

Obituary: Avot Yeshurun

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Yehiel Perlmutter (Avot Yeshurun), writer, born Niskhish Ukraine 19 September 1904, died 22 February 1992.

AVOT YESHURUN was a distinguished member of a generation of Israeli poets whose mother tongue was Yiddish but who managed to create an impressive body of modern poetry in Hebrew.

Yeshurun was born Yehiel Perlmutter in the small town of Niskhish in western Ukraine in 1904. When he was five his parents moved to Krasnystaw in East Poland. He emigrated to Palestine in 1935. Had he not done so he would have shared the fate of the rest of Krasnystaw's 2,000 Jews, who were murdered in Belsec concentration camp.

As a child he spent a great deal of time in his grandfather's home, imbibing the spirit of traditional Hasidic pietism. This patriarchal world remained one of the two main focuses of his artistic imagination. The other focus was the Arab and Bedouin milieu he encountered when he arrived in Palestine. Indeed, he wrote: "It was not Herzl or Weizmann who brought me to the Land of Israel but the Arab longshoreman who brought me from the ship to the Jaffa beach." This Arab, a black-bearded man, reminded him of his father. This kind of involuntary identification with the Arab informs much of Hebrew writing in the first three or four decades of this century. Zionism was, after all, predicated upon the idea that the experience of diaspora had formed the Jewish spirit, which could only be normalised by working the land of Israel and being a people like any other people.

In Palestine, against the backdrop of the intercommunal strife of the Mandate years, his poetry explored the natural affinity between the Jews and Arabs - two people formed historically from the same soil. After the destruction of European Jewry in the Second World War and the mass flight of Palestinian Arab refugees from Jewish-held territories in the Israeli War of Independence, Yeshurun came to believe that the European Jews and the Palestinians had one further thing in common: they were both victims.

A lover of puns, one of his central ideas was expressed in this rather remarkable line: "The spirit of ancient Israel is in the talis prayer shawl - Hebrew of every taal isma Hey! Listen to this - Arabic ." In other words, in the utterance of the most ordinary Palestinian can be found the soul of Israel.

In all, Yeshurun wrote some six volumes of poetry which are characterised by arguably the most idiosyncratic style in modern Hebrew poetry. He joyously flouted the tenets of Hebrew grammar and syntax as he strove to create a new idiom replete with Arabic and Yiddish loan-words: a linguistic melange which symbolises the shared destiny of Jews and Arab - both, as he puts it, "sentenced to the hard labour of endless longing".