

OF OSTRICHES AND QUEENS

Hillel Halkin

In praise of a forgotten Hebrew surrealist

A minor cultural event took place in Tel Aviv on December 12, when French Ambassador Alain Pierret presented the first bi-annual Menashe Levin Award, a 9,000-franc (app. \$1,770) prize for French-Hebrew translation, to Irit Akrabi, for her Hebrew rendition of Marguerite Yourcenar's "Hadrian's Memoirs."

Levin (1903-1981), long this country's leading French translator (among his more than 50 translations are works by Balzac, Flaubert, Diderot, Voltaire, Maurois, Malraux and Saint-Exupery), would no doubt have had mixed feelings about this. On the one hand, he knew well the chronic hunger for recognition—and for income—that plagues even the best translators, and would have been only too happy to help a fellow professional.

But he would also, I think, have been pained by the irony of a translation prize in his name, because, an often brilliant writer in his own right whose slim body of fiction has yet to be properly assessed, he suffered for years from having to eke out a meager living from the work of others instead of writing himself. Incredible though it seems, this former Polish yeshivah student who taught himself French so well that he even wrote an unpublished novel in it never had 9,000 francs to journey to Paris, and died without setting foot in France.

A Menashe Levin Prize for Forgotten Writers; or for Needy Hebrew Surrealists; or even for Outstanding Mischief in Fiction—any of these might have pleased him more.

Levin himself, tongue in cheek, described his style as "subrealism," which was perhaps his way of saying that, as far as he was concerned, up and down were the same direction. "Sur" or "sub," however, he was in the late 1920s and 30s (in later years he all but stopped writing because of translation commitments) a unique figure on the Hebrew literary scene, one influenced not—as were most of his contemporaries—by the Jewish classics and the Russian romantics but by the French Dadaists and

Continental expressionism.

While older men like Agnon and Hazzaz were still writing about Jewish life in Eastern Europe, and colleagues like Shlonsky and Alterman, with whom he worked on the literary periodical "Turim," were making poetry of the new world emerging in Palestine, Levin was composing stories about gypsy guitarists and blue circus horses, or else about watching Tarzan movies in Tel Aviv that had snakes "wriggling in air as though in a symbolist painting," a "biblical lion" that "tears



Menashe Levin: Time to give him a prize of his own

through the jungle, eclipsing the moon," and ostriches that were "winged camels whose feathers have fanned the queens of Asia and the sad Romantics of Europe."

Levin's "major" work, published to a total lack of acclaim in 1938, is a mad-cap little book called "A Hundred Nights in Old Jaffa." A kind of narrated film script set in Jaffa and New York and even briefly on the moon, its cast of dozens includes an Arab goldfish vendor, a Macedonian belly dancer, a bewitched donkey, a mad scientist called Professor X, Charlie Chaplin, Don Quixote, the Devil, the Devil's wife and Josephine Baker. There are many ingredients in this Oriental witches' brew, one of them being a slapstick meditation on the wear-and-tear on art by its consumers. Professor X indeed has a catalogued collection of once-valuable aesthetic artifacts that are now so much second-hand junk:

"Here is the apple that the snake knocked out of Eve's mouth: Through a microscope you can still see her teeth-

marks on it. Here is one of Cleopatra's gloves, turned black as old bronze. (It's no wonder: All the kings of Africa have put their lips to it.) Here is the heart of Scheherazade, as soiled from love as an old playing card. Here is Don Quixote's horse—cast in plaster, of course: The original reached the stratosphere long before the scientists. Here is a black lily sniffed by Dante and Baudelaire. Here are the wax wings of that dilettante da Vinci, melted away like his frescoes. Here is Paganini's violin: Its strings are snapped, but touching them can still trigger a musical disaster."

Levin did not always go in for such high jinks. He could write quietly and tenderly too. "Tishrei," a beautiful story about his childhood in a Polish shtetl, begins: "My father gave his cigar an absent-minded flick. At once the dawn turned to ashes in the windows . . . Father blew out the candle in the candlestick, casting a gray leaf-fall on the path between the thick woods of commentary on the sides of his Talmud and the open field of the text."

The father's fingers flicking the gray dawn into being, the comparison of the crowded Rashi script to a wood whose fallen leaves are in fact a sudden shadow on a margin of the page (the time of year is the Hebrew month Tishrei, autumn), the way these images are harmonized by several quick strokes of chiaroscuro: To read these lines is to watch a master at work. Ten years after his death, it is time to give Menashe Levin a translation prize of his own by publishing him in English and other foreign languages so that he can have the wider audience he deserves. □

AN UNLIKELY ZIONIST

Eric Silver

Crossman: The Pursuit of Power, by Anthony Howard. Jonathan Cape; 370 pp; £16.99.

The Athenaeum is the kind of London club where you would expect to see Sir Humphrey, the honey-tongued civil servant of the British television series "Yes, Prime Minister," plotting the downfall of his boss's latest brainchild. You need to be at least a bishop to get elected. Richard Crossman, two years out of Harold Wilson's government, invited me there for a farewell drink one rainy