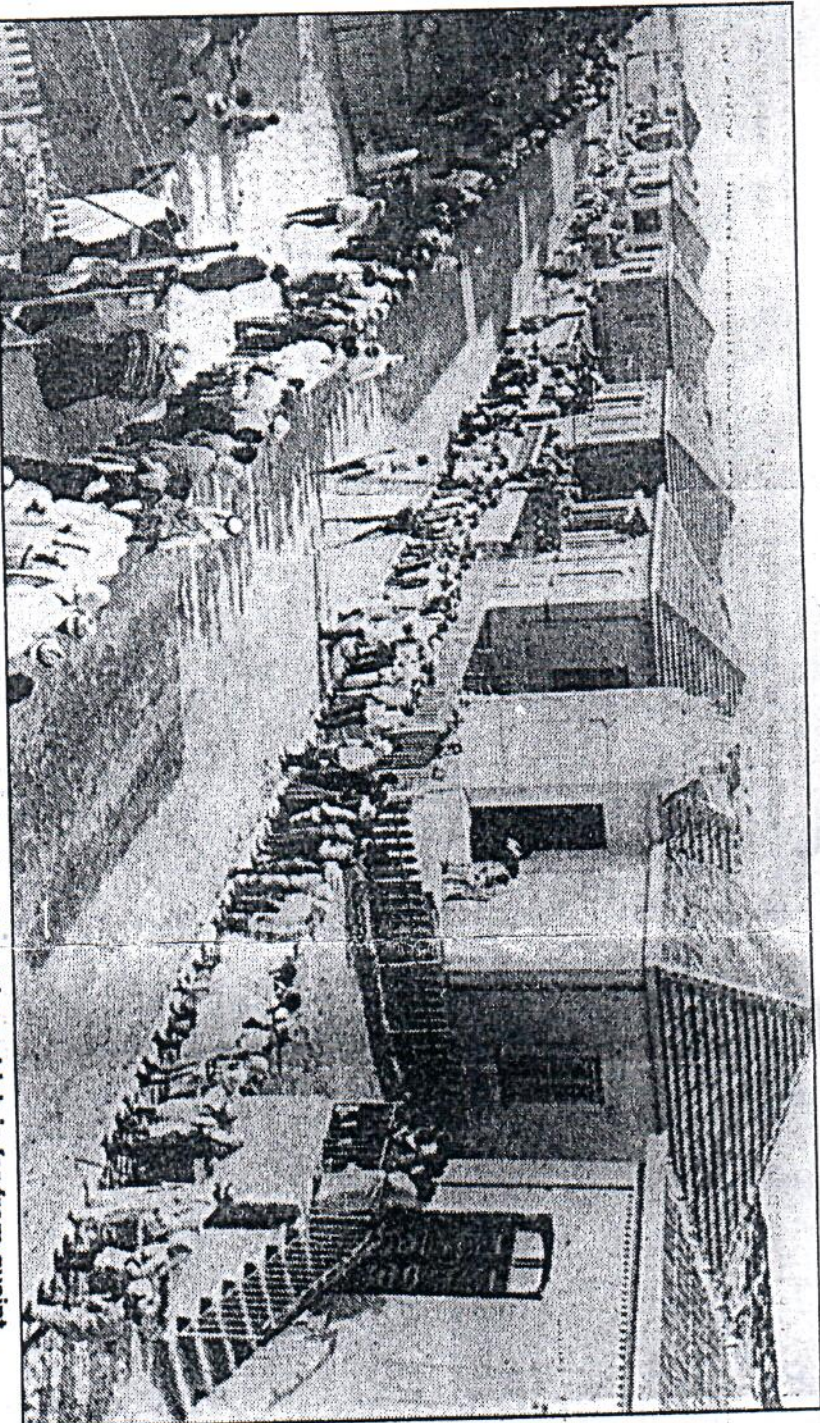


Past Tense Look Back in Rancor

In a posthumously
published
novel/memoir,
author Menashe
Levin describes
the tough life of a
penniless writer in
the early years of
Tel Aviv.



Tel Aviv in the 1920s; Menashe Levin paints a literary portrait of the city at that time which is far from quaint.

By Sraya Shapiro

Author Menashe Levin, who died in 1981, was a onetime fixture of the Tel Aviv literary scene best known for a series of surrealist short stories — ultimately collected in *A Hundred Nights in Old Jaffa* — and countless translations of classic novels and plays. During his lifetime, he refused to publish his first novel, and only now — almost 70 years after it was written — has *Holot Kehulim* (“Blue Sand Dunes”), been brought out by Hakibbutz Hameuhad. It may be the first narrative of any length describing life in “Little Tel Aviv” of the 1920s, and reads more like a memoir than fiction.

Levin was then a young man with literary ambitions, recently arrived from Poland, a master of the Hebrew language and full of admiration for European art and letters. He wrote the novel about himself and the company he kept back then. It is easy to understand why he chose to suppress this work: had the people Levin wrote about read the book, they would certainly have resented his candid descriptions of them, regardless of what names he assigned the characters based upon them.

Surely, Levin himself would have been embarrassed to have had Eliezer Steinman, former editor of the literary weekly *Turim*, read *Holot Kehulim*. Steinman, whose alter ego is named Brin in the novel, is shown denouncing a figure clearly meant to be Avraham Shlonski, the revered “proletarian poet” as “this versifier who has devoted himself entirely and without humility, without modesty, as if he were Shabtai Zvi, a messiah of the modern proletariat. He is nothing but an impostor, a false prophet carrying on a harangue about the real wretched and the hungry. We must eradicate them like poisoned mice likely to spread a plague.”

Levin applied his keen sense of observation to describing in invaluable detail the impoverished bohemian life in the early years of the sun-baked “first Hebrew city.” Dan Racine — the name of the hero Levin based on himself — lives in a dreary room with walls unplastered, cobwebs in the corners, and just three books sitting on his one chair: Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* and the Bible. Racine’s breakfast consists solely of bread and grapes, which he shares with an unexpected visitor, an old friend. (A hungry Racine will later be grateful to the wife of a fellow writer who treats him to tea and cookies.)

The novel is set in a Tel Aviv that is still largely sand, a place where Beduin women sell figs and dates which they hawk in

mournful dirges, “like biblical mourners.” One woman puts her hamper beside her and suckles her lean infant.

Racine talks with a teacher at the nearby school, who confesses he does not like the fact that his pupils hail from many lands.

THE PROTAGONIST makes some money by helping a physician whose literary ambitions do not match his talent, and who depends on Racine to improve his writing. As it happens, however, the doctor is often unavailable and Racine is left to deplore his misery in talking to an artist who is unhappy because the man who had ordered a portrait from him is an absolute brute, unable to appreciate true art.

Racine also calls on the wife of a veteran writer who, at 30, knows beyond doubt that her youthful dream to become an opera singer will never come true, and spends her energy preparing food for her husband and children.

Passing by the beautiful house of “the national poet” — which could be none other than the great Haim Nahman Bialik — Racine does not hide his disrespect for “a man who is rich enough to see to his own well-being.” Racine sees him watering his garden, and thinks: “After his poetic trees shed all their leaves, he is free to enjoy the quieter joys of speaking at opening ceremonies of new exhibitions and new theatrical performances, and giving receptions at his beautiful home to people, among whom

no intellectuals exist at all.”

Calling on his friend, the artist Frank — based most likely on his contemporary Yitzhak Frenkel — Racine naturally discusses about art. He hears Frank’s devastating opinion about another artist “who paints dancing figures holding Torah scrolls” — a reference perhaps to the near-legendary Baruch Agadati.

Frank describes his former life in Paris, where he had to work as a railroad porter, but was happy to absorb the artistic atmosphere of the city. Frank’s wife clearly does not share the painter’s views; her smile is bitter, her grumbling voice clearly indicates her suffering. Pity the fate of a woman who marries an artist, she whines, whose talent does nothing to benefit her. “In my opinion, he must take a job as everybody else and paint in his free time.”

“Lend me a few grush. Don’t ask why,” Racine begs Frank.

“Impossible,” he replies. “I only get one grush a day from my wife for cigarettes.”

In despair, Racine goes to the social benefits office, but funds are limited and Racine arrives too late to get a share.

Levin does not hide his disrespect for the upper levels of Tel Aviv society of the period. “Engineers, doctors, highly-placed officials and society women, whose standard of living he envied, were those whose complete contempt for art gave them the right to choose a beauty queen for the upcoming Purim celebrations,” sneers Racine. ■