



ARABS OF THE MOSAIC FAITH REUVEN SNIR

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On 14 December 1984, I was sitting in the news department of the *Voice of Israel*, Arabic section. Our correspondent had just informed us that Anwar Shaul (1904–84) had passed away. We broadcast this news along with a short biography. Over the internal telephone network, I called the news editor in the Hebrew section; it was important, I thought, to inform Israeli citizens that one of the last Arab-Jewish writers had passed away. “Anwar who?!” I heard her screaming. I explained briefly. “It doesn’t interest our listeners,” she said. I did not try to convince her, but these words stayed with me. As an academic dealing with the historical development of Arabic literature, mainly in modern times, I saw myself faced with a challenge. I knew, of course that the system of literature was not isolated from other systems – political, religious, national, etc. – but perhaps owing to my personal back-

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ground, I was confused. I understood why the role of the Jewish authors in Arabic literature had been marginalized and why Arab culture had low status in Israeli society; I was also aware of the sad fact that Israeli society had chosen not to enjoy the contribution Arab Jews could have made to building a pluralistic Israeli culture – a culture that would not have excluded the “other” Arab, who was in fact an integral part of the Jewish historical cultural heritage. Nevertheless, I was surprised by the sheer indifference felt by Israelis toward the death of one of the last Arab-Jewish writers as well as by efforts, consciously or unconsciously, to rewrite the past, even if that past was hardly a distant one.

Exactly twenty years later, on 14 December 2004, I gave my Fellow presentation at Wiko on my project “The Literature of Iraqi Jews in the Twentieth Century”. I could not avoid starting with the aforementioned episode, which somehow had generated my interest in the topic, but because I had been occupied with other topics I never had had the time or the mental readiness to concentrate on the study of the topic. My parents were born in Baghdad and immigrated to Israel in 1951; I was born two years later. Being a Sabra – a native-born Israeli – in the Israeli-Zionist educational system, I had been taught that Arabness and Jewishness were mutually exclusive.

My stay at Wiko enabled me for the first time to dedicate myself entirely to this purpose, in fact to the investigation of my own roots as well. Thanks to the scientific atmosphere and the excellent facilities, I was able to widen my investigation into the cultural activities of Jews of Iraq. I was interested mainly in the literary activities in Arabic during the twentieth century – since the emergence in Baghdad in the 1920s of an Arab-Jewish secular vision with the most eloquent slogan “Religion is for God, the Fatherland is for everyone”, and till the near-demise of the Arabic literature of the Iraqi Jews in the late 20th century.

Shaul’s poem “The Spring”, published in 1924, illustrated the hope of Iraqi Jews for a new era of national unity far removed from any opportunistic considerations or religious fanaticism. “Get up, get up – you the writers and poets,” he wrote in the introduction to the poem, “Spring has come, the Lord of Time, smiling, Nature has been smiling for human beings.” In Iraq, Arab cultural and national identity included Jews together with Muslims and Christians; the Arab identity of the Iraqi Jews was uppermost; they were “Arab Jews” or “Arabs of Mosaic faith” – in many ways, the Iraqi Jews resembled the middle-class and affluent, entrenched Jews of Germany or other European places who placed national and cultural identity above religious affiliation, feeling more “German” or “European” than Jewish. When I started to study this resemblance, I thought of similar phenomena in different places, but during my stay at Wiko I discovered a network of

relationships between Iraqi and European Jews since the mid-nineteenth century. We know of Jewish European immigrants who arrived in Baghdad, bringing to the Iraqi Jews the conception of *Haskala* (Enlightenment) and pushing them toward secularization. For example, the scholar Jacob Obermeyer (1845–1935) lived in Baghdad from 1869 to 1880 and tried through his reformist conceptions to modernize the religious framework of the local Jewish community. In his eagerness, he challenged the Baghdadi religious leaders, who in one case even united in putting him into *cherem* (exclusion from communal participation).

But the Spring of Baghdad was short. In the 1940s, as a result of the escalation of the national conflict in Palestine, religious and national identification blurred and the distinctions made by early Arab nationalists between Jewish religion and political Zionism gradually disappeared. The definition of Arabism became ever more narrow and excluded Jews; because of Palestine, no matter how vociferous their loyalty as Iraqi Arabs and their denials of Zionist partisanship, Jews became targets of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. The “Farhud” in Baghdad in June 1941, when more than one hundred and fifty Jews were killed and Jewish property was looted, led to an obfuscation of the Jews’ role in Iraqi society by implying doubts about their loyalty. Jewish young men were pushed into joining the Zionist movement or the Communist underground. While the first struggled for the establishment of an independent Jewish state, the latter fought against the corrupt regime and for equal rights for all minorities. Following the establishment of Israel, many Iraqi-Jewish poets and writers emigrated to the new state, while a much smaller number decided to seek their fortune in the West.

On their arrival in Israel, Jewish identity for the Arab Jews became by itself a cultural and national identity. The language (Hebrew) imposed upon them was limited to a single religion, a single nation, and a single ethnic entity. Moreover, advocates of Western-oriented cultural identity bewailed the “danger” of the “Orientalization”, “Arabization”, and “Levantinization” of Israeli society. The encounter with the powerful Zionist Hebrew culture was a kind of a shock for the immigrants – they soon started to internalize the negative attitude of the canonical center toward Arab culture. They learned to reject their own roots in order to get closer to the heart of the Zionist Ashkenazi collective. The dilemma was particularly delicate for those immigrants, who prior to their immigration were immersed in the mainstream Arab Islamic culture.

While in Iraq, Arab cultural and national identity encompassed Jews together with Muslims and Christians, in Israel, Jewish identity became intermeshed with cultural and national identity. Thus, as a result of the national conflict, the natural Iraqi hybrid of a

Jewish-Arab identity became contradistinct and even diametrically opposed identities – Arab versus Jew. Moreover, there was a kind of unspoken agreement between the two national movements – Zionism and Arab nationalism, and each with support from an “exclusivist” divine source – to marginalize Arab-Jewish culture. The national and political struggle over a small piece of territory has not hindered the two movements from seeing eye to eye in this respect, despite the difference between them – the one inspired by European colonialism and the other, an anti-colonial venture. We are currently witnessing the demise of Arab-Jewish culture; a tradition that started more than one thousand five hundred years ago is disappearing before our eyes.

My aforementioned Hebrew book *Arabness, Jewishness, Zionism: A Struggle of Identities in the Literature of Iraqi Jews*, which I had finished at Wiko, was published in June 2005, while I was still in Berlin. Thanks to the excellent services of the library and the stimulating discussions, I had the opportunity to widen my research into other Arab-Jewish communities, especially the literary activities of the Jews in Egypt. I also took part in the seminars of the working group “Modernity and Islam” and in the project “Jewish and Islamic Hermeneutics as Cultural Critique”. In cooperation with Professor Angelika Neuwirth from the Freie Universität, I taught a seminar on the Arabic literature of the Jews at the Seminar für Arabistik und Semitistik. The seminar was held in the Arabic language and discussed Arabic literature by Jewish authors from classical Arabic poetry through medieval Judeo-Arabic treatises to modern Jewish writings in Arabic during the twentieth century.