stealing the hand-wrought produce,

And what had been sown, and what should have been sown,

Sucking the blood from the veins

And grabbing the clinging strips of flesh from the body.

And the poem ends with these words:

My people are now arising --

How wary the criminals are of the coming dawn!

V

What was the atmosphere that engulfed the meeting after the poems had been read? How did the Jewish writers react, considering that, for most of them, this was their first encounter with angry Israeli Arab poets and, for some of them, the first contact of any kind with Arabs living in Israel? According to the description published in Ha'Olam Hazeh shortly after the meeting (and whose source, apparently, was Rashid Hussayn himself), "the discussion was friendly and polite."⁽¹⁴⁾ But, the article continues, when Tammuz requested the participants to express their views on the three poems they had just heard, "the response was total silence. Abraham Shlonsky glanced at Moshe Shamir. Haim Gouri stared at the floor...everyone waited for his colleague to speak first." ("Abraham Halfi," Tammuz wrote,⁽¹⁵⁾ "told me afterwards that, except for silence, he did not see any other way to respond to what his ears had just heard")

If we rely on the articles of four participants who reported what transpired during the meeting (Rashid Hussayn in al-Fajr, Megged and Gouri in Massa, and Tammuz in Ha'Aretz), then the first to speak was the elder writer, Abraham Shlonsky. He preferred, however, not to tackle the poems' content head on. "Abraham Shlonsky" wrote Tammuz,⁽¹⁶⁾ "recovered first...He begged that the discussion remain focused on the poems' literary aspects; and, in this vein, he proceeded to elaborate on the complexities inherent in the art of translation and the dilemma of judging poetry, from just hearing it. He remarked that one person had translated all three poems, and he recalled that, upon hearing the poems read in the original Arabic, he had been more impressed by the noble sound of an incomprehensible language than by the Hebrew translation which he perfectly understood.

Shlonsky's restraint, however, was not characteristic of the atmosphere during the rest of the meeting. Although discussion continued in a relatively quiet tone, without shouting, many hidden bombshells were detonated nonetheless in the hearts of the participants. Tammuz, according to Rashid Hussayn,⁽¹⁷⁾ said that the taste of reality was bitter indeed, and he saw no need to sweeten it with saccharine. According to the same source, Shamir, then a prominent member of MAPAM, said that "we must understand that the Arabs here are part of a great nation now going through a crucial stage in its historical development. But they should not compare today's situation to the days of the Crusaders and Saladin. Brad we Jews, too, must not compare our present situation to the days of the biblical Joshua." Haim Gouri challenged his Palestinian listeners (again, according to Rashid Hussayn's account): "We came here to talk peace; but is there anyone in Damascus willing to print an article in the newspaper about peace with Israel?" At this point Tammuz interjected and reminded the listeners that the Egyptian Coptic writer Salama Mousa (1887-1958) had spoken out in support of peace and had even suggested reducing part of the Egyptian military budget.⁽¹⁸⁾

Aharon Megged was convinced that "the Arabs are part of the exquisite landscape of the country, and we must become familiar with that part of the scenery." According to Rashid Hussayn, who reported the discussion, Jabra Nicola retorted: "We are the salt of this land, and we want, like you, to enjoy its beauty."(19)

Jabra Nicola, the eldest of the Arab writers at the meeting, had translated and published books in Jaffa as early as 1935. He was not content with only one rebuke, but added to the moral discomfort of his Jewish listeners. According to Tammuz, "in his following remarks he [Nicola] hit the nail on the head by posing the disturbing question: how many of you know how to speak Arabic? Nearly all of us present, excluding two, speak Hebrew. How do you intend, therefore, to communicate with us?"

Two poets, Habib Kahwaji (from the village of Fassuta in the Upper Galilee) and Shakib Jahshan (Nazareth) came to the defense of Arab nationalism. Kahwaji said that nationalism does not hate other peoples, but it unswervingly despises governments that support imperialism against it. Jahshan added that, in the Arab world, there are those who speak about peace, such as the Syrian Michel Aflak, one of the founding fathers of the Ba'ath Party.(20)

The critic Adnan Abu-l-Su'ud (Nazareth) lamented the low level of education offered to the Arabs in Israel and criticized its biased program. Others complained of the restrictions enforced by the military government, which had prohibited them, for example, from traveling to Kufr Yassif (Western Galilee) to attend an Arab poetry festival. Rashid Hussayn published in his periodical his own statements made at the meeting(21):

He who denies us the right to express our suffering and our hope can be compared to one who denies Bialik and Tschernichowsky their volumes of nationalist poetry.

We would expect you to understand our heartfelt love for nationalist aspirations and our identification with the aspirations of the Arab world to liberate itself from imperialism and to defeat it. Although we Arabs of Israel have enough black bread to satisfy our bellies, and the roads into our villages are now paved, yet these things are only pieces of candy that can win the hearts of toddlers. We are not infants. The barrier existing between you and us is not made of glass, otherwise we would smash it; nor is it made of stone, otherwise we would transform it into lime and pulverize it. It is a barrier existing in our hearts. It is invisible, and here lies the difficulty in destroying it.(22)

The last person to speak was `Issa Loubani, secretary of The Union of Writers and Intellectuals, who invited the participants to a second meeting scheduled to take place in Nazareth the following month. At midnight the Arab writers left Tammuz's studio and headed north. But before that, the participants had to endure another unsettling experience. At ten o'clock, the writer Mustafa Murrar stood up and apologized that he had to leave Tel-Aviv and return to his village, Jaljoulya, before the military government's curfew in his area went into effect at eleven. Murrar's departure left the Jewish writers thunderstruck.

Haim Gouri writes about this: "One rises tottering, leaning on his cane, announcing he must take his leave. His colleagues explain he has to go now because of the curfew. We are dumbfounded. It is far easier to deal with abstract matters."(23) According to Tammuz, "the atmosphere was electrified by another incident: twice in the course of the evening, one of the Arab writers had stood up, and then another, and excused themselves for having to leave 'before the curfew takes effect'. Absolute silence. An embarrassed smile while our eyes remained glued to the wall – that was our response."(24) In this way, the Jewish participants began to feel the oppression wrought upon the Arab residents of the country caught in the pincers of a military government. This was precisely the topic of Rashid Hussayn's poem "The Locked Door."

Distraught, Haim Gouri summed up his feelings during the meeting: "At first, the encounter seemed to me a

capricious adventure, a dream. Afterwards it seemed there was nothing more humane, elementary, or heart touching than a meeting of this sort. Why did we have to wait ten years?"(25)

VI

A second meeting, however, never took place. In a letter by Rashid Hussayn to the editor of *Massa*, published five weeks later,(26) he still claims that "a second meeting will be held shortly. We are ready to listen to the other side. Then we will be able to understand the Jewish people through acquaintance with their intellectual engineers."(27) But the truth is that, by the time this letter was published, it was already obvious that no future meeting would be taking place. MAKI was up in arms due to the absence of Jewish communist writers from the meeting. Heavy-handed negotiations went on between the Union of Writer's and Intellectuals (an Arab literary society) and Tammuz and Schiff. According to Schiff, they could not agree to an announcement by the Union to invite "their own" Jews to participate in the next meeting in Nazareth.(28)

The non-partisan Rashid Hussayn apparently relinquished his role as liaison, and the talks on the Arab side were taken over by `Issa Loubani, a card-carrying member of MAKI, who was also the secretary of the Union of Writer's and Intellectuals. In December, there appeared in *Kol Ha'Am* (MAKI's daily) a public statement, issued on behalf of the Union of Arab Writers and Intellectuals, in which Loubani spelled out his version of the jagged history of the negotiations.(29) According to Loubani, discussions had been held in November between himself and Tammuz in preparation for a second meeting. He discovered, however, that Tammuz had already scheduled the date of the meeting, set up its agenda and sent out invitations to twenty Jewish writers while omitting the names of those "known for their interest in the problems of the Arab population and in improving relations between the two peoples."

Following this, Loubani sent Tammuz a letter stating that the Union had decided, after a thorough review of the proposed participants (i.e., the list drawn up by Tammuz), to invite an additional number of Jewish writers. In reaction to this, Loubani received the following reply from Tammuz, dated 24 November 1958:

I received your letter through The Union of Arab Writers and Intellectuals. I was not aware of the existence of this group and I have never discussed with them anything concerning a meeting between Jewish and Arab writers. I have engaged in talks with people like yourself, Rashid Hussayn, and others. Therefore, I cannot understand how this Union can assume the authority to invite "other Jewish writers" to meeting that are [sic] not its own. I hereby notify you that the meeting, scheduled to take place on November 20, 1958, has been cancelled. Responsibility for this rests on you alone.(30)

This was the manner in which contact was broken off. At the end of his public statement, Loubani reiterated that, despite all that had happened, the Union was willing to reopen negotiations with Jewish writers, "from all backgrounds and affiliations" Nevertheless, this signaled the end of the affair.

Sometime later, Zeev Schiff was asked to write an article about these events for *Ha'Aretz's* Literary Supplement under the title "A Good Idea that Went Awry: On the Sidelines of the Meeting between Arab and Jewish Writers."(31) Inter alia, Schiff claimed that among the new names drawn up in the list by the Tel-Aviv side was the poet Haya Kadmon, a fairly new member of MAKI, but the names of Alexander Penn and Mordechai AviShaul, veteran MAKI writers, were absent.(32)

Criticism was leveled at Tammuz and his colleagues not only from the extreme Left, but also from MAPAI. Michael Assaf, senior Arabist in the MAPAI establishment and a top analyst on Arab affairs for *Davar*, berated Tammuz and

Schiff, chastising them for the uproar that had overtaken their first (and only) meeting. In a lengthy article,(33) he compiled a list of accusations against the organizers and the writers who had published pieces about the meeting in a "positive" vein. Among other charges, Assaf claimed that the Tel-Aviv meeting was not the first contact between Jewish and Arab writers, but that there had been two previous occasions for contact – one in MAPAI's "Milo" club in Tel-Aviv, chaired by Dr. Ya'akov Horowitz (Literary Editor of Ha'Aretz before Tammuz), and that Rashid Hussayn and Mustafa Murrar had also attended the "Milo" meeting.

Assaf relates that yet another literary, meeting took place in the School for Histadrut Activists. Both meetings, claims Assaf, focused on purely literary topics and were extremely beneficial for bringing together hearts and minds and fostering mutual understanding. The truth of the matter is that, at both meetings, the key speakers were senior Histadrut officials who mouthed tepid admonitions to the Arab listeners, all of whom had been invited according to a lily-white MAPAI-approved list of names. At the first meeting, the key speaker was not Dr. Horowitz, but Reuven Barkat, head of the Histadrut's political department.(34) The second meeting took place under the direction of Eliyahu Agassi, a veteran MAPAI Arabist and head of the Histadrut's Arab Section. The Arab "writers" culled for these meetings were generally activists or teachers fully in compliance with the military government. Excluding Horowitz, Rashid Hussayn, and Mustafa Murrar, no outstanding Jewish or Arab writers were included among the participants, nor did a productive literary dialogue ensue.

However Assaf's main criticism of Tammuz and Schiff was that their flagrant political naiveté had apparently led them into a MAKI trap by allowing the communists to take control of the meeting they (Tammuz and Schiff) had initiated.

It's strange that the selfsame Zeev Schiff has just published a series of thoughtful articles in Ha'Aretz entitled "The Battle for the Arab Street," which concluded on this note: "There is only one way that 'The Arab Front' should be dealt with: it should be regarded as an official, activist organ of MAKI, led by non-communists who honestly and truly desire the best for the Arab minority, but who have gullibly slipped into MAKI's trap. It was exactly this same 'trap' that the Arab communists planted for the Jewish writers and poets at the symposium." One thing is certain: Haim Gouri, Aharon Megged, Moshe Shamir, Abraham Haiti (one gets the impression that he was the most disheartened among the participants), and others, as well as the absent guests, Alterman and Yizhar, did not fall for the communist "trap." I also have no doubts about the old-timer, the bard Avraham Shlonsky, who is long familiar with communist-designed symposium-traps. What then could have been the reasons for and the benefits from a meeting with MAKI writers and poets in the first place...

[Assaf further charged that:] No writers fluent in Arabic, such as the journalist Menachem Kapliouk and his son Amnon Kapliouk, or Dr. Israel Ben-Zeev, or Yehudah Burla, attended the symposium. Why were invitations not sent to professors from the Hebrew University and Arabic-writing intellectuals and novelists from the Sephardi communities; men like the Shamosh brothers [Isaac and Tuvyah], Eliyahu Khazoum, Murad Michael, Shalom Darwish, and many, many more?(35)

It appears, then, that Assaf, in his fervor to denounce the sins of the Jewish initiators, missed the basic point. The idea behind the meeting was to assemble mainstream Hebrew writers, especially those of the Palmach generation, then at the epicenter of the country's literary creativity, with their Arab counterparts. Also, most of the people mentioned (excluding Burla and perhaps Menachem Kapliouk) were not bona fide writers, but rather journalists, education supervisors, political activists, or, as in the case of Shalom Darwish, Arabic-writing Jewish authors.

Zeev Schiff took up the challenge of Assaf's criticisms. In his article "A Good Idea That Went Awry" (mentioned above), which appeared after Assaf's critique, he relates that the Tel-Aviv initiators strove hard, as he put it, that no

communists would be present among the Jewish writers at the first meeting...

...in order not to offer any pretext to parties of particular interests. On the other hand, it would have been absurd had we adopted the same strategy toward the Arab intellectuals. The picture today in "the Arab street" even if most people prefer not to admit it, is that intellectuals affiliated with MAKI, directly or indirectly, are those who call the shots. Any attempt to deny this given state of affairs, such as the "Milo" meeting, is a distortion of reality and something we did not want. Therefore we made certain that the Arab list would be diversified. The poet Rashid Hussayn helped us out in this. Our intention was to set up the groundwork for additional meetings, in which all circles and ideological trends would participate. The meeting has taken place, and has generated an ongoing response.(36)

It seems that, in the melee of a political dispute, the Jewish-Arab writers' dialogue died at childbirth. Meaningful contact between the writers was postponed for several decades fraught with crises and traumas.

In like manner, not only in the Jewish camp did bitter argument rage over the very concept of these meetings, their content, and participants, but also on the Arab side, political friction created a split between the communists and a majority of the non-aligned. This was true, naturally, not only in the intellectual community, but in the general political arena as well. The split between Nasser and the communists shook the Popular Front to its foundations, causing it and The Union of Arab Writers and Intellectuals to disappear. Rashid Hussayn, for example, adorned several issues of his periodical with massive attacks against the Arab communists, including MAKI, and this may be the reason that his name is absent from the final chapter of the story being related here.

VII

Reactions to the symposium were not limited to the diatribe fulminating between the organizers and their detractors from both Left and Right. There were also "literary" responses to the Tel-Aviv meeting. Massa published a translation of `Issa Loubani's poem "A Tale of Struggle," with the editors' forward:

The poem was written by an Arab poet from a village in the Galilee, and was read at a meeting of Jewish and Arab writers. As mentioned at the meeting, the poet was dismissed from his teaching position after the poem's publication. Regardless of our opinion of the poem's content or artistic value, and the hasty translation which has undoubtedly marred it, we present it to our Hebrew readers as an expression of the contemporary feeling prevailing in the Arab sector of the country and the intellectual circles there. We look forward to receiving our readers' comments.(37)

At least five comments arrived at the editors' office. They were published in Massa on 24 October 1958, only one week after the appeal to the periodical's readers. All of the readers who responded (Shraga Avneri from Haifa; Eliezer Shemi from Tel-Aviv; Akiva Rotenberg from Rishon LeZion; Zalman Arni, a high-school pupil from Jerusalem; and A. Yedidya from Kiryat Haim) expressed feelings of discomfort, to say the least, with the poem. Some of them agreed with `Issa Loubani's dismissal from his post as teacher because of his ideas. The respondents were loath to accept the sweeping accusations contained in the poem, aimed at the entire Jewish people, rather than against a particular element within it. Two of the readers expressed their admiration of the poet's literary talent. Shemi wrote:

All that I know about Arabic poetry in Israel is derived from rumors or superficial articles in the press. I was therefore greatly surprised to come upon Issa Loubani's poem "A Tale of Struggle" published in your journal. While its artistic value has been undoubtedly impaired by the "hasty translation," in the language of the editors,

nevertheless one can readily distinguish its superb features: realistic imagery, rich descriptions (not banal ones), great inner passion, a commendable epic strain (sorely lacking in most of the current Hebrew poetry), a multi-layered structure recognizable in the line of development, which flows from tranquil portrayals of childhood to psychological tempests at the end of the poem, a lyrical plot, and extremely powerful pictures.

But in the remainder of his comment he points out the poem's indiscriminate accusations:

This matter reveals either narrowness of vision and thought or evil intentions, for one cannot account for an intellectual of Loubani's caliber believing that the entire Jewish community is "thirsty for the blood of Arabs." If exceptions exist among us, then they are ostracized by general public opinion. However, for us the poem's significance lies in its being a symptom, a warning. The feelings expressed in it are honest, and if we do not hasten to counteract their sources, then we are "rearing snakes in our own laps."

Others (e.g., Zalman Avni) demanded from the poet to take a more "positive" approach:

As a progressive Arab, this poet and others like him are obligated to lead their people to progress and development. But if he prefers to whip them up with vitriolic expressions against the government, then it becomes a matter of senseless audacity. Not only is this activity the antithesis of a "progressive" undertaking, but it is also divorced from human values. One may derive from this poem that the Arabs dwelling among us form a fifth column. Excessively harsh expressions such as: "the wicked" "the criminals," etc. reflect the poet's shackled heart.

In summary, this has been an unsuccessful effort. It would have been preferable for the poet to re-channel the direction of his thoughts and energy along more positive lines and fight for mutual rapport between Arab and Jew.

Regarding the meeting itself, the reader A. Yedidya commented:

Meetings between Jewish and Arab men of letters, as well as between youth and pupils from both peoples, are desirable, but not for beating our breasts in contrition or hanging our heads in shame. Rather, they should strive to forge friendship. It should be clear that hatred and hostility will not bring down the military government and other existing restrictions. We must not forget that we are a nation with its back to the wall.

A week later, on 31 October 1958, Massa published a lengthy letter by Gabriel Moked,(38) a critic, scholar, and Editor of the literary quarterly, Akhshav. Moked's reaction was decidedly against including poems such as Loubani's, Abu-Hanna's, and Rashid Hussayn's in a literary publication, for they reminded him of "a zealous, patriotic essay by an elementary or high school pupil in Mousmous or Umm al-Fahm [an Arab town south of Nazareth]." Judged by their poems' content, these poems were, in his opinion, "primitive and simplistic manifestoes." Moked is repulsed by their appearance in literary supplements. "What it means is that two different criteria are applied. It is as though we have set up a literary and intellectual nursery school for Arab writers in Israel." Regarding Jabra Nicola's protest, Moked counters that he is not willing "to listen to nationalistic-Zhdanovistic preaching on the glory of popular, anti-colonial sloganeering."

Rashid Hussayn was quickly forced to defend his "lost honor" before Moked. His response, published in Massa,(39) is characteristic of his playfully yet unyielding style. He recounts all of the stages preceding the writers' meeting, and is willing to admit that "in this [i.e., Loubani's] and other poems there were ideological errors, at odds with the intentions of the meeting." He also assures his readers that the poems in question were not the best works produced by Israeli-Arab poets. "But really, is there nothing in any of the works by these three Arab poets that could be deemed 'artistic'? How can a Palestinian-Arab write poetry detached from his immediate reality? How can he

write only about life's beautiful features?" In the end, Rashid returns to the meeting itself:

The value inherent in the meeting goes several levels above the shortcomings of the poems recited. A second meeting will soon take place. We are ready to hear the other side..."

VIII

The uproar receded. Several years would pass before another meeting was held that included as distinguished a group of mainstream writers from the country's two major written languages. Literary contacts did not substantially increase; neither did a profitable dialogue between the two literatures take place. Only a few of the major Israeli Arab poets had their works translated into Hebrew. Even the works of such major poets as Mahmoud Darwish and Samih al-Kassem, who had come to dominate the stage in the thirty years following the Tel-Aviv meeting, were only sporadically translated. The superb prose of Emil Habiby won a measure of recognition, if somewhat belatedly, in Israeli Hebrew cultural circles, due to the talent and persistence of its translator, Anton Shammass. The main texts of Israeli-Arab literature were beyond the sight and curiosity of the majority of the Hebrew reading public. It is as though the hundreds of thousands of Arab citizens (today one million) had no part in the national cultural life of the country. Arab writers, for their part concentrated their activity within the Arab fold, occasionally venturing over to the Arab world. When Emil Habiby was awarded the Israeli prize for literature in 1992, a small opening was breached on the Jewish side of the wall of alienation. Israelis, at least some of them, are by now ready to listen to the harsh complaint emanating from the other side without a gut-reaction of reproof. But the time is not yet ripe for a full-fledged dialogue to take place in which, not only understanding and cooperation might be attained, but also, perhaps, the mutual blossoming of a marvelously invigorating creativity (in the words of Haim Gouri) from "the two great loves."

NOTES

(*)The translations of literary passages from Hebrew into English for this article were done by the author. The article was translated by Moshe Tlamim.

(1). Michel Haddad, *A Variety of Arabic Poetry in Israel* (Nazareth, 1958) [Arabic].

(2). On Rashid Hussayn's early poetry, see Emil Marmorstein's article in the first edition of the British journal *Middle Eastern Studies*, 1 (1964) 3-20.

(3). The poem is included in the collection, *Sawarikh* (Nazareth, 1958) 15 [Arabic]; my Hebrew translation appears in Yona David (ed), *Et Asher Baharti be Shira* (Tel-Aviv, 1958) 257-8 [Hebrew].

(4). On the atmosphere in the Arab street during this period, see Fli Reches, *The Arab Minority in Israel between Communism and Arab Nationalism* (Tel-Aviv, 1993) 27ff. [Hebrew].

(5). See G. Kanazi, "The Concept of 'The Land' in the Literature of Arab Israelis," *HaMizrah HeHadash*, 32 (1993) 165-81 (especially 172ff.) [Hebrew].

(6). *Ha'Aretz*, 18 September 1958 [Hebrew].

(7). *Ha'Aretz* (Literary Supplement), 3 October 1958 [Hebrew].

- (8). "The Locked Door," published in Ha'Aretz (Literary Supplement), 10 October 1958 [my Hebrew translation].
- (9). "The Land," published in Ha'Aretz (Literary Supplement), 24 October 1958 [my Hebrew translation].
- (10). "Tale of Struggle," published in Massa, 17 October 1958 [my Hebrew translation].
- (11). Tammuz, Ha'Aretz (Literary Supplement), 24 October 1958 [Hebrew]. I was not present at the meeting, and all the information on what transpired is from the reports published later in Massa, Ha'Aretz, Ha'Olam Hazeh, al-Fajr, and Kol Ha'Am.
- (12). See Kanazi, "The Concept of 'The Land' in the Literature of Arab Israelis."
- (13). In an article entitled "Delicate Matters" which Aharon Megged, the Editor of Massa, published alongside the translated poem (Massa, 17 October 1958), he makes the following comment: "The poems, saturated with hatred (like the one also translated here), are difficult to bear. They are as threatening as a dagger or butcher's knife. A fire is unleashed that can ravish both thistle and grain. The epithets 'criminals,' 'fornicators,' 'plunderers' are employed collectively, indiscriminately. Without differentiating between a whole people and temporary laws. Without pinpointing the guilt. Without accusing anyone."
- (14). Ha'Olam Hazeh, 15 October 1958 [Hebrew].
- (15). Ha'Aretz (Literary Supplement), 24 October 1958 [Hebrew].
- (16). Ibid.
- (17). Rashid Hussayn, al-Fajr, November 1958, pp. 11-12 [Arabic].
- (18). Ibid.
- (19). Ibid. Compare Tammuz's words on the same subject: "But of all these things, only one detail was picked up, and the sharp-witted Jabra Nicola Jabra caught it, justifiably so from a certain point of view: 'We Arabs are part of the country's landscape, we are a living people. Your tone of self-righteousness is the source of evil and the main obstacle blocking understanding.'" (Ha'Aretz. (Literary Supplement) 24 October 1958) [Hebrew].
- (20). Tammuz, *ibid.*
- (21). Rashid Hussayn; see note 16.
- (22). Ibid. The text was presented in Arabic and translated here, but it is likely that during the meeting the poets presented these views in Hebrew.
- (23). Haggai (Haim Gouri), Massa, 7 October 1958 [Hebrew].
- (23). Tammuz; see note 18.
- (24). Haggai (Haim Gouri); see note 22.

(25). Massa, 14 November 1958 [Hebrew].

(26). "Engineers of the human spirit" is from Stalin's reference to writers. The communists were fond of quoting it; Rashid Husayn followed suit.

(27). Zeev Schiff, Ha'Aretz (Literary Supplement), 26 December 1958 [Hebrew].

(28). Kol Ha'Am (Literary Supplement), 12 December 1958 [Hebrew].

(29). Ibid. It is not clear if the wording of Tammuz's letter as quoted in Massa was from the original Hebrew or if it was a translation of the Arabic version of Loubani's open letter (i.e., it may be the translation of a translation).

(30). Ha'Aretz (Literary Supplement), 26 December 1958 [Hebrew].

(31). Schiff; see note 27. The text in Schiff's article is muddled where Haya Kadmon's name appears, and it is not clear if it was decided to invite her or if it had only been proposed.

32. Michael Assaf, "The Arab-Jewish Symposium," Davar, 28 November 1958 [Hebrew].

33. On the meeting at "Milo" see "A Jewish-Arab Meeting in Soviet Eyes" Ha'Aretz (Literary Supplement), 24 December 1958 [Hebrew].

(34). Assaf, "The Arab-Jewish Symposium"

(35). Schiff; see note 27.

(36). Massa, 17 October 1958 [Hebrew].

(37). Massa, 31 October 1958 [Hebrew].

(38). Massa, 14 November 1958 [Hebrew].

Photo (Rashid Husayn)

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