

DRAFT—not for publication¹

Masada, Cosmopolitan Rome, or Messianic Judea?

"Flavius-Feuchtwanger" and the Turmoil of Mandate Palestine, 1923-1945

Yael S. Feldman, NYU

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The powerful presence of ‘Josephus’ in the ethos of pre-state Israel is usually attributed to two textual events: the publications of both Simhoni’s Hebrew translation of *The Jewish War* [1923] and Yitzhak Lamdan’s dramatic poem *Masada* [1923-26].² Much ink, including my own,³ has been spent on the impact of Masada as a symbol and a challenge for the new Yishuv, eager for national myths of heroism-even-unto-death when necessary.

Less dramatic but still substantial was the role played by Josephus’s work in the arduous but happy task of getting to know the land, its geography and history [*yedi’at ha-aretz*]. This impact had begun in fact already with the pioneers of 2nd Aliya (1904-1914), whose “second bible” was the Russian Josephus,⁴ as recorded in the writings and memoirs of Yizhak Ben Zvi and Rachel Yanait, among others.⁵ It

¹ This paper represents an early stage of a new research project focusing on the image and reception of Josephus through his various cultural representations in Hebrew.

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⁴ Newly translated in 1901... Lapidus...

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continued throughout the century with the well known archeological discoveries from Masada and Gamla to Herodion and Ir David.⁶

My paper focuses however on a different, under-explored aspect of Josephus's presence in Mandate Palestine during the 1930s-40s.

The currently available research of this period amply documents that 'Masada' reached the zenith of its impact -- especially during the war years -- as an emblem of *resistance* in both Europe and Palestine.⁷ However, the application of this concept clearly followed Yosippon's revised vision of the "final battle" at Metzada -- rather than Josephus's original version of the Masada zealots' mass suicide.⁸ As I have argued elsewhere, this mostly unacknowledged subtle shift of source apparently took place through the absorption of Lamdan's poem -- which was read avidly and even staged by the youth movements in the ghettos, thus fostering the ideal of fighting the Nazis "to the last man."⁹ The impact of Yosippon/ Lamdan's vision can be detected also in the Yishuv's 1942 desperate 'secret' plan for a final-defense battle on the Carmel, which was named alternatively Metzada or Musa Dahg...¹⁰

My main argument in the present paper is that the fostering of this dual vision was accompanied by the emergence of a different aspect of Josephus's legacy: his conflicted persona. A perusal of the Hebrew press of the first half of the 20th century shows an intriguing process of personalization: whereas earlier on we find mostly

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¹⁰ For more on this link see my forthcoming... + relevant biblio

treatments of concepts and themes derived from Josephus's *oeuvre*, from the 1930s on the same or similar themes were viewed through the prism of the *author's life choices*... Thus a Friday-night lecture given in Krakow in December 1904 was titled in general terms -- "*Hazerem hale'umi vehazerem hakosmopoliti*" – but drew its examples from Josephus's work.¹¹ Same is true for a 1926 report in *Davar*, "*Milhamot hamered hagadol be-Emek Izrael*."¹² By the 1940s however Josephus *the man* was put on a much-publicized public trial in Tel Aviv, *Mishpat Flavius*.¹³ As can be surmised from the shift in naming from Josephus to Flavius, the trial's focus was the historical persona's imputed betrayal of his national identity and his adoption of Roman cosmopolitanism, signaled by his choice of a Roman name.

Within a few months, this very crucible was highlighted in a new play, *Yerushalayim ve-Romi: Yosifus Flavius*, put on stage by the Yishuv's foremost theater, Habimah, with choice actors in the main roles. Though the show received a rather lukewarm reception,¹⁴ the attention to Josephus Flavius, both the man and his life and work, continued to grow exponentially throughout 1942 – as attested by public lectures, radio discussions, staged radio readings, and reports about new archeological discoveries...¹⁵

1942 was of course the traumatic year in which WWII almost reached the gates of Mandate Palestine.¹⁶ This was also the year that brought to its shores the first

¹¹ Given by Lazar, the editor of the Hebrew journal *Hamitzpeh*. *Hamitzpeh*, December 9 1904, 1. [Check if timing is Hanukkah related...]

¹² *Davar*, 23 July, 1926, 8.

¹³ Hatzofeh, Dec 30, 1940, 2. Cf. William Thackery, *Josephus, the Man and his Work*, 1926.

¹⁴ *Yerushalayim ve-Romi: Yosifus Flavius* [a play in eleven scenes] premiered on March 26 1941 and performed 42 times. Reviews...

¹⁵ Notices in *Davar*, April–September, 1942. See the Metzada-Mussa Dahg plan above.

¹⁶ *Hamashkif*, June 29, 1942, 2. + critical biblio

refugees of the slaughter in Europe and with them the Yishuv's earliest awareness of the unprecedented dimensions of the new *hurban*.¹⁷

Given this timing, the play *Yerushalayim ve Romi* deserves our attention, as its curious ideational provenance as well as publication history raise some intriguing questions about inter-cultural transmission in general and the changing perception of Josephus during W-W-II Palestine in particular.

The play was written by Natan Bistrizky-Agmon (1896-1980) -- a most charismatic third-Aliya propagandist at home and abroad, a prolific writer of (mostly) historical plays, and a translator-editor. The play was originally published in 1938 in a small-book format¹⁸ and was received warmly in the press.¹⁹ The reviewers were quick to point out the author's general preoccupation with the Second Temple period and its self-destructive Messianic impulse, and questioned the contemporary motives behind this fascination. They praised the play for its dramatic ["Shakespearean"] power and for the new light it sheds on its *two* tragic protagonists – Ben-Matityahu and Berenika [!]. They treated cautiously however its potential 'message': "I don't know," says Rivka Gurfein, writing in summer 1939 against the background of the 'winds of war', "if Bistrizki meant to pass a historical verdict [*mishpat histori*], to outline a path, to imply a way out. In any case, drawing analogies is an almost impossible task, as it may take us to a dead end, to confusion [*mevukha*]."²⁰

¹⁷ Rubashov, 1943... + critical biblio

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¹⁹ Rivka Gurfein, Efrayim Tzoref.....

²⁰ ALL TRANSLATIONS FROM THE Hebrew are mine.

The threatening issue of historical analogies forcefully surfaced in the reception of the performed play two years later. Apparently, the dramatic power of the written word did not pass the test of the stage. Bistritzky's *Jerusalem and Rome* seem to have surprised – and annoyed—his audiences with a new twist on the familiar trope of nationalism vs. cosmopolitanism. His Yosef ben-Mattiyahu, the morally-dubious survivor of the siege of Yodefath, pleads with Vespasian for his life not only by welcoming him as a Caesar-in-the-making but also by professing a belief that "the East expects [or perhaps wishes for, *metzapeh*] to fuse [or unify] with the West"... [Scene 3, p. 43]. And why? "They have power but we have prophecy," he later explains to King Agrippa [46]... Moreover, it was this prophetic power, he avers, that enabled him to suspend the taking over of Jerusalem by Vespasian... This suspension is critical because as long as the unthinkable is deferred there is a chance for *reaching peace with Rome*... [47, my emphasis].

No wonder some reviewers understood the play as a transparent though unconvincing attempt to push forward the political platform of Labor Zionism -- the need for exercising self-control ["*havlagah*"] in the struggle against the British Mandate...²¹

Moreover, as Ben Matityahu's interlocutors change, he slightly modifies his tune. Encountering Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakai, a recent escapee from the besieged Jerusalem, he implores him to return to the city and try to stop the "insanity" wrought by "the sectarians." Trying to convince him, he argues that despite her conquests Rome is slowly falling apart from within because "she lacks an Idea"... But so is Jerusalem: each of the city-states is run by one-sided madmen. "It is time

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to *unify Rome and Jerusalem*, the Rule and the Idea [*hashilton vehara'ayon*]," so that "our chaotic world will have a wholesome leadership [Scene 4, 53]." "WE must broker between the two," he pleads, and put an end "to the war of the Jews against the world" [54].

One can only imagine how "*lehavi sof lemilhemet hayehudim ba'olam*" must have shocked the average Jewish viewer in 1941 Palestine... Nor is this idea easy to digest today, even after realizing that the author might have been playing with the implied meaning of Flavius's Greek title, "The Jewish War" [*Iudaico (spl?) polemo*].²²

The second element that may have aroused the ire or disease of the average spectator was the sympathetic treatment and heroization of Berenika, King Agrippa's sister and historically a secondary character of this drama, who has been much maligned in ancient sources, Jewish and Christian alike.²³ In contrast to most of these sources, Bistrizky exempts her of both the incestuous sins attributed to her by Latin historians,²⁴ and the charge of betrayal – because of an alleged love affair with Titus – that have stained her image in the Jewish tradition.²⁵

In what seems an ingenious psychological insight, the playwright fashions her character as a mature woman genuinely in love – for the first time in her unhappy life of arranged royal marriages -- with Titus, the youthful Prince and Commander, who is no less passionately attached to her elusive feminine mystery. This duo emotional investments allow Bistrizky to entrust her with an impossible mission,

²² Liza Ulmann, trans., Intro....

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²⁵ + the reversal that took place in pre-modern/modern renditions of her story... different emphases

unprecedented in any of the classical sources: the extraction from Titus of a promise to keep the temple safe, to make sure it will not be destroyed even if the city is conquered (Scenes 6-7, 9).

This reinvention did not go unnoticed by the play's reviewers. They welcomed enthusiastically the way in which the playwright salvaged Berenika's tarnished reputation, seeing her as "the most artistic, classic, tragic character in this drama" (Tzoref). A few years later, the theatre critics seem to have disagreed. As predicted by Gurfein, "the new perception [fashioned by the playwright] of the character is at war in our mind with the old image to which we are used to, with which we agree.... And even if the new perception does not always take hold in our heart, it does shake up received notions and arouses great discomfort."²⁶

Gurfein was on target in her misgivings. A play which in 1938-39 got her thinking abstractly about the possibility of perceptions changing with time and hindsight knowledge, indeed aroused much discomfort in the minds of theatre goers in 1941. The question is why.

To answer this question we have to go back to the early 1930s – the decade that saw the publication – and immediate translations -- of the first two volumes of the most elaborate literary treatment to date of both the man and his work – Lion Feuchtwanger's *Josephus Trilogy*.²⁷ This is not the place for a full account of the

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multifaceted literary career of this German Jewish author, who must have been a voracious reader just as he was a prolific writer.²⁸ Suffice it to say that the scope and range of his oeuvre testifies to a curious mind, deep learning, and a fertile imagination – a combination that enabled Dr. Feuchtwanger to reinvent our hero and his past as both deeply embedded in his historical time[s] and place[s] and as a reflection of our – or rather his creator's – present realities. Since Feuchtwanger was also among the first to respond forcefully in his writing to Nazi propaganda, there is no need to 'suspect' the disquieting analogies between his historical rewriting and the present; they are certainly there, and with full intention, reflecting “Feuchtwanger-Flavius”’s conflicts in the face of rising National Socialism and the impending loss of his beloved, Weimar- style cosmopolitanism.

The first two volumes of the Trilogy -- *The Jewish War* and *The Sons* (1932, 1935) -- were quickly translated to Hebrew (as well as to English).²⁹ I suspect however that they might have been read in Palestine in German as well. Not surprisingly, the only Hebrew review I have found so far critiqued the first volume for over-'modernizing' its subject matter and especially for reading into the past contemporary issues plaguing the Jewish Diaspora of his day. These "exilic motifs," argues the reviewer, "falsify the ancient realities of our people." Among them he counts "the tendency to distinguish between matter and spirit, and to fashion Judaism as an *abstract spirit* (15)."³⁰

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²⁹ Hebrew: 1932, 1936; Eng: 1932, 1935.

³⁰ Shmueli, "*Milhamot hayehudim*," *Moznaim*,... Nov 25, 1932, 14-15. Thanks to...

In view of this critique, I can only imagine how disturbed this reviewer (among others) must have been upon reading the second volume, *Habanim*,³¹ which appeared a couple of years later. It was in this part of the story, after *hurban habayit*, that Feuchtwanger lets his hero search for existential solutions in a post-destruction diaspora world. It is here, in cosmopolitan Rome that Feuchtwanger's Flavius [or F-F] passes through different options of being in the world. In fact, the titles alone of the 5 books that comprise this volume tell the full story: The Writer; The Man; The Father; The Nationalist; The Citizen of the World.

For the attentive reader, the last stage should come as no surprise. Already in the first volume Josephus has celebrated his metamorphosis into Flavius Josephus by composing a 'Psalm' that "would later be called," says the text, 'A Psalm for the Citizen of the World'.³² Here, a plea to God for a license to sing the praises of the wide open universe is answered in the most surprising manner: the divine voice encourages him and humans in general to "waste themselves" over all corners of the world, over all seas and continents... Moreover: attachment to one land is declared an "enslavement," since "Not Zion is the name of the kingdom I vowed to you, but rather Cosmos."

F-F's next psalm, titled "A Psalm about the Self," takes his cosmopolitanism a step forward. Deploing the fact that he must choose, must undertake a specific ethnic/national identity, he expresses his wish to be himself, to be just *a self*, an individual without the constraints of a group identity...³³

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³² *Milhemet hayehudim* [The Jewish War], trans. Lichtenboim, 294-96. Repeated, with title, in *Habanim* [The Sons], trans. Lichtenboim, 14-15. [check question of language of composition in the German...]

³³ *Habanim*, trans. Lichtenboim, 241-42.

These poetic ideals notwithstanding, F-F continues to strive to impact the Roman world around him in very practical ways. Rather than practicing the somewhat solipsistic mode of being his psalms preach, he constantly challenges the limits of his existence as a Jewish-Roman citizen of the second class, doing his utmost to impress the majority culture with the past achievements of his now-beleaguered people, and raising his son on the best of two cultures so that eventually ‘the wisdom of Shem will dwell in the tents of Rome’ ...³⁴

If this ideal merger sounds familiar, it is no accident. I suspect that it was this re-imagined Flavius that had been the unacknowledged impetus behind the new perception of Yosef ben Matityahu fashioned by Bistrizky in his 1938 play. I also suspect that he made up with his courage for what he lacked in artistic originality. If we consider that only a few years earlier the Hebrew translation of Josephus's own autobiography, *Hayye Yosef*,³⁵ was rejected tersely by its reviewer ("we will not give Josephus any prizes..."),³⁶ we may be able to appreciate the role of Bistrizky's play as a cultural transmitter in those turbulent years.

But there is more: Bistrizky also transmitted to Hebrew some of Feuchtwanger's original reinvention of Bereniki. Feuchtwanger was in fact the first to redeem her from her historical double indemnity for incest and treason by allowing Titus to be infatuated with her just as she was with him. In his version, theirs is a psychologically wrought and deep mutual attraction, with all the romantic ups and downs we associate with this concept, rather than a fleeting affair. Moreover, he

³⁴ Cf. Bialik [‘enter the beauty of Jepheth into the tents of Shem...’]

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³⁶ *Lo nakhtir shum ketarim lerosh...* Ezra Reichert, reviewing *Hayee Yosef* in *Do'ar Hayom*, January 13, 1933, p. 3.

endows Bereniki with special feelings for the Temple, making her an independent active agent [rather than a humble messenger of the people, who was derided by the Roman procurator Florus, according to Josephus³⁷] in the attempt to save it from destruction. To justify these feelings he plays on the Hebrew proximity of *habayit/ Beit hamikdash* [home/ temple], suggesting that the Second Temple court was her childhood home, where she had ostensibly played as a child.³⁸ He thus doubles the psychological motivation for her willingness to risk her relationship with Titus by her desperate plea to spare the temple even if all else is lost, extracting from him a promise that he is unable to keep despite his 'good intentions' ... with disastrous consequences for both of them, not to mention Judea.³⁹

It should be clear by now why I believe that Feuchtwanger's novels were responsible for the new preoccupation with Josephus the man and his world in Jewish Palestine, despite the reserved reception of his novels. This reservation was somewhat nuanced only with the publication of the *Josephus Trilogy* third volume, *The Day will Come*.⁴⁰ Published only in 1945, in Feuchtwanger's American place of refuge/exile and after the devastating war instigated by his home country was over, this fascinating novel deserves an analysis all of its own. It is rife with curious connections between Roman political and religious history and 20th-century political realities and political theory [!]. This applies in particular to two major themes that run through the novel: the general rise of popular Jews-hatred and the struggle of the loathed

³⁷ Goodman, R&J, 361.

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³⁹ Titus's psychology double layered too [the workings of Freudian UC] etc Cf. Goodman, R&J, 420-21

⁴⁰ 1944/1945

Caesar DDD – Dominus ac Deus Domitianus – to keep the old regime and Roman religion alive under new pressures from rising Christianity and old pressures from rebellious Judea.⁴¹ Curiously, DDD's shrewd attempts to understand the elusive staying power of the post-destruction, Jabneh-led Judea and its formless, unseen God are replete with echoes of Carl Schmitt's 1930s "political theology"...⁴² Despite the hilarious anachronism, I find the application quite apt, unfortunately for our times as well, especially in the analysis of Jewish Messianism....⁴³

None of this rich tapestry seems however to have impressed its war-weary readers in Mandate Palestine. This volume received more reviews than its prequels, only because it finally proved right the Zionist critique of Diaspora and Jewish Cosmopolitanism. The titles of the reviews run the gamut from "*Feuchtwanger hozer bitshuvah*" and "*Hazar el 'amo*" to "*Hayehudi hazaken*."⁴⁴ They are tinged with a certain tone of gloating at the author who in the 1940s was forced to acknowledge – through the life and death he invented for the old Josephus -- the failure of his cosmopolitan dream of the 1930s. Indeed, Feuchtwanger knew no compassion in his final judgment. Against the messianic promise of the title he sends the bereft and beaten Flavius back to Judea, where he finds a dishonorable death when joining a newly ignited Messianic revolt....

⁴¹ Goodman, 551-557

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