

Schwartz, Yigal. 2014. *Mekhela hungarit* (A Hungarian Chorus). Or-Yehuda: Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir.

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Despite its title, which seems to promise a tuneful Hungarian narrative, the one thing that Israeli literature researcher Yigal Schwartz's *Mekhela hungarit* [A Hungarian Chorus], depicting his 1950s-1960s Israeli childhood in a family of Hungarian-Jewish Holocaust survivors, really lacks is harmony in the sense of peace and concord amongst this "quartet" of parents and their two children. Yet, for many, including the present reviewer who is Schwartz's colleague at Ben Gurion University and also of Hungarian-Jewish origin, the appearance of *Mekhela hungarit* is both a joyous event and a forceful though poignant reminder of the hardships endured by our previous generation in Nazi-ruled Hungary and subsequently of the traumas they inevitably passed down to us, their wishfully carefree, proud *sabra* [Israeli born] children.

As the Head of the *Heksherim* (Contexts) Center for Jewish and Israeli literature and Culture at Ben Gurion University of the Negev at Beer Sheva, Israel, Yigal Schwartz is known primarily as a leading researcher of Modern Hebrew literary historiography, who has studied the work of Israeli writers of Central- and Eastern-European origin like Aharon Reuveni (1886-1971) and Aharon Appelfeld (b. 1932), and native Israeli authors like Amos Oz (b. 1939) and Hayim Beer (b. 1945). In addition, he has now for decades acted as literary editor in important Israeli presses and has had a substantial share in shaping the present vibrant and multicultural scene of Israeli literature. It is no less known that Schwartz is of Hungarian origin, born in Israel to Hungarian-Jewish Holocaust survivors who emigrated separately and met in Israel in 1947; but until recently these two realms, of the public and professional and of the personal and familial in Schwartz's life have never met in his published oeuvre.

In 2012, during a couple of months that he spent on sabbatical leave in Budapest, Schwartz created a unique, painfully gripping scholarly-memoir that can also be read as a *bildungsroman*. It is not easy to lay bare in public one's deeply scarred soul, moreover to the same audience to whom one has presented one's professional writings and presentations; yet Schwartz has courageously undertaken the mission of journeying to his childhood and coming of age in Israel of the 1950s and 1960s in the shadow of the Holocaust of Hungarian Jewry. During Schwartz's childhood his family, father Ben-Zion (Béla, 1918-1985), mother Bracha (Kati, née Grünfeld, 1929-2005), and the children Naomi (1947-1995), and Yigal (b. 1954), all lived in a grim setting in an orchard worker's humble home near Ramat Gan (then a small town and presently a city bordering on Tel Aviv's north-eastern part). Ben-Zion-Béla worked the land as an employee of the landowners, but Bracha-Kati only occasionally -- when not away on one of her escape journeys -- strutted out into the muddy soil with high heels. The couple often quarreled, at times broke up, and then would re-unite via routine teasing-reconciliations. Their children were at times viewers, at times objects or targets within their parents' couple dynamics, and yet they somehow maintained their lives, studies, friendships, and occasional lapses into a fantasy life that each had created through reading. In the vicinity of the family's orchard, there



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lived several semi-deranged loners so customary in Israeli society of the time, who acted as onlookers and sometimes helpers of sorts for this dysfunctional family.

Thus burdened by family dysfunction, rather than simply writing a straightforward memoir, Schwartz chose the extremely unusual route of making use of an auxiliary narrative to help him create his own text of a learned commentary combined with a minute, more discursive than literary, personal memoir. The narrative through which he rewrites his own was created over twenty years ago by the well known native Israeli author Ruth Almog (b. 1936), who in the early 1990s devoted a short story collection to portraying mostly displaced and miserable individuals (many of them children) and groups of the early decades of the new State of Israel. In one of the stories in the collection, called "*Gamadim al hapijama*" ['Dwarfs Pajamas'] (which might better be called a novellette since it is thirty-pages long), Almog reshaped the family anecdotes and stories she had heard from Schwartz, her editor for that collection (Ruth Almog, *Tikun Omanuti* [*Artistic Emendation*]; Jerusalem: Keter, 1993, 21-47; fully cited in *Makhela hungarit*, 10-42).

Twenty years after the publication of Almog's *Artistic Emendation*, Schwartz in his tantalizing scholarly-memoir responds to, fills in, and at times objects to Almog's story, which is also or primarily his own (for a comparable case of self re-writing see: Péter Eszterházy, *Celestial Harmonies – a Novel* (Trans. Judith Sollosy); Sulphur Spring, TX: Ecco, 2004; [Hung. 2000]). Conspicuously alluding to Roland Barthes' monumental interpretation of Honore de Balzac's novelette "Sarasine" (Roland Barthes, *S/Z – an Essay* (trans. Richard Miller); New York: Hill and Wang, 1985 [French 1974], 221-254), Schwartz divides Almog's "Dwarfs Pajamas" into what Barthes called *lexias* ('discourse units'). Unlike "Sarasine," which is a baffled lover's account of his uncertainty about the sex/gender of his beloved opera singer, Schwartz's reflective/reflexive family saga is rather the cry of a scorched-scarred victim of a hideous childhood, who nonetheless and despite all has in the end made it to success and renown.

In his memoir, close to thirty, twenty, and ten years after the deaths of -- respectively -- his father, older sister, and mother, Schwartz once again conjures up their "souls," or narrative voices and focuses, as well as their accusations and defense speeches, using a distinct graphic font to represent each of them. He accuses his parents of conducts that nowadays would have made State and welfare authorities remove the children from their parents' custody. The father is verbally and emotionally blocked, physically abusive to both children and sexually (albeit not fully) to his daughter, called Maya in Almog's novelette and Naomi in Schwartz's memoir and in real life. The mother regularly deserts her family for weeks and months, going on fancy cruises on her own or with occasional partners and sponsors, or visiting her American relatives. Pathetically coquettish in a mock Central European style, she thrives on many men's (or any man's) gallant-to-slavish admiration-to-servitude for both her feminine self-esteem and emotional sense of being at the center of attention.

Interestingly, the mother's experiences in the Holocaust and resultant traumatic imprints are depicted entirely differently by Almog and by Schwartz in their respective narratives (regarding his father's experiences of the time, about which the father himself hardly ever spoke, Schwartz knows very little and has only recently discovered documents stating that his father was one of the 1,600 lucky Jews to be allowed to leave German-occupied Budapest to Switzerland on the "Kasztner Train" on June 30, 1944). In the first narrative, the mother is a camp survivor who becomes terrorized and frenzied-stiff whenever her husband utters, to his sadistic amusement, the German march order *Rechts* ['Right'] and/or *Links* ['Left'] (a clear homage to the short story "Hasafam" ['The Moustache'] by the Hungarian-Israeli writer Avigdor

Hameiri (1890-1970), in his collection entitled *Haguf hageoni - tet-zayin sipurim* [The Genius Body - Sixteen Stories]; Tel Aviv: Tarmil, 1980, 37-41; for more on Hameiri, see: Ilana Rosen, "Fragments of a Hungarian Past" in this issue). Following each such scene, the mother, Lutz/Luci (her name in Almog's novelette) leaves the house for months, punishing her husband Isidor and neglecting their children.

In Schwartz's memoir, by contrast to Almog's story, the mother is not a Nazi camp survivor but a former Budapest Jew, and rather than letting herself be wrought up by her husband, she reminisces, almost bragging, that during the westward "death march" from Budapest to Austria, she successfully caught the attention and flirted with "a German officer" (85), or more probably, an Arrow Cross militia guard marching her group of Jews to their death. Inevitably, this too is a *Shoah* trope, alluding this time to the Israeli young reader's best-seller *The Summer of Aviya: A Story*, by the famous theater actress Gila Almagor (trans. Hillel Halkin; London: Collins, 1991), in which the heroine's Polish-Jewish would-be partisan mother "simply stunned [the Germans] with her beauty," while her squad laid explosives under an approaching ammunition train (36). In the Almog version, the Hungarian-Jewish-Israeli Lutz/Luci often teases her husband insinuating that their son (called Gyora in Almog's novelette and Yigal in Schwartz's book and real life) is possibly not his child, perhaps as a way to retaliate for her husband's pervert attraction to their daughter (which figures in both narratives), to whom she is herself an indifferent mother. In Schwartz's version of the story his mother makes Gyora/Yigal her *kedvenc* [Hungarian: 'favorite'], fondly calling him *mókuska* ['little squirrel'] and taking him along to cafés and other pleasure places where she meets with her beaux, thus making her son, too, one of her secret partners for her sexual escapades.

A Hungarian Chorus is a manifold co-text, inter-text and intra-text transmitted through a meticulously crafted cacophony of genres and languages. Among the Hungarian-Culture texts presented or embedded in it are the following: the juxtaposition, as a dual language motto, of the Hungarian children song *Kicsit szomorúság* ['Slightly Sad'], by Iván Szenes (1924-2005), with the Hebrew well-known beginning-of-school song "Michael," by Polish-Jewish author Itzhak Katzenelson (1885-1944), who was murdered in Auschwitz (un-numbered page); a word-game riddle about *Biztos* ['sure,' 'certain'] and *Piszkos* ['dirty'] going into the sea suddenly "interrupting" the delineation of the deportation of Schwartz's Nyíregyháza family to Auschwitz in 1944 (68), perhaps alluding to Jews being called *büdös* ['stinking']; references to the sounds and tastes of this Hungarian-Israeli family, e.g. the author's being called *Yigálkám* by his mother (72), or his father's preparing of *körözött* ['rounded,' cream cheese tinted reddish by paprika] and *katonák* ['soldiers,' meaning uniformly cut oblong pieces of a bread slice with a spread on it] for their gloomy trio dinners (141, all in Hebrew transcription). All these instances interact with or counter-balance the author's more routine (for the 1950s and 1960s) and widespread (in his book) integrations of Israeli and European or North-American teenage adventure classics functioning as dramatic relief at the peak of pain and sorrow (including a chain of national heroism texts, crowned by Sándor Petöfi's (1823-1849) "*Nemzeti Dal*" ['National Anthem,' 1848] in Hungarian, followed by a Hebrew unauthorized translation, 123).

Of special interest with regard to cultural transformation and "translation" are two issues (here one might aptly think of Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation – a Life in a New Language*; Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1989). The first relates to the author's aural, child's or childish, conception of the Hungarian language and of the broken Hebrew of his parents and other immigrants around him. This issue significantly concerns Almog's work as well, as she ascribes a distinctly Hungarianized, very broken, pidgin Hebrew accent to mother Lutz/Luci but not to

father Isidor, who speaks little but proper Hebrew. The only figure that comes close to Lutz/Luci in this regard is her sister Magda (a figure that never existed in the family's real life, as none of their relatives ever came to live in Israel), who comes over to take care of the neglected children and talk sense into their crazed father when Lutz/Luci is away, and who tells the children stories and fairytales in minimal Hebrew. In one of the few lighthearted moments in this cheerless novelette, little Gyora fails to understand why Snow-White's *em horeget* ['stepmother'] constantly *horegt* ['kills'] everyone around her; with the real reason being the difficulty of Hungarian speaking Israelis to pronounce correctly these slightly different guttural sounds (191). Of more dramatic and psychological weight is the recurrent reference of many figures in the Almog novelette, as well as of Schwartz in his re-reading of it, to this initially strange sounding Hungarian word *törpe* ['dwarf'], which is later found out to mean, "simply" (Aunt Magda's most used adjective), that Isidor is "not very tall" (96, 161; as is also visually evident by the real-life couple's wedding picture, 192-193).

Apart from its virtuous, consciously eclectic, hyper use of all these voices and sources, *A Hungarian Chorus* is remarkable for its portrayal of Holocaust survivors as human stumps, forever mentally and morally flawed, forever disastrous and poisonous to their offspring and surroundings. Neither are their offspring, including the writer, spared of the wrath of his criticism for perpetuating the parents' legacy of egotistic self-survival, self-destructive mechanisms, and imminent potential of hurt toward their own beloved. It would be naïve and imposed, so this reviewer feels, to end this review with any "and yet..." formulation, although clearly the author of this crisis-full moving misery-memoir has left his distinct mark in Israeli literature and scholarship. Instead, this reader of the inharmonious *Hungarian Chorus* wishes to look forward to Yigal Schwartz's sequel to it, in which he might tell us more of his mature life's deeds, adventures, and achievements, in spite of all evil prophecies.