


Documentation and Fiction in Hameiri's Accounts of the Great War

Tamar S. Drukker
University of London

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Volume 17 Issue 3 (September 2015) Article 16**Tamar S. Drukker,****"Documentation and Fiction in Hameiri's Accounts of the Great War"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss3/16>>Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 17.3 (2015)***Thematic Issue ***Life Writing and the Trauma of War***. Ed. Louise O. Vasvári and I-Chun Wang<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss3/>>

Abstract: In her article "Documentation and Fiction in Hameiri's Accounts of the Great War" Tamar S. Drukker discusses the only surviving Hebrew-language docu-novel of the Great War, written by Avigdor Hameiri (1890-1970), a Hungarian Jewish officer. His 1930 memoir *The Great Madness* is a wartime personal journal about his life at the Russian front. Many of the episodes described in *The Great Madness* receive a more styled treatment in Hameiri's wartime short stories which appeared in three collections during the 1920s. These stories are sometimes surreal, symbolic, and carefully crafted. Drukker's study of Hameiri's wartime life writing and his literary rendition of experience into stylized stories shed light on the purpose of his writing, the intended audience, and in particular Hameiri's choices -- linguistic, literary and ideological -- in choosing the medium for recounting and documenting in writing life experience in extreme conditions.

Tamar S. DRUKKER

Documentation and Fiction in Hameiri's Accounts of the Great War

The Great War (1914-1918) was the most devastating and violent conflict the world has known until then, a total war which resulted in the death of over eight million soldiers and some five million civilians on all sides of the conflict. This war changed Europe and brought an end to the existing world order and a break of known traditions and cultures. It was also unprecedented in its literary impact, with thousands of established and future writers taking part and directly affected by the war relating their experiences in writing. Over a million Jewish soldiers participated in the war, of which some also chose the pen to document, and creatively respond to, the horrors they underwent and witnessed (Abramson, *Hebrew* xii-xix). Of these Jewish writers, Avigdor Hameiri (Feuerstein) stands out for the importance and centrality of the war writings in his overall oeuvre. With a literary career spanning from 1907, with the publication of his first Hebrew poem, to his death in Tel Aviv in 1970, Hameiri is best remembered for his expressionist poetry and his theater work, mostly satire. A significant share of his literary production is his war literature, which includes two docu-novels, a play, twenty-seven short stories and some fifty poems, but all were composed in a period of about fifteen years, from the time of the war until the 1930s, and Hameiri has not returned to this theme in later life (see Holtzman, *Avigdor* 34-35 where he lists all the known First World War Hebrew writers). This paper will examine Hameiri's war diary alongside some of his short stories, in an attempt to understand their significance both for world literature and for the emerging Hebrew culture of his time.

On 11 April 1930, the Mitzpah publishing house placed an advertisement in the Hebrew daily newspaper *Davar* announcing the publication of the second edition of Hameiri's *The Great Madness: Notes of a Hebrew Officer in the Great War* (השגעון הגדול: רשימות קצין עברי במלחמה הגדולה). Only a few months previously, on 6 November 1929, the same paper printed an advertisement for the publication of this book, with the publisher's promotional blurb placing it alongside the great examples of world literature of the Great War. When advertising the second edition, however, it seems like there was no longer a need to elaborate on the content and the quality of the book, as the advert simply reads: "The first edition of the 2000 copies sold out within several months – a record for an original Hebrew book" ("ההוצאה הראשונה בת 2000 עותקים נמכרה במשך חודשים אחדים – ריקורד של ספר עברי מקור (Davar 9). Although the Hebrew term for a best-seller was not to be coined until a decade later, and at this time there were no formal listings of book sales, Hameiri's book was, in fact, the very first Hebrew bestseller among the Hebrew readers in the land of Israel and the only literary work of its kind published in Hebrew. Its popularity, as well as its reception as a Hebrew example of contemporary European literature, can be found in a review published in the daily newspaper *Doar Hayom* from 5 January 1930, by Uri Keisari, who writes that

I spent the months May till July 1929 in Europe, on board ships at sea, on trains in land, along borders, French, Belgium, Swiss. Offices, halls, taverns, restaurants, cafés. Everywhere, at every corner, in every hand: *All Quiet on the Western Front*. In a fatal manner the book would appear everywhere, as if it were an epidemic, a kind of wind blowing and passing from place to place. In a train carriage eight people are sitting. Seven of them are reading. All seven books: *All Quiet on the Western Front*. On a smaller scale the same is happening with us, now. *The Great Madness* is found in every hand. On the beach, in the hands of a young woman. In the corridor of the gymnasium [high school], in the hand of a student. On the train, in the hand of the worker. In the city, the *moshava*, in the village. In the house, outside – *The Great Madness*.

בחדשי מאי-יולי 1929 עשיתי באירופה, על גבי ספינות בים, על רכבות ביבשה, בגבולות צרפתים, בלגים, שווייצרים. משרדים, אולמות, בתי-מרוח, מסעדות, קהארות. בכל מקום, בכל פנה, בכל יד: 'במערב אין כל חדש'. ממש בצורה פטלית היה צין הספר הזה בכל עבר, כאילו היה מין מגפה, מין רוח העובר והולך ממקום למקום. בתא של רכבת יושבים שמונה אנשים. שבעה מהם קוראים ספרים. כל שבעת הספרים: 'במערב אין כל חדש'. בוועיר אנפין נעשה גם אצלנו אותו דבר, עכשיו. 'השגעון הגדול' נמצא בכל ידיים. (Keisari 3). על שפת הים, בידי העלמה. במסדרון הגימנסיה, בידי התלמיד. ברכבת, בידי הפועל. בעיר, במושבה, בכפר. בבית, בחוץ --- 'השגעון הגדול'.

Keisari was not alone in noting the similarities between Remarque's anti-war novel published only a few months before and Hameiri's *Great Madness*. Hameiri himself took pains to prove that his work was composed earlier and is therefore not directly influenced by *All Quiet on the Western Front*. And indeed, sections of the book appeared in the daily newspaper *Haaretz* under the title *The Great Paradox* in 1925-26 (see Drukker 268; Holtzman, *Avigdor* 43-51). It is important to note that, unlike *The Great Madness*, Remarque's book is not a memoir, and despite the use of the first person narrator and the present tense, it is a product and reflection of the post-war generation. There is no doubt, however, that its phenomenal success led to the creation of the 'boom' in war literature at the time as seen in the positive reception of *The Great Madness* (Eksteins 351). *The Great Madness* is a first-person account of life on the Eastern front during the Great War written by the aspiring Jewish poet and young journalist Hameiri, who finds himself in a new guise, that of a Hungarian Jewish officer in the Austro-Hungarian army. It is a war-time personal journal describing the life of the narrator from the events leading up to the outbreak of the war, his enlisting, training, and fighting at the front. The book ends when Hameiri and his company are taken captive by the Russians. Life in captivity is the theme of Hameiri's second war-time memoir של משה (*Hell on Earth*) published in 1932.

Avigdor Hameiri (1890-1970) was born in Odávidháza in the Trans-Carpathian region then a part of Hungary, and in his youth received traditional Jewish education. He studied in Budapest where he became active in Zionist circles and was involved also in circles of poets and writers. He befriended the Jewish Zionist writer and activist József Patai (1882-1953) (see Patai 21-22; Hameiri, *Great* 76), as well as the renowned Hungarian poet Endre Ady (1877-1919) and both these writers had a lasting influence on Hameiri and his writing. The excitement of the Hebrew critics at the publication of *The Great Madness* and its success with the reading public derive from the fact that the work is at once

both an example of and belongs within European literature and that it is an expression of Jewish identity in the early twentieth century (see Mond <<http://www.nrg.co.il/online/47/ART1/877/114.html>>). Hameiri found himself throughout his life identified and identifying with Jewish and Zionist ideology, as well as Hungarian nationalism alongside a form of Central European cosmopolitanism, and this dual identity is clearly reflected in his war literature. National loyalty, Zionist aspirations, and European pacifist identity all three exist in contradiction in his life, identity, and works (see Rachamimov 179). The success of *The Great Madness* with the Hebrew readers in the land of Israel in 1929-30, is partly owing to the unlikely setting and unusual voice of the protagonist: a European Jew, versed in tradition, a dedicated Zionist, yet an active member of Hungarian literary circles, and a member of the avant garde nightlife in Budapest at the eve of the Great War.

In the author's introduction to the 1929 edition of his book *The Great Madness*, Hameiri refers to his text as "notes" (רשימות) and claims they have been written during his time on the front starting two days after he became a soldier at the age of twenty-four, and up to the day when he was taken prisoner along with his platoon by the Russians three years later. He adds: "I have neither polished nor coarsened my notes, nor did I add to them or subtract from them. I made my notes and waited for the finale, for the return to general sanity." (לא שפרתי את העובדות וגם לא כערתי אותן: לא הוספתי עליהן ולא גרעתי מהן ולא כלום. רשמתי והכיתי לסוף: להשתפות הגדולה שתבוא. (Hameiri, *Great* 11). This insistence on the authenticity of the work as a memoir, from the onset, has led readers and critics to focus on the time, conditions and status of the writing. As Paul Fussell has shown in his careful reading of Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* (1929) and Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), all memoirs contain elements of artistic embellishments, but the use of literary tropes, reconstructed dialogue, and juxtaposition, while they give the texts an element of fictional writing need not, necessarily, diminish their authenticity (Fussell 96-7, 203-06). The presence of a creative artist controlling the narrative is most pronounced in Hameiri's case owing to his choice of language. Choosing to write in Hebrew, a language that had no vernacular use at the time and was not the language in which the war was experienced, Hameiri places himself as the writer who is also a mediator between the lived experience – or reality – and the literary product (see Drukker 261-62). As Barbara Foley shows in her study of US-American nonfiction novels, the writing of history has often been between the borders of documentary and fiction, without wishing to blur them (see 289-91) and Hameiri's insistence of the "truth" of his work does not restrict him to use only straightforward reportage. Hameiri's life at the front was lived in a mixture of languages, typical of the Austro-Hungarian army, but more pronounced in his case, where he uses Hebrew as a language to communicate with fellow Jewish soldiers, as well as a language he uses to respond to events as they unfold in his poetry and in his diary. There is no record of the actual document composed at the front line, but textual hints suggest that it was a combination of both Hungarian (as the early published sections, still during the war, attest) and Hebrew, as can be seen in short epigraphs in some of Hameiri's wartime sketches of his comrades in arms, extant in a private archive (see Alexander). Only the poems composed in Hebrew find their way into the final printed version, whereas his poetry in Hungarian, written to serve the military machine, is mentioned, but not reproduced (see Drukker 264).

Despite some factual "modifications" or re-writings found in Hameiri's documentary novels/diaries, most critics and scholars stress the detailed and journalistic style of Hameiri's writing praising his ability to conjure a hellish reality for his readers. Avner Holtzman stresses the realism found in *The Great Madness* and *Hell on Earth* and while listing the literary devices used, he concludes that they are non-fiction novels. This helps him in his analysis of Hameiri's short stories, which in contrast to the diaries, are freer in their use of symbolism and fantasy (see Holtzman, *Avigdor* 54-5, 101-13; Ben Ezer). Hameiri published twenty-seven short stories that deal directly with the war. Many of them were first published in newspapers and periodicals throughout the 1920s, some earlier, still during the war, in Hameiri's own Hungarian translation (under the pseudonym Albert Kova [Patai 219; Rachamimov 186]), written while a prisoner in Siberia. The stories were then collected in book form in three collections: *תחת שמיים אדומים* (1925) (*Under Red Skies*), *קשת יעקב* (1926) (*Jacob's Bow*), and *בשם רבי ישו מנצרת* (1928) (In the Name of Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth) five more war stories were published in a later collection and they were all gathered in an edition of Hameiri's war stories published after his death in 1970. The short stories were well-received, but did not cause the sensational excitement as the publication of *The Great Madness*. In his short stories Hameiri usually focuses on a single event or character and the setting is vague. While in *The Great Madness* much attention is given to chronology, location, and setting, the short stories lack background and begin with the action *in media res*. Some of them relate to characters and events which are also described in *The Great Madness* and a comparative reading of these parallel versions highlights the techniques and possibilities of the different media.

In both the novel and the short stories there is an interesting move between condensed or minimal description and detailed accounts, for literary effect. The novel begins with a description of civilian life at the outbreak of the war and the events that lead to the transformation of the narrator from a civilian to a soldier at the front line. The first six chapters of *The Great Madness* are devoted to this journey, from the author's newspaper desk and from the nightlife of pre-war Budapest to the military barracks, all summarized in the opening lines of the first short story in the edited collection, entitled "The Doctrine of the Barracks" (תורת הקסרקטין): "The invitation came suddenly. Of course we knew there was a war in the world, the war exists. But it is far from us. So far from us. And suddenly – we were taken, we were shoved in the train – march!" (הזמנה באה פתאום. הן ידענו, שישינה מלחמה בעולם, ישנה כבר. אך היא רחוקה מאתנו. מאתנו – מרש! לקחו אותנו, תחבנו לתוך הרכבת – מרש! (Hameiri, *War Stories* 9). However, the rest of this story, which in the original Hebrew version is nine pages long, describes in detail the arrival of the young recruits to the barracks near the front, where they need to be trained in haste. The story focuses on their first hours at the base, and the first encounter between the new recruits and their commander. While the speaker stands to attention, and is therefore a passive observer, the stage is taken up by

the sergeant-major and his welcome speech. The same eventful first hour on base is told in the novel as well, but summarized into a single paragraph, reproduced here:

The sergeant-major instructed us in the meaning of Homeland and the rules of a decent man, who prays not to God but to His Majesty. The sergeant-major instructed, the shells kept coming, one after the other, enough to drive one mad. The sergeant-major was explaining the nature of the good soldier and the meaning of death, when suddenly a shell fell and stopped the word death right in his throat. He exploded into a thousand fragments, and all that was left of the sergeant-major were rags of flesh and bone. (הפילדויבל למד אותנו את "תורת המולדת" ואת הלכות האדם ההגון המתפלל) לא לאלהים אלא להודו. הפילדויבל הרביץ תורה, והרמונים באו ובאו. בזה אחר זה ובסך, עד כדי להשתגע. הפילדויבל מבאר לנו את מהותו של החייל ההגון ואת *The Great Madness*) (טיבו של המות – ופתאום בא רמון אחד ומחניק בגרונו את המלה "מות". הוא מתפוצץ לאלפי רסיסים ומן הפילדויבל לא נשאר, כי אם סמרטוט בשר ועצמות. *Madness*, 47).

There is irony in the commander's demonstrative death, the very first example of the reality of warfare presented grotesquely in all its horror to the newly-arrived soldiers to witness. Death, in all its manifestations, will accompany the speaker, and the reader, all throughout this corpus of war literature, and it is the central image of the short story, which ends thus, with the officer's speech:

" -- No, sirs, do not philosophize, but hit, stab, tear, kill him, slit his head in seven, smash – s-m-a-s-h! – crush him to dirt, to garbage, to junk! ... and you shall say: and your own life? Your own soul? -- nothing of the kind: dammit, your own soul! Here there is no soul and there is no life, no thought and no feeling, but there is one special and unique thing, my nasty men, soft-hearted gentlemen – and that is Death! ... Death! ... D-e-a-t-h! ... Do you know the meaning of D..." A loud sound of a cannon stopped him for a moment. The Sergeant-major hurried to finish: "Do you know the meaning of Death?" The cannon roared again: za-a-aa... A terrible and horrible explosion silenced him and stunned us all. We, the new recruits, dispersed in all directions – the grenade exploded in our midst and we were carried like chaff in the wind – and from afar we heard the voice of the Sergeant-major like a voice coming from a deep well, in a hoarse and dying groan saying: this is D-e-a-t-h ... When all turned silent we returned to our places – and found our teacher lying wallowing in blood and dirt. His head suffered several injuries, his clothes torn to rags, and the intestines twisting out of his stomach, cut snakes, red-green-grey ... And he is still partly alive and from his bleeding throat the terrible and severe voice still groans: "Th-i-s is D-e-a-t-h!...."

-- לא אדונים, לא לעשות פילוסופיה. אלא להכות, לדקור, לקרוע, להמית אותו, לשטע את ראשו לשבעה, לרסק – לרסק! – למעך אותו לעפר תחוח, לזבל, לאשפתות!.. תאמר: וחייך – שלך! נפשך – אתה? – לא דובים ולא יער: לעזאזל, נפשך-אתה! אין פה שום נפש ושום חיים, שום מחשבה ושום רגש. אבל יש פה דבר אחד יחיד ומיוחד, אדוני הנבזים, מוגי-הלב העדינים – וזה המוות!.. המוות!.. ה-מ-ות!.. הידועים אתם מה זאת ה... "קול יריית-תותח כבדה שוב הפסיקה אותו לרגע... הפילדויבל מיהר לגמור: "הידועים אתם מה זאת מוות?". "התותח שוב נתן קולו: זע-ע-ע... התפוצצות אדירה ונוראה החרישה אותו והדהימה את כולנו. אנהנו השירונים נפוצנו לארבע רוחות השמים – ה"רימון" התפוצץ ברשותנו ואנחנו נישאנו כמוץ על כנפי רוח – ומרחוק שמענו את קול הפילדויבל קול הבא מאיזו תהום עמוקה, בגניחה צרודה וגוססת האומרת: זהו ה-מ-ות... כשקמה דממה חזרנו תיכף למקומנו – ומצאנו את המורה שלנו מונח מתבוסס בדם ועפר. ראשו היה פצוע פצעים אחרים, בגדיו קרועים לסמרטוטים ומבטנו יוצאים ומתפתלים בני-מעיו. נחשים (Hameiri, *War Stories* 17) כותמים, אדומים-ירוקים-אפורים... והוא עודנו חי קצת ומגרונו השטוף דם עודנו הולך וגונה הקול האיום והחמור: "זה-ו ה-מ-ות!..")

Which of the versions of the final moments in the Sergeant-major's life, is truer? While the novel offers a short, almost laconic, and matter-of-fact reportage, the short story attempts to capture and record every detail of that moment, including the Sergeant-major's final speech, verbatim. The speech, which makes up most of the short story, is reconstructed. It could not be an accurate rendition of a given speech, not only because it is re-written in Hebrew, but also because it is written from memory. Critics and scholars have wrestled with this question trying to define the degree of truth found in memoirs, and especially in war literature, embodied in the fiction (Klein 4).

Moshe Ben Eliezer was one of the first critics to find Hameiri's novel too graphic and that the subject of war not suitable for a literary work. The accumulation of details and the variety of literary approaches to the theme, as seen in the example above of condensing or expanding at every moment, seem to Ben Eliezer to only exemplify the impossibility of true representation of history. The horror of war cannot be described in language without becoming literature, or fiction (Ben Eliezer 15 qtd. in Dromi). The issue of the use of fiction to recount history becomes more acute after World War II and especially in regards to the Holocaust (Lang 19). While no one seems to doubt the ethics of Hameiri's truth claims nor the legitimacy of his use of historical elements in his fiction, the value of work is often judged against an ideal of two separate possible accounts: truth or fiction. Several reviews of the novel, when it first appeared, criticized Hameiri's extensive flourishing, finding the use of literary tropes and techniques unsuitable and ineffective for his subject matter. Again, comparing his work to Remarque's, one reviewer claims:

The comparison is inevitable: *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque is a less 'literary' book than Hameiri's. According to all the signs in the book, it seems that Remarque has less poetic possibilities than Hameiri – but the book does not suffer at all from the fact that its author is not so blessed. Therefore the life of the soldier during the days of madness are given simply, with minimal literary devices, with an aspiration for a maximum truth. Therefore the soldier who lived through such a life as described in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and will read it as his life story ... It is not literature. It is not the case with Hameiri, whose literariness is in excess. Therefore he does not have the strength of simplicity found with Remarque.

(ההשוואה מתבקשת מאליה: "במערב אין כל חדש" אשר לאריך מריא רימארק הנו ספר פחות "ספרותי" מספרו של המאירי. לפי כל האותות אשר בספר נראה, כי אין רימארק בעל אפשרויות ספרותיות מרובות כהמאירי – אולם הספר לא הפסיד מזה כלל, שמחברו אינו מבורך בכל המעלות הללו. על כן ניתנו חי החייל בימי השגעון כפשוטם במינימום של אמצעים ספרותיים מתוך שאיפה למכסימום של אמת החיים. על כן ישב החייל אשר עברו עליו החיים הללו, הנתונים ב"במערב אין כל חדש", ויהיה בו כבספר חייו. ... אין זה (Yatziv 10) ספרות. לא כן המאירי, שספרותיותו מרובה. על כן לא ניתן לו עוז הפשטות אשר לרימארק.)

It has been argued, and convincingly (Holtzman, *Avigdor* 39-41; Abramson, *Hebrew* 23), that *The Great Madness* contains more craft, while the short stories and the poems contain more art (on art

and craft as the essential elements of a memoir see Zinsser 6). But as we can see from the example above, both genres play with the tools available to the writer, and even the most fantastical story is there as an expression of truth, though perhaps not a historical one. Jay Winter dismisses the question of the historical accuracy of war literature as uninteresting, with the claim that war novels are never documentary, despite the authors' assertion. Nonetheless, these literary recreations are relevant to our understanding of historical events, and can be true representations of an author's inner life (Winter, 66 and throughout). Biographers of Hameiri can scan his texts for precise details about his life and experiences on the front. A cultural historian, on the other hand, can seek to find in the text more profound truths that the author wishes to convey. Reading all of Hameiri's war literature together, one cannot ignore the author's insistence on describing the horrors of life at the front and the effect of this war on the individual, both soldiers and civilians, and especially on the Jewish participants in this conflict.

In the introduction to the novel Hameiri claims that he "had not set out to observe the Jew in myself and in my comrades-in-death, but that is how it turned out" (התכוונתי מראש לראות את היהודי שבי ושבהברי-). Once again, the validity of this claim can be questioned, especially as the language chosen for the prose is a Jewish language (Drukker 265), but whether or not Hameiri intended this, the Jews are present in his literature as they were in the Eastern front. There are no precise records of the number of Jewish soldiers who took part in this war, on both sides of the conflict, and the estimate is that some 275,000-400,000 Jews served in the Austro-Hungarian army, with those attaining low officer ranks in the thousands (Rachamimov 181; Rozenblit, chapter 4). The protagonist of *The Great Madness* identifies himself as a Jew, but is surprised to discover that this is how others see him as well. An anti-Semitic casual comment from one of the protagonist's nightlife fellows, "pallid and delicate university lecturer Dr. Garay," (הפריבאט-דוצנט הד"ר גאראי החיוור והרך) (*Great* 3) suggesting that Jews are not loyal subjects, is the trigger for Hameiri's voluntary conscription (14). And from that point on, the protagonist himself identifies the people he meets by their ethnic and religious background, in an army that is a genuine mix of peoples, nations, languages and cultures. The characters in the novel can be roughly divided into three groups: Jewish soldiers, most notably Corporal Margolis, a former Yeshiva student, and the older orthodox Jew nicknamed Uncle Osterreicher; anti-Semites, who are mostly to be found among the officers; and philo-Semites, mostly from other minority groups and simple private soldiers who befriend the Jewish protagonist, sometimes because of his Jewish identity. Some of the most vehement anti-Semites are converted Jews (like Private Mady, Hameiri, *Great* 142), but Hameiri also describes deeply-rooted Christian anti-Semitism. Jewish soldiers are also found across the line, in the Russian army. The reality of fighting against co-religionists is new to the Jewish population of Europe who for the first time enlist in significant numbers to fight a war. Hameiri's Jewish protagonists struggle with this new situation, of the possibility of facing their Jewish brethren in battle. Hameiri, in his narrative, pays attention to the particular difficulties of his fellow Jewish soldiers in this impossible "madness" of constant warfare. He describes how his protagonist and his Jewish men find creative ways to adhere to Jewish law and yet remain obedient soldiers, as in this episode, about Uncle Osterreicher:

The elderly soldier found a dead Russian soldier among our dead, who looked Jewish. He examined him, and when he found out he was really a Jew, he said "*Kaddish*" after him. And this was enough to have him reported and sentenced to a day's fast. The fast was no problem for him, since in any case he observed all the traditional fasts in the Jewish calendar. Moreover, Corporal Margolis, when he heard about it, thought of a clever ruse. He advised Uncle Osterreicher to go on the sick list. This was easy enough, since he had been suffering from an old man's chest since the thaw, and the doctor was partial to him on account of his regular praying, complete with shawl and phylacteries ... The penalty fast was therefore postponed until the third day, which was – as Margolis knew very well – a traditional Jewish fast, *Ta'anit Esther* ... Typical Margolis cunning – if you must fast, at least do it when you should, and not at Mr Figger's orders. In this way our indignation at Uncle Osterreicher's punishment turned to a secret joke among the Jewish soldiers.

החייל הזקן מצא חלל רוסי בין החללים שלנו. פני החייל עוררו בו חשד, שהחייל הוא יהודי; וכשנוכח שבאמת לא טעה – התפלל אחריו קדיש בכונה. – זה שמש יסוד בשביל (להעמיד אותו לראפורט ולהעניש אותו ליום אחד צום. – מילא הצום; זה לא עונש בשביל הדוד אסטרייכר, שהיה צם בין כה את כל התעניות כדון. וביחוד לא היה עונש זה מצער יותר גם מטעם אחר: הגפרייטר מרגלית, כששמע על דבר העונש מהר ויעץ לו להדוד אסטרייכר להודיע שחולה הוא היום. זה לא היה מן הדברים הקשים. הדוד היה משתעל בין כה שעול-זקנים אחרי הפשרת השלגים ואחרי יסורי הקרבות; – וגם: רופא הצבא התחיס אליו בחבה על אשר התפלל תמיד בלי כל עכוב בטלית ותפלין כדון. ובכן הדוד אסטרייכר שמע לעצתו של מרגלית וקבל שני ימים מנוחה, והיום השלישי, יום הצום שלו – חל בדיוק בתענית-אסתר! – ערמתו של מרגלית! – אם לצום, הרי לא לפקודת האדון (Hameiri, *Great* 177-78). (פיגאר! ככה הפך כאב-העלבון שלנו על ענשו של הדוד אסטרייכר לצחוק רחב-פה בכל החבריה היהודית

Giving a dead soldier proper burial, and in the case of a Jewish casualty, reciting the *Kaddish* prayer for the dead, is an act of courtesy and humanity, following one's conscience, but it is also adherence to religious obligation when faced with the death of a co-religionist. Empathy towards the fighting men on the other side of the line is a recurring theme in the literature of the Great War (Cole 484), and it is not limited to those of the Jewish faith. Thus, building on this pacifist notion of comradeship among all fighting soldiers, on both sides of the conflict, often united in their hatred toward the high-ranking officers and the men in power presented as the war mongers, Hameiri can express this sympathy and remain a loyal and patriot fighter.

The unique situation of the Jewish soldier in the Great War is further complicated when rumors of the proclamations of different European leaders to support the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine, and rumors of the establishment of a Jewish Brigade reach the front line. The chapter "Madame Pompadour" (220-38) in *The Great Madness* describes the effect of the possibility of an independent, Zionist Jewish military force on the protagonist, and his Jewish fellow men. The title refers to the code name given to Joseph Trumpeldor (1880-1920), a Zionist activist and the founder, in 1915, of the Zion Mule Corps within the Allied forces (Silverstown 37). When snippets of information about this cross-national Jewish organization is still scant and unconfirmed, Hameiri resists the temp-

tation to follow his Zionist leaning and turn against the Magyar in him. For now he is no longer sure of the total absurdity in his former friend Garay's accusation, on the eve of the war, that as a Jew he cannot "know what a homeland means?" (מנין לך לדעת, מה זאת מולדת?) (*Great* 14). Is his excited hope for a Jewish homeland in contradiction with his Magyar patriotism. Here he is faced with a difficult internal conflict, as can be seen from the agitated internal monologue:

A Jewish brigade! The idea cast a spell on us. Imagine, a Jewish brigade conquering Jerusalem... Good God! How wonderful, how terrible! Terrible it was, for what if we were to encounter this brigade and have to fight against it? No, no of course, there's nothing for it. If they came, we would know our duty to our Homeland. Not one of us would hesitate for a moment. God forbid we should dream of treason at the front. But a Hebrew brigade...! Ach, nonsense! There was no such thing.

גדוד עברי. – מושג זה היה בכל זאת לכעין קסם מוזר, גדוד עברי הכובש את ירושלים. – אל אלהים! הבאמת? הן זה נפלא ונורא, נורא; יען כי – מה יהיה אם זה יביא אותנו באמת לידי פגישה בגדוד זה? – אל אלהים! – לידי התנגשות. – מובן, מובן. אין מה לדבר. אם יבואו – אנחנו נדע את חובתנו למולדת. איש מאתנו לא יעשה שטות כזו: לחשוב (Hameiri, *Great* 233; more on the Jewish Brigade see Keren).

When another Jewish officer joins the platoon with more detailed information about the Zionist activity across the border, Hameiri can no longer leave the question of his loyalty and identity as a theoretical internal polemic. Remaining true to his military office, he and his fellow Jewish officer perform a symbolic secret ceremony, where they declare, to each other, where their national loyalty lies: "We are hereby divorcing our dear wife, Hungary, and taking Madame Pompadour in holy wedlock" (בזה אנחנו בזה (נותנים גט פטורין לאשתנו היקרה הגברת הונגאריה. ובוזה אנחנו אנו מקדשים את הגברת פומפדור לאשה (237). However, the chapter ends with chaotic outbreak of the impending confrontation with the enemy, which forces the protagonist to leave all ideologies and hopes aside and fight alongside his men, to preserve his life. The brutal reality forces the protagonist to act as he believes an officer should, despite his symbolic 'betrayal'. But even at this crucial moment, we can see that for Hameiri, the author as well as the protagonist at the front line, the option is not either/or. He is both and at the same time, a loyal Magyar soldier and an ardent Zionist, living daily a not a-typical contradiction of European Zionist patriotism, as experienced and expressed by many Jews across Europe in the first half of the twentieth century (see Aberbach).

While the question of the loyalty and patriotism of the Jewish subjects of the Austro-Hungarian Jews, both civilians and soldiers, is one of the daily dilemmas facing our protagonist, another typical Jewish experience of the Eastern Front is the encounter with the Jewish civilians, the impoverished religious Jewish folk of Galicia, and this receives little mention in *The Great Madness*. The story of the Jewish communities whose lives were destroyed by the mere fact that the war swept across their homes is one of the lesser-known chapters of the Great War, as observed by Winter (chapter 3), Marsha Rozenblit (110-19) and others. While in *The Great Madness* the protagonist encounters mostly anti-Semitic civilian population in the almost-deserted towns and villages of Galicia, some of Hameiri's short stories are devoted to the Jewish civilian population of Galicia. To a greater extent than in the novel, in the short stories as a whole, the Jewish theme is not accidental but central, and in some of the stories, the suffering of Jewish civilians is at the fore with the war acting as an almost insignificant background event (Abramson, *Hebrew* 24). One such story is "The Bleeding Bible," from the first collection published in Hebrew in 1925, a story of Jewish suffering and martyrdom, told by a Jewish woman whom the narrator, the same persona of Hameiri the soldier, meets by chance. The narrator notices that the woman's house is void of any Jewish signs. The Jewish woman explains that only recently the Russians have taken possession of the village, having been warned of their unforgiving treatment of the Jews, she pretends to be a local gentile peasant woman, as she is forced to host the Russians at her home. She confesses that

To become a gentile woman so to speak – was not at all simple. It was not an easy task. Well, first of all – I changed my clothes. The maid I had with me in the past gave me some of her clothes, and then – I messed up the house somewhat, made disorder in every corner, as is the custom in their houses. On the fire I placed a big and blackened pot, as the one they use for cooking pork, may God forgive me. And eventually – to make this nice mess complete – I mixed all the dishes, those used for meat together with those used for dairy food ... God above! To stand and to watch this chaos! ... I shut my eyes, but what was I to do, and the danger of death is hovering over our heads. And then ... and then ... it is shameful to recount, sir, I myself, with my own hands, took the scissors – may God forgive me all my sins, yes, I myself, cut off my son's sidelocks.

ודבר זה, להיעשות לגויה בתוך כדי דיבור – זה לא היה דבר פשוט כל-כך. לא בנקל ייעשה כזה. ובכן, ראשית-הכמה – החלפתי מלבושים. המשרתת שהיתה לי לפני זה נתנה חליפת-בגדים משלה, אחר-כך – פרעתי קצת את הסדר בבית, עשיתי אי-סדרים בכל פינה, כנהוג בבתיהם. על-גבי האח העמדתי קדרה גדולה ושחורה מפית, כאותה שהם מבשלים בה בשר-חזיר, השם ימחול לי. ולבסוף – כדי להביא את המהפכה הנחמדה לידי שלימות גמורה – עירבבתי את כל מכשירי-האוכל שלי, את כלי-הבשר עם כלי-החלב, ביחד ... ריבונו-של-עולם! לעמוד ולראות בערבוביה זו! ... עצמתי את עיני. אך מה היה עלי לעשות, והסכנה מרהפת על ראשינו. ואחר-כך ... הרפה ובושה לספר, אדוני, אנוכי בעצמי. (ובכבודי, בידי שלי נטלתי את המספרים – יסלה לי השם את כל חטאתי, כן, אני בעצמי גזזתי את פאות הילד שלי. (Hameiri, *War* 52).

Once again, a very detailed and realistic report, given in the Jewish woman's own voice, gives the story a strong sense of authentic reportage. But gradually this plausible narrative becomes grotesque, with the Russian's sadistic treatment of the ill Jewish boy, and eventually fantastic when the boy's Bible gets torn by the Russian and the child believes the book is wounded and bleeding. This pathetic romantic ending places this story in a tradition of nineteenth-century Jewish tales from the shtetl, as in the works of Y.L. Peretz (1951-1915) (Abramson, *Hebrew* 23) rather than in the expressionist-modernist European literature of the time.

Hameiri gives voice to crucial predicaments of a large section of contemporary Jewish population, but places these Jewish questions within a European context. His own personal journey, from traditional provincial Jewish home, to secular education and assimilated modern life in Budapest at the eve

of the war resembles that of an entire generation. His war-time experiences, and his careful observation of the experiences of others, those who fight and suffer alongside him in the trenches, those across the border among the enemy lines, the non-combatants who remain back in the carefree city and the misery of the civilians caught up in the fighting, all shed light on different experiences of Jews in Central and Eastern Europe in the first decades of the twentieth century. This vast scope of Jewish experience, immediately effected by the great events unfolding in Europe and forming part of European culture, found in Hameiri's writing is partly the reason for the unprecedented success and importance of his work, especially *The Great Madness* at the time of its publication (noted already upon its first publication, by Ben Eliezer 14-15). However, only a decade later, reality for European Jews of Europe had changed dramatically, and with the almost annihilation of Jewish life in Europe, the world described in Hameiri's writings became very distant, and the issues he had earlier raised in his novel were no longer relevant. Hameiri continued to write and work in Palestine, later Israel, but rarely returned to the central theme of his earlier works, the Great War and its impact. His readers were no longer supportive of the pacifist-universal message found in his works. Nor could they identify with the Jewish experience described. The initial excitement of both contemporary critics and readers of Hebrew about a 'European'-style writer among the early modern Hebrew authors of mandatory Palestine, waned quickly. Nowadays, János Kósbányai, who translated *The Great Madness* into Hungarian, reads Hameiri's early work as a Hungarian literary production. Hameiri's immigration from the country of his birth and his eventual decision, in the 1920s, to write and publish in Hebrew, after a decade of creative writing in both languages, resulted in the fact that the most representative and prolific of Magyar writers of the Great War is virtually unknown in Hungary (Kósbányai <<http://www.irodalmijelen.hu/05242013-0950/kobanyai-janos-avidgor-hameiri-magyar-ady-evei-2008-februar>>).

In both Israel and Hungary, Hameiri's corpus of war literature is not easily available and not widely read, despite several attempts to revive the interest in Hameiri's war literature among the Hebrew reading public (a collected edition of his war stories published in 1970, and new editions, with scholarly introductions, edited by Holtzman, of his war memoirs published by Dvir in 1989), and recent reintroductions to the man and this chapter in his life and to a wider audience (Holtzman, "One Hundred"; Mond, "The Writer"). Today, in Israel, Hameiri is mostly forgotten or is remembered only as the founder of the satirical Kumkum theater. In 2011, when the "Memorial Museum of Hungarian Speaking Jewry" in Safed, Israel, opened an exhibition dedicated to Jewish artists who left Hungary in the twentieth century, Hameiri is not featured under the section for writers, but only under theater (although some of his Great War sketches were displayed, but no information offered about his war literature (see Alexander <<http://baderech.hjm.org.il/Article.aspx/He/HameiriAvidgor>>). Otherwise, Hameiri's name for the Israeli reader conjures up his lighter poetry, most notably "From the Summit of Mt Scopus" (מעל פסגת הר הצופים) (1928).

Hameiri was a prolific translator, and perhaps foremost a poet. Poems and lines of verse are included in *The Great Madness* (one of them, "My Son Hanina" is chapter 17 in the original Hebrew and does not appear in Lotan's English translation) and Hameiri also published over fifty poems that relate directly to the war and his experience at the front and in captivity. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss Hameiri's war poems, and their place alongside other Hebrew and Yiddish poems of the Great War, mostly notably those by U.Z. Greenberg and Shaul Tchernichowsky (see Abramson, "Wound"; Goodblatt <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2330>>), though one must consider them, along with Hameiri's own play based on *The Great Madness* and his Hebrew translation of the play based on Jaroslav Hašek's 1935 *The Good Soldier Svejk* as components of his war literature in its entirety. Whereas the poems and the plays are the least documentary of his writings, in their free use of expressionism and literary tropes, at the same time they are the most genuine and authentic of literary expression. And as the comparative presentation in this paper suggest, the blurring of literary forms and techniques is intentional and controlled. The author uses a variety of literary media to convey his most personal experiences, even simply as a witness observer. Rather than judge this literary corpus through the criterion of historical accuracy and attempt to place each work somewhere along the spectrum between documentary and fiction, it is more useful to consider all these works together as a genre of war literature in a variety of media. Further support to such an inclusive categorization of these writings is found in the relatively limited period in which they were all produced, and while central to Hameiri's life and literary career, once completed, sometime in the mid 1930s, Hameiri has not returned to write about the Great War.

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Author's profile: Tamar S. Drukker teaches Hebrew language, literature and culture at SOAS, University of London. Her interests in scholarship include historical narratives, early Modern Hebrew prose and contemporary Israeli writing. Drukker's publications include "'I am a Civil War': The Poetry of Haim Gouri," *War and Poetry in the Middle East* (Ed. Hugh Kennedy, 2013), "Language and Silences in Two of Aharon Appelfeld's Coming-of-Age Tales," *Yod: revue des études hébraïques et juives modernes et contemporaines* (2014), and "The Love of Jacob to Rachel in Modern Hebrew Poetry," *The Poetry of Love in Middle Eastern Literatures* (Ed. Atef Alshaer, 2017).
E-mail: <td4@soas.ac.uk>