



RON SEGAL'S first work was inspired by his research on the Shoah Foundation's digital archives. (Pavel Bolo)



IMPRESSED WITH the German reading and publishing culture: Assaf Gavron. (Fana Feng)

German people of the Israeli book

A German-Israeli book story

• ORIT ARFA

FRANFFURT – At the Leipzig Book Fair early this year, months before the Frankfurt Book Fair that just wrapped up last weekend, the Israel booth sponsored by the Israeli Embassy could hardly accommodate Germans who came for readings with Israeli authors Eshkol Nevo, and Dror Mishani.

In the audience was Franziska Jackisch, a high-school teacher organizing an Israeli-German student exchange with some government financial support.

“I think I got interested in Israeli literature as an older teenager because my mom has always been interested in it, so I ‘inherited’ it in a way,” Jackisch told *The Jerusalem Post*. She most recently read works by Lizzie Doron and Dorit Rabinyan, whose popularity soared in Germany after Education Minister Naftali Bennett banned her Israeli-Palestinian love story from being taught in Israeli schools.

Just a few weeks later, another event took place in Berlin that would seem to point to a particular German interest in Hebrew fiction. The Heinrich Böll Stiftung, a political foundation associated with the Green Party, held a weekend conference dedicated to Israeli-German literature covering the theme of social justice. The opening took place on the eve of Holocaust Remembrance Day, but there, the Deutsches Theater was barely half-full.

Israeli author Mira Magen, whose parents had escaped Hitler's clutches, addressed the crowd. “To sit now in Germany and to talk about justice, and lack of, is a type of closing a circle, even though it will never be closed.”

This attempt at closing a circle that can never be closed has led Germany to become a warm market for Israeli literature, although a dip in sales and acquisitions might signal that the glory days are over – days when Israeli satirist Ephraim Kishon enjoyed a more illustrious career in Germany than in his own country. German readers' tastes and interests are now shifting to reflect an increasingly post-Holocaust era.

“There were many years when Israeli literature was extremely desired by German publishers and readers. In the last several years there has been a tremendous decline – in the rights that are bought and the advances that are paid,” said Deborah Harris, of the Deborah Harris Agency, which represents David Grossman and Meir Shalev, among other heavyweights. “It was once a given that the German audience would want to read Hebrew literature – that is no longer so. Due to Israeli politics, a saturation of books on the Shoah and Israel, the interest level is now diminished.”

Nili Cohen, the director of the Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature, confirmed the decline.

“The German book market has been shifting into some kind of ‘normalization’ toward Hebrew fiction

in translation, meaning that their decisions are based in recent years on professional, commercial factors,” she said.

WITHIN THE past five years, some 260 Hebrew novels were published in English translation, compared to 130 each in both German and French. Up until 2015, a total of 1,052 Hebrew books of fiction were published in German, compared to some 1,537 in English and 694 in French.

Cohen cites Zeruya Shalev, Ayelet Gundar-Goshen and Eshkol Nevo as particularly successful Israeli authors in Germany.

“These authors are known for focusing on personal, psychological, moral and social themes,” Cohen said. Despite the decline, Germany still provides a relatively welcoming platform for an international Israeli break-out.

“I would say that Israel is a special country for Germany, and there's maybe an older audience than a younger one interested in Israel right now,” said Shelly Kupferberg, an Israeli-born German journalist who moderates Israeli literary readings in Germany. “But there are people like Amichai Shalev, Etgar Keret and Assaf Gavron, and not the ‘three big tenors’ – Amoz Oz, Grossman and A.B. Yehoshua – a new generation of Israeli writers being translated into German.”

Gavron, best known for his acclaimed novel *The Hilltop* (Scribner, Aliyat Hagag), travels to Germany

regularly. In April, he went as part of a book tour sponsored by the left-wing NGO Breaking the Silence, for *Kingdom of Olives and Ash: Writers Confront the Occupation*, an anthology of essays to which Gavron contributed. He's been back several times since to promote his latest novel, *Eighteen Lashes*.

His novel *Almost Dead*, about an Israeli businessman who somehow keeps averting terrorist attacks during the Second Intifada, was his first to debut in Germany (Luchterhand Literaturverlag 2010). After the Deborah Harris Agency gave up on it, he found a German agent through a friend.

“He was able to sell it right away in Germany, with a good publisher,” Gavron said in an interview at his Tel Aviv home. “For me it was a big jump. They paid me a very nice advance, and they published it in hardcover, and they brought me on a big tour... It really established me as an important Israeli writer in Germany.”

In the United States, *The Hilltop* established Gavron largely among Jewish readers and institutions, although it was praised in mainstream American media. For Americans, Israeli literature fits a niche market. For Germans, Israel is a topic of more general appeal.

Germany, relative to other countries, has a particular fondness for foreign literature. Germany boasts the third largest book market after the United States and China.

“A lot of American literature is translated, [including] Latin American literature, so there is a real richness of international literature in the book market, and there Israel takes part,” said Thomas Sparr, a senior editor at Suhrkamp Publishers, whose Israeli authors include Amos Oz, a German darling.

Berlin-based Israeli author Ron Segal notices another contributing factor: financial support fostering Israeli-German cultural and academic exchange.

SEGAL WENT to Berlin in 2009 on a scholarship to conduct research on digital archives of the Shoah Foundation, work that eventually inspired his first novel, *Adin* (Pardes 2010). The Israeli Culture Ministry supported the German translation.

“It's really important to be translated, especially if your native language is spoken by a few millions,” Segal said over the phone during the Israeli book tour for his second novel, *Cat's Music*. “It's a very beautiful language, but how many people speak or read Hebrew? There are 80 million Germans, so of course it makes a difference.”

Both he and Gavron believe Germany's respect for literature also plays a part.

“I'm really impressed with the German reading and publishing culture,” Gavron said. “People come to events. They buy the books. They're curious. They want to know.”



(LEFT TO right) One of the ‘Three Tenors’: David Grossman. (Photos: Wikimedia Commons)

DECORATED WRITER Eshkol Nevo has found success in Germany. (Moti Kikayon)

DORIT RABINYAN'S popularity soared among German readers after Education Minister Naftali Bennett banned her Israeli-Palestinian love story from being taught in Israeli schools.



ISRAELI AUTHORS were a draw at the Leipzig Book Fair. (Orit Arfa)

Major American publishers run through the numbers more than they do the letters, but that's changing in Germany, too.

Reading is increasingly being supplanted by Netflix, social media and other competitors, said Alexander Simon, a German literary agent who represents Segal.

“Surveys and research shows we lost over six million readers in the past six years,” Simon said.

He took on Segal because he loved the book, but these days, German publishers are less willing to take risks.

“Once, they wouldn't mind if they lost 20,000 or 30,000 euros. They could make it on someone else,” Simon said. “That's not the case anymore.”

He agrees that unpopular Israeli politics have precipitated the decline, especially since “Netanyahu and his gang” came to power. “I've had the impression, and this is what I've heard between the lines, that interest in Israeli literature has really gone down. It was really high in the 70s, 80s and 90s and then it dropped. I have a feeling this has to do with political issues.”

Germans are still shy of publicly criticizing Israel, lending interest in Israeli writers who will.

“When people are afraid to criticize themselves,” Simon said, “they're happy someone else is doing it.”

Still, Gavron has noticed that French and British audiences are more critical of Israel than German ones.

“I think Germans are very protective of Israel,” Gavron said. “I think they liked *Almost Dead* because there are two narrators, an Israeli and a Palestinian, and it tells the story from both sides. Most writers will be on the Left. That's the way things are. I actually think in Germany, at the events, I'll have questions from people who are critical of Israel but that wouldn't be the majority at all.”

And while interest may be on the decline, it's still being nurtured among a newer generation.

“In preparation for our Israel project, we recommended a lot of Israeli books and films and television series to our students,” said Jackisch from the Leipzig Book Fair. “And some of them told us that they've read one or two of them.”