

On the Hatikvah Trail: At the Central Zionist Archives

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I never expected to hold original handwritten letters from Naftali Herz (Zvi) Imber, renowned author of Hatikvah, Israel's National Anthem, to Israel Zangwill, novelist and playwright, from about 1907 – nor copies of two letters to the Jewish Chronicle about the melody for Hatikvah. There was a wealth of material to cover at the Central Zionist Archives, this being only one subject on my agenda, and I wanted to see what would offer added value on Hatikvah for Jewish communities today.

In fact, I had not realized before my visit just how many people had put pen to paper on the life of Imber, or disputed when he was born, where he wrote Hatikvah (Tikvateinu), who composed the melody, and the origins of the melody itself. I can elaborate a little, keeping it simple: it would all make an interesting true/false quiz, but it depends on whose version would be considered definitive! I opened reams of old photostats, leaflets, newspaper articles, and worked my way through them, looking carefully to see who said what and why: without raising the spectre of old disputes, I think it makes for interesting reading.

1. In his Medical Diary at the St Louis hospital where the impoverished, sick writer was hospitalized in the early 20th century, Imber wrote that he was born in 1856; nonetheless, there are well substantiated explanations of the fact that he was born in 1855.

2. Imber's brother Shmaryahu (who held Imber's diaries and wrote about him) wrote several times, lastly in 1940, that Naftali was a mute until age 7, but though often quoted, there is no other substantiation of this condition.

To us, his mute state might sound like a form of autism, if at all credible.

At age 7, Imber started Cheder and was recognized as a renowned Talmud scholar within the space of 3 years, but moved to new and secular horizons as a poet and writer in his early teens, writing in German, then Hebrew, and – much later - English.

3. Imber is often cited as coming to Eretz Yisrael for a period of about 6 years. Galya Yardeni (1964) shows that he was only here for 4 years and 4 months.

4. Imber wrote of the "jubilee of Hatikvah" in 1902, and also wrote to Theodor Herzl that he had founded Zionism 25 years before him. However, the title "Tikvateinu" was inspired from the founding of Petah Tikvah in 1878, so one should allow a little poetic license with the dates.

5. Shmaryahu writes that Imber wrote Hatikvah in Jassy, Romania in תרל"ט (1878-1879) but there are records from settlers in Rishon Letzion to show that he wrote it there and that they corrected his Hebrew. However, there was also another writer who explained that Imber wrote it within a cycle of poems, e.g. Hope, Faith, etc., and another (a critic of Imber) who drew parallels with a verse in Heinrich Heine's poetry...

6. Similar records also attest to the composition of the melody being by Samuel Cohen. The date of the composition is also in dispute, but that is a less-argued point.

7. Finally, I came to the great debate about the melody itself.

a. One writer discussed the composer Smetana's exposure to Jewish music (Sephardi) through a Jewish woman with whom he pursued an acquaintance, and thus the use of the Sephardi Hallel/Prayer for Dew motif in his "Ma Vlast".

b. Another explained that these Sephardi tunes could be traced back to notations in the early seventeenth century, but did not feel that this explanation was credible, and explained that the tune was probably also prevalent in various folk cultures, including in a Swedish folksong.

c. Two handwritten letters to the Jewish Chronicle, the latter in 1930, however, bring the musical notation for the Sephardi Hallel and "Ma Vlast" to support that particular thesis.

The last happens to be my favourite, but I don't discount the popular folk melody idea, either – they co-exist quite comfortably for me!

My overall impressions of Imber the man were mixed: a hyper-active genius who showed early promise as a poet, was a genuine Zionist, but had personality problems, a person without the ability or luck to sustain himself financially - despite his various benefactors, including the Christadelphian Oliphant, in Eretz Yisrael and Judge Mayer Sulzberger in the USA.

After he left the shores of the Holy Land for India, England and America, he really seems to have lost much of his inspiration, although he did publish later volumes of "Barkai" poems in America. In England, Imber had rebelled against the Jewish establishment and was suspected of association with the missionary movement: the best one can say is that he was easily influenced by his benefactors. He thought of himself as an apikores, but in his later life in America he enjoyed some social acceptance in Jewish circles, publishing for the JPS and the Library of Congress, during his productive period. He also continued his acquaintance and correspondence with another transplanted soul, Israel Zangwill, whom he had met earlier in England.

The original blogger

Imber wrote all kinds of prose, and many letters: about himself, his wish to return to 'Palestine', the pre-eminence of Hatikvah and, of course, all sorts of ditties and poems dedicated to his benefactors. I definitely visualize him as the quintessential Jewish literary blogger of the early twentieth century. Imber also had a facility for throwing off articles and treatises on almost any subject, as well as for public speaking – an option he chose as his creative writing declined further. Some of his correspondence and manuscripts are in Hebrew, too, but his handwriting sadly became less and less legible as his health deteriorated, and he could have done with the advantages of a soft touch keyboard. Imber's indigent state, together with his predilection for drink and dissipation, were major factors in the decline of his health and his early death in 1909.

Tragically, but almost inevitably, Imber did not fulfill either his dreams or his potential, and his writing as a whole did not bear out that early spark of genius. Nonetheless, each work should be judged on its own merits, and its timing. Those who do him justice will remember him for more poems about the First Aliyah, as well as his later Hebrew translation from the English of the ancient Persian ballad, the Rubayyat of Omar Kayyam. Imber predated the wave of Modern Hebrew poets, like Bialik and his successors, who actually came to live in Eretz Yisrael, many of them suffering tremendous hardship. Possibly, those who criticize him most simply misjudge the context, and even envy his pre-eminence as the person who will be remembered for one great contribution he made to Hebrew poetry, even if his Hebrew required correction. The names of his critics are mainly forgotten...

100,000 people turned up for Naftali Herz Imber's funeral procession - a tribute to his one work that inspired everyone around the world: ***Hatikvah***.