CHAPTER 2

The Land of Israel as the Idealized Mother

"Ascending to the Land of Israel"

In late May 1908, the twenty-year-old Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes landed in Jaffa. The Hebrew date of his “ascent to the Land of Israel” was the end of the month of Iyar 5668, some ten days after Lag Ba’Omer of that Hebrew year, yet Agnon later claimed that he had “ascended to the Land of Israel” on Lag Ba’Omer. His loyal daughter and posthumous editor, the late Emuna Yaron, whose first name means “faith,” and who was named by her father to bolster his own Jewish religious faith when he lived in Germany, backed up this claim, even though she had no documentary proof for it.¹

The Israeli scholar Yitzhak Bakon² understood that the date of Agnon’s “first aliyah” was crucial to the understanding of his literary work:

This issue seems to be of special importance, for we see here a well-known phenomenon in the biographies of great writers: the blurring of the lines between biography and fiction. [...] We can see how traits belonging to a literary figure of an Agnon protagonist have penetrated the writer’s own biography. The formation of this trait in the figure of the protagonist begins with one of the early works, when the writer was sixteen years old, and continues through the work that was published in Hapo'el Hatsa'ir on its sixtieth anniversary. The first work, “Little Hero,” [...] carried the date of Lag Ba’Omer 5664 [...] There is a clear connection here between the boy’s sense of his future (or his dreams) and what is signified by the date of Lag Ba’Omer. The second work opens with the words “I came to the Land on Lag Ba’Omer in the Hebrew year 5667, that is, 1907."³

The false birth dates and immigration dates were part of the “false self” of the young writer, who pretended to be that which he was not; they were both an expression of his narcissistic grandiosity, including his fantasy of being the Messiah, and a defense against his unbearable feelings of non-being in his

---

² Yitzhak Bakon (1919–2013), Galicia-born Israeli literary scholar.
³ Agnon 1904; Agnon 1967; Bakon 1968; Barshai 1988, pp. 129–130; my translation.
fusional relationship with his mother. His writing was his *raison d'être*; it expressed his innermost conflicts and was his way of feeling that he existed. And, like “the Land of Israel,” the Hebrew language that he had embraced was his idealized adoptive mother.

An Adoptive “Father”

After his visit to Ottoman Palestine in 1907, the Zionist leader Arthur Ruppin, who was eleven years older than Agnon, painted a dismal picture of “the Land of Israel” in his letters to the Zionist Organization. Ruppin had been born in the East Prussian town of Rawitsch (now the Polish city of Rawicz) which would revert to Poland after the Great War of 1914–1918. Ruppin’s father had been a compulsive gambler who financially ruined his family, forcing Ruppin to drop out of school; yet he had conquered adversity and succeeded in obtaining a Ph.D. in political economy from the Martin Luther University of Halle. His culture was German, but he was a Jewish and Zionist leader who in 1908 settled in Palestine, opened the Zionist Office in Jaffa, and became known as “the father of the Yishuv.” In 1914, he saw a potential solution to the Jewish-Arab conflict in Palestine in the proposal to transfer Palestinian Arabs outside Palestine by buying land in Syria and selling it to them. One of Ruppin’s friends was Jacob Thon, who settled in Palestine in 1907 and founded the Jewish National Council of Palestine.

Arthur Ruppin would become a father figure to Agnon. Palestine at the time of Agnon’s arrival in 1908 was a backwater of the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire – poor, underdeveloped, plagued by malaria, trachoma, and many other diseases, ruled by an oppressive and corrupt regime, and harboring some fifty thousand Jews, mostly young immigrants from Eastern Europe, within a population of half a million Arabs, most of them poor peasants. In Istanbul, the “Young Turks” had staged a *coup d’état* which, on the one hand, brought constitutional reform and new liberties but, on the other hand, severely repressed all ethnic aspirations in the service of Ottoman nationalism. Seven years later the three Ottoman Muslim generals who had taken over the government, and who led the Ottoman “Committee of Union and Progress” that staged the

4 Arthur Ruppin (1876–1943), German-born Palestinian Jewish leader.
5 *Yishuv* (settlement) was the collective Hebrew name for the Jewish community of Palestine.
6 Jacob Thon (1886–1950), Austrian-Galician-born Palestinian Jewish leader.