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Introduction

Yehoshua Ozjasz Thon was a central and important personality in modern Jewish history in Poland. Since the turn of the twentieth century, he was a central figure for Kraków Jewry as a rabbi and a preacher, an educator, a philosopher and sociologist, a man of letters, a thinker, and a social leader. In interwar Poland he was an essential and significant person for the whole Jewish population in Poland as an intellectual, a publicist, a politician, a deputy to the Polish Sejm, and a Zionist theoretician and activist. During his life and after his death he was well-known and was perceived as a central actor in the intellectual, social, and political life of the Jews in Poland.¹ Nevertheless, in our days he is neglected and forgotten. I believe that this fascinating thinker should be rescued from oblivion. The purpose of this book is to bring back the memory of this complex personality, to portray his multi-faceted thinking, and to shed light on his ideas which were the foundation for his widespread activity in a very crucial time in the history

¹ Many entries in different Jewish encyclopedias, lexicons, and memories have entries about Thon. This fact shows that he was important in Jewish life in Poland. For instance: Gershon Bader, *Medina ve'ha'khomeha*, (New York: 1934), 106–108; Azriel Carlebach, *Sefer hadmuyot*, (Tel-Aviv: Modi'in: 1959), 212–215; *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD-rom Edition; Nathan Michael Gelber, “Dr. Yehoshua Thon,” in: *Sefer Kroke: ir va'em be'Israel*, ed. by Aryeh Bauminger, et al, (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kuk, 1959), 355–357; Gershon Hanokh, *Bidmey hasa'ar: Mivhar ktavim*, (Jerusalem: Hasokhnut hayehudit, 1962), 207–208; Me'ir Henish, *Miba'iyt umihuts: pirkey zikhronot*, (Tel Aviv: 1961), 236–238; Gershon David Hundert ed., *Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 1880–1881; Getzel Kressel, *Leksykon hasafrut ha'ivrit badorot ha'ahronim*, (Merhavia: Sifriyat Hapoalim, 1967), 7–8; Isaac Landman ed. *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, (New York, 1943), vol. 10, 247–248; Rabbi Binyamin, *Kneset ha'khamim*, (Jerusalem: 1961), 30–31; Geoffrey Wigoder, ed., *New Encyclopedia of Zionism and Israel*, (USA: Associated University Press: 1994), 1270–1271; S. Wininger ed., *Grosse Jüdische National-Biographie*, (Netherlands: Kraus Reprint, 1979), 107–108.

of Polish Jews. Looking at all his functions it is hard to believe that one person could be so active, it seems as if he lived simultaneously several lives. He lived not only an intellectual life but also he held many functions in different organizations such as the president of the Zionist movement in Western Galicia, member of the Sejm, and head of Koło – the Jewish parliamentary club. He was also an activist in favor of Hebrew culture and a teacher, established several Hebrew schools and the Jewish library *Ezra*, and was the president of *Tarbut* and a member and president of B'nai B'rith. I will try to portray the most essential fields of his intellectual endeavors and also to point to some of his political actions which were driven from his thought. Perhaps by the end of this journey into the life and thinking of Thon it will be possible to reach a clue to the question why this fertile, active, so present in the Jewish and Polish public sphere in Poland of the beginning of the twentieth century was marginalized in the last decades.

Thon was a person who lived in the encounter of cultures, Jewish and European (particularly German and Polish cultures); he was acquainted with them both perfectly and aspired to create a synthesis of them. He felt at home in many fields: philosophy, sociology, literature, theology, and history, and therefore, in a certain sense he could be perceived as a renaissance man who was very much modern, perhaps even post-modern in his multiculturalism and inter-disciplinary interest and approach. Thon lived in an extremely stormy period in Jewish life in Europe, which ended in a catastrophe. His death before World War II should enable to understand a person for whom the Shoah was not a part of his perspective and horizon although the rise of the Nazis was. His death in 1936 forces us to deal with an optimism which was, alas, refuted and squashed.

Thon's life and the numerous initiatives, activities, and functions he filled cannot be separated from his thought, his worldview, his ideas, and his writings. Therefore, since this book has the goal of an intellectual portrait of a person whose thinking I have found intriguing, I would like to concentrate on the intellectual realm. Thus, in the first biographical chapter I will illustrate briefly his phases in life and his activities, and then in each chapter, which is dedicated to a different sphere, to deal in detail with the many fields of his thought and writings. I hope that this book will succeed in illustrating fully the literary, theological, philosophical, ideological, and political thinking of one of the most important personalities in the modern history of Polish Jewry, to bring back the memory of this unusual figure.

The first biographical chapter is concentrated on three main stages in Thon's life. During his childhood in Lwów, the extremely talented poor boy from a traditional family learned new ways of Jewish thinking. First through Haskalah and then with national ideas he started to develop his Zionist passion. The second stage in Berlin was the shorter in time, but it was Thon's formative years. As a student in Berlin University and in *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, he became an intellectual. There his philosophical and sociological thought and also his concepts of Judaism and nationalism were developed. He spent the third and the longest stage of his life in Kraków (almost forty years) where he had a magnificent career as a rabbi and a preacher and later as a leader of Polish Jews. This chapter gives in a nutshell the most important events and stages in the life of Ozjasz Thon.

The second chapter portrays Thon's literary career. Already as a student in Berlin he took part in what is known in the history of Hebrew literature "Tse'irim affair." Together with the Hebrew writer Micha Yosef Berdyczewski and his childhood friend Mordechai Ehrenpreis and as in opposition to the Zionist theoretician Asher Ginzberg (Ahad Ha-Am), Thon tried to make a revolution in Hebrew literature; he wanted Hebrew literature of his time to become modern. However, with time, a "contra-revolutionary" approach to Hebrew literature can be noticed in his thinking, when he tightly connected "good literature" with national ideas. Another issue very close to his heart and strongly connected to Hebrew literature was the Hebrew language. In his writings, as well as in various activities, he initiated many endeavors for the promotion of Hebrew and underlined the importance of Hebrew schooling and Hebrew periodicals which he made great efforts to promote. Nevertheless, although he was a zealous Hebraist, he could not detach totally from his love of Yiddish, and this conflict was very present in, on the one hand, promoting only Hebrew as the national language, but on the other hand, writing constantly in Yiddish in order to reach the Jewish masses.

As a person who grew up in a traditional orthodox Judaism and received his ordination as an orthodox rabbi by the age of sixteen, but who was also exposed to the ideas of Haskalah and was fascinated by European culture, and who in addition received his second rabbinical ordination in the reform institution of higher education in Berlin, Thon tried to find in his perception of Judaism a middle way. The third chapter portrays his efforts to develop this third-way, or the golden middle, a kind of a synthesis between the two opposite approaches. This chapter also deals in length with his religious

message as it was revealed in his sermons in Tempel Synagogue in Kraków. Unfortunately, only the first volume of three volumes which were planned by the editor was published before the outbreak of World War II, the other two were lost in the war. Therefore we have sermons only from the first nine years of his preaching.

The issue at center of the fourth chapter is Thon's philosophical and sociological thought and writings. His first interest was the very fundamental work of Kant. Thon's mature PhD concentrated on Kant's ethics. As a student of Georg Simmel Thon encountered the then young discipline of sociology and became fascinated by it. He grasped sociology as the science of the forms and the psychical motivation of human association. As such, he came to the idea of investigating Zionism with the categories of sociology, in order to establish the scientific foundation of Zionism. At a young age he thought that this would be his intellectual mission, alas, he never completed that task because life carried him away from his study-room to the life of praxis. Nevertheless, Thon's the longest philosophical work about the British philosopher Herbert Spencer is, as I see it, his greatest contribution to the Hebrew language and culture of his time.

The core of Thon's thinking was, as I believe, his concepts of nationalism and Zionism, and this issue is at the heart of the fifth chapter. I show how a young Thon was under the strong influence of Ahad Ha-Am's thinking, but with time he shaped what is called synthetic Zionism which combined the spiritual and cultural Zionism of Ahad Ha-Am with the political Zionism of Herzl. Both personalities were the main figures in Thon's Zionist ideology. Another crucial issue was Thon's efforts to prove that the Jews are first and foremost a nation and not merely a religious group, as opposed to both Orthodox and Reform outlooks, and in that he belonged to the foundation of Jewish-national thinking. Another essential issue, and I believe the most interesting and intriguing, is the relation in his thought between passionate Zionism with his diasporic vision. How could he combine both ideas which at the first glance look like total contradictions? This complex approach constituted the foundation of his vision of Poland as a multi-national and multi-cultural state, in which the Jews could develop the "Judaism of the future." In this respect Thon's views look very actual and even post-modern *avant la-lettre*.

The last chapter illustrates some of the main political initiatives and activities of Thon. In this chapter an effort was made to understand Thon's political thinking which stood behind some of the political initiatives he

undertook in his life. Among them were his participation in the Peace Conference in Paris 1919 and also some of his activities during his four terms (1919–1935) in the Polish parliament. By and large, most of his endeavors had the goal of attaining equal rights for the Jews in the Second Polish Republic. Perhaps the most important for him was the agreement with the Polish government in 1925, known as *Ugoda*. This affair, probably the most controversial in his whole political career which cost him in health, was a result of a very clear political program and political thinking. All in all, Thon began his political activity with great enthusiasm and optimism and had strong beliefs and expectations from the revival of the Polish state. But through the years he could notice, while being in the eye of the storm, how difficult it was to fight the horrible anti-Semitism which prevailed in the first sessions of the Polish legislative parliament and which became even stronger and virulent over the years, especially during the 1930s. This fact raises the unavoidable question whether Thon's decision to let himself be carried into politics at the expense of his intellectual creativity was the right decision.

All the sources I have used are in the bibliography, however, I would like to mention here the sources which, unfortunately, could not be used: first and foremost Thon's own writings which were ready to be published but were lost because of the outbreak of World War II. Two volumes of his later homilies in Polish were lost. Hirsch Pfeffer the editor announced in his introduction to the first one that there was a plan to publish two more. The tragic and dramatic fate of his Hebrew volume is described in detail in Chapter Two. Nella Rost-Hollander, Thon's daughter, testified that Thon's library and all his manuscripts and archive were lost in the war. This unfortunate fact makes me aware how richer could be this book if not for that loss. Another lack was personal letters of Thon. Apart from his letters to Ehrenpreis and Berdyczewski, and a few to Ahad Ha-Am and Yosef Klausner, I was disappointed not to find any more private letters of him that could have shed more light about his inner state of mind. The most disappointing moment in my research was when I could not find even one personal letter of Ozjasz Thon to his brother Ya'akov Thon when I looked through his archive in the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem. Another disappointment was to discover that regarding Thon YIVO archive does not hold any treasures. Concerning Thon's texts, in his long years of writing in Jewish periodicals Thon published hundreds of articles, however in the bibliography I included only those which I referred to in the text itself.

Fortunately, some of the periodicals in which he often published can be read on-line, for example: *Nowy Dziennik*, *Haynt*, and *Ha-Tsefirah*. On-line can be found also the transcripts of the Sejm proceedings.

In the end I would like to refer to some technical remarks that would make easier the reading of the book regarding spelling and transliteration. Concerning Thon's first name, in his Hebrew and Yiddish writings he was Yehoshua, in German and English Osias, and in Polish Ozjasz. In each publication which I have quoted I kept the original version depending on the language of his text. I have employed a similar solution with writers who used their Hebrew name in Hebrew texts, and their Polish name in Polish texts, for example Jeremiasz/Yirmiyahu, or Mordechai/Marcus. Concerning spelling of persons and places in Polish and Hebrew I have followed YIVO transliteration rules except for cases in which the name is known in English in a different spelling. When it comes to the names of Polish cities I have chosen to keep the Polish spelling like in Kraków and Lwów. Polish titles of articles were kept in the original spelling, before the orthography reform of 1936.