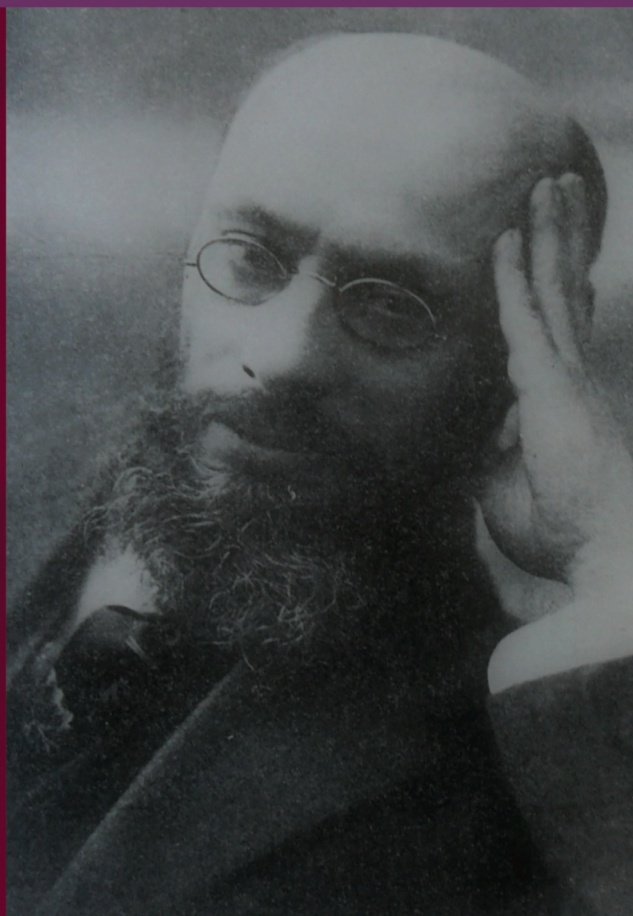


Shoshana Ronen

A PROPHET OF CONSOLATION
ON THE THRESHOLD OF DESTRUCTION:

Yehoshua Ozjasz Thon

an Intellectual Portrait



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Warsaw 2015

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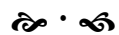
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*To Stanislaw Obirek,
my companion for life
and ideas, with deep affection*

Contents

Acknowledgments	9
Introduction	11
1. Life: Lwów – Berlin – Kraków	17
Lwów (Lemberg, L'viv): Childhood	17
Berlin: Maturity	29
Kraków: A Rabbi and a Leader	39
The Jewish community in Kraków	49
Politics	51
Postmortem	55
2. Literature: From Avant-garde to Tradition	59
<i>Tse'irim</i> : The Dispute in <i>Ha-Shiloah</i>	61
True Literature is National	68
Two Literary Options: Berdyczewski versus Bialik	76
A Writer and an Editor	81
The Revival of Hebrew Language	86
3. Religion: Between Athens and Jerusalem	96
Preaching: The Religious Message	96
<i>Haskalah</i> : West versus East	106
Thon's perception of Orthodox and Reform Judaism	109
Judaism as a Civilization	117
The Third Way (Golden Mean): Synthesis	120

4. Philosophy and Sociology: Sources of Inspiration	125
Kant and Perpetual Optimism	128
Sociology in Its Early Stage	131
Herbert Spencer in Hebrew	136
Thon's Reading of Spencer's Philosophy	139
The Philosophical Foundations of Zionism	144
 5. Nationalism: The Revival of the Jewish People	 148
Nationalism	150
Jewish Nationalism	155
Zionism	162
Two Zionist Prophets: Ahad Ha-Am and Herzl	174
Ahad Ha-Am	174
Theodor Herzl	184
Zionism and the Diaspora	189
The Jewish Nation in the Multi-National Polish State	197
 6. Political Thought and Activity	 203
The Jews in Interwar Poland	206
The Paris Peace Conference 1919	213
The Post-War Pogroms	222
Jewish Parliamentary Politics and <i>Koło Żydowskie</i>	231
<i>Ugoda</i>	239
Thon's Last Two Terms in the Sejm	247
Thon the Politician in the Eyes of Others	252
 Epilogue	 257
 Bibliography	 261
Index	274

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A special gratefulness to my husband Stanislaw Obirek for his assistance and encouragement in the process of research in different libraries and archives and in the process of writing. He is always with me and for me in moments of intellectual delight but also in moments of despair. I dedicate this book to him.

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'khameha*, (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*, (Netherland: 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.

1

Life: Lwów – Berlin – Kraków

Lwów (Lemberg, L'viv):¹ Childhood

Three memoirs are the fundamental sources for the construction of the environment in which Abraham Yehoshua-Ozjasz Thon² was born and raised in Lwów. These are his memoir³ and the memoirs of his close friends Mordechai-Marcus Ehrenpreis⁴ and Mordechai-Marcus Braude.⁵ It is interesting that one can find more details about Thon's home and family

¹ The many names of the city, depending on the power relations and cultural orientations, are a challenge. I have chosen the Polish version of Lwów in this book because, even before the revival of independent Poland, and certainly from the year of Thon's birth (1870) till World War II, the hegemony in the city was Polish. I am aware to the fact that there are good arguments to choose another name, for instance Lemberg as long as the city was under the Habsburg Empire role, or L'viv as its current name in the Ukraine. For the complexity of the city's name see: Harald Binder, "Making and Defending a Polish Town: 'Lwów' (Lemberg), 1848–1914," *Austrian History Yearbook*, 34 (2003), 57–81.

² This surname was a common for Jews in Galicia, for example, in Tarnów, Lwów, Drohobycz. It has German origin from Thonner. See: Alexander Beider, *A Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from Galicia* (USA: Avotayno, 2004), 541.

³ Yehoshua Thon, "Demuyot mi-Lvov," in *Pirkei Galitsyah*, ed. Israel Cohen and Dov Sadan (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1957), 369–375. Thon's text was published, first, in Yiddish in *Haynt*, 30.4.1929.

⁴ First published in Swedish: Ehrenpreis, Mordechai Marcus, *Mitt liv mellan öster och väster* (Stockholm: A. Bonniers Förlag, 1946). I used the Hebrew translation: *Beyn mizrah le-ma'arav*, ed. Hanoah Alkalay, trans. M. Giyora (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, New Edition, 1986). Markus Ehrenpreis (1869–1951), was the chief rabbi of Bulgaria (1900–1914) and Stockholm (1914–1951), was a writer, an editor, and a Zionist activist.

⁵ Mordechai Marcus Braude, "Zikhronotav shel ha-rav doktor Mordechai Ze'ev Braude (1870–1908)," in *Zikhron Mordechai Ze'ev Braude*, ed. Dov Sadan and Hayim Ormiyan (Jerusalem: Ha-Sifriya Ha-Tsiyonit, 1960), 15–233. Mordechai Marcus Braude (1870–1949), was the rabbi of Łódź, an educator, a member to the Polish Senate, and a Zionist activist.

in his friends' memories than in his own.⁶ Thon himself was reluctant to tell more intimate details about his home and family, so he related only a few significant figures who were active at the time of his childhood and adolescence in his hometown. Moreover, Thon emphasized that he had no intention whatsoever to write an autobiography and would like only to illustrate a few personalities important to him in the town.

After living in Kraków for 32 years, and 38 years after leaving Lwów, Yehoshua Thon wrote in his memoir: "Lwów my homeland. In this city I was born and there are the roots and origins of my soul. From my forefathers ... I am a Lwower and will always be a Lwower."⁷ Thon was born in Lwów (Lemberg) on February 13, 1870.⁸ At that time the city was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the capital of Galicia. In this period it was under a great Polish influence, and the Polish language became the official language of the administration.⁹ As Ehrenpreis wrote, at that time the city was a cosmopolitan place, characterized by multi-cultural and multi-religious atmosphere. Culturally it was situated between East and West, and therefore, influenced by both cultures, namely, Eastern and Western European. Five different ethnic groups were living there: Poles, Rusyns, (Ruthenians – today one would say Ukrainians), Jews, Armenians, and Germans. As

⁶ There are a few biographies of Thon, most of them repeat, more or less, the same details. Important are two biographies written by his daughter Nella. The first, in Polish, was written after his death, and the second was published in English and Spanish in the 1960s, so it has the perspective of the war and the destruction of the European Jewry. Nella Thon-Rostowa, *Ozjasz Thon: Wspomnienia córki*, (Lwów: Cofim, 1937); Nella Thon-Rost-Hollander, *Jehoshua Thon: Preacher, Thinker, Politician*, (Montevideo – Uruguay: Beit Galizia, 1966). Jeremiasz Frenkel published his biography of Thon twice. Once for Thon's sixtieth birthday, and the second time after his death with a slight change. Jeremiasz Frenkel, *Ozjasz Thon: Zarys Biograficzny* (Kraków: 1930), and Jeremiasz Frenkel, "Ozjasz Thon," in *Almanach i leksykon żydostwa polskiego*, ed. Roman Goldberger, (Lwów: H. Likier, 1938), 200–231. Hirsch Pfeffer also published twice his biography of Thon. Hirsch Pfeffer, *Ozjasz Thon 1870–1936*, (Kraków: Centralny komitet uczczenia pamięci dra Ozjasz Thona, 1937), and Hirsch Pfeffer, "Dr. Ozjasz Thon," in *Almanach i leksykon żydostwa polskiego*, ed. Roman Goldberger, (Lwów: H. Likier, 1938), 350–375. Another short biography of Thon was written by the well-known historian Bałaban. Majer Bałaban, "Dr. Ozjasz Thon (1870–1936)," in *Almanach i leksykon żydostwa polskiego*, ed. Roman Goldberger, (Lwów: H. Dikier, 1938), 120–135.

⁷ Thon, "Demuyot mi-Lvov," 343.

⁸ Frenkel, *Ozjasz Thon: Zarys Biograficzny*, 5; Pfeffer, *Ozjasz Thon 1870–1936*, 10.

⁹ Ela Bauer, "The Intellectual and the City: Lvov (Lwów, Lemberg, Lviv) and Yehoshua Ozjasz Thon," in *A Romantic Polish – Jew: Rabbi Ozjasz Thon from Various Perspectives*, ed. Michał Galas and Shoshana Ronen, (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2015), 11–26.

Ehrenpreis noted, this kind of ethnic and religious mixture was a melting-pot for universal ideas and values.¹⁰ In Galicia Jews benefited from living in a multinational environment in which, “national pluralism was the norm and national minority movements flourished.”¹¹

Galician Jews gained their emancipation three years before Thon was born, in 1867. Therefore, he was born into a social and political atmosphere in which Jews enjoyed extensive civil and political rights similar to the political and civil status of Jews in Western Europe.¹² It seems that the emancipation of the Jews came hand in hand with Galicia gaining its autonomy within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and it happened in the same year when the constitution was passed – 1867. The Poles, as the major group of Galician landowners, constituted the ruling group, and Polish became not only the official language of the region, but also of the dominant culture.¹³ Therefore, Lwów became an important cultural center of the Poles.¹⁴ Since then, a growing Polonization process could be identified among the Jews of Galicia in general, and the Jews of Lwów in particular,¹⁵ and also an intensification of the Jewish assimilation into the Polish society. Processes of assimilation were various, starting from lingual and cultural acculturation to a total integration into the Polish society, ending in a small numbers of conversions to Catholicism.¹⁶

In the second half of the nineteenth century till the beginning of the twentieth century Jews were about 28 percent of the entire population. The thirty-one thousand Jews in 1880 grew to around thirty-six thousand Jews by 1890.¹⁷ At the end of the eighteenth century the Enlightenment and Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) began to influence the traditional Jewish

¹⁰ Ehrenpreis, *Beyn mizrah*, 8.

¹¹ Joshua Shanes, *Diaspora Nationalism and Jewish Identity in Habsburg Galicia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³ Józef Buszko, “The consequences of Galician Autonomy after 1867,” *Polin*, 12 (1999): 86.

¹⁴ Nathan Michael Gelber, “Lvov,” *Encyclopedia shel galuyot*, vol. 4 (Jerusalem: Encyclopedia of the Jewish Diaspora, 1956), 304.

¹⁵ Jerzy Holzer, “Enlightenment, Assimilation and Modern Identity: The Jewish Elite in Galicia,” *Polin*, 12 (1999): 82–83.

¹⁶ Gelber, “Lvov,” 304.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* For detailed illustration of the Jewish community in Lvov see pages: 303–342. See also: Rachel Manekin, “Lviv,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, ed. Gershon D. Hundert, vol. 1, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 1106–1110.

Ghetto. Moses Mendelssohn, Nachman Krochmal, and Solomon Judah Loeb Rapoport, all were known and read.¹⁸ Ehrenpreis wrote that in the time of their childhood¹⁹ the liberal winds were already there; for example, in Lwów was a progressive Jewish community with their Tempel – house of worship.²⁰ Apart from being a multi-cultural and multi-national city, a vital and an energetic Lwów was also very important for the religious and cultural history of the Jews. Thon noted that as a border town Lwów was also a wild metropolis, and ironically he mentioned that it was the only city – fortunately no other town followed in its steps – that murdered its progressive Rabbi,²¹ poisoned by an ultra-orthodox Jew.²²

Orthodoxy and Hasidism also were a part of the Jewish community in Lwów, however, from the mid-nineteenth century the assimilationists were the major power. However, toward the end of the nineteenth century their power declined and the influence of nationalist-Zionist trends was felt. At that time, two Zionists societies were founded there: *Mikra Kodesh* (1883) and *Zion* (1888) in which Thon and his friends played a major role.²³

Both Ehrenpreis and Braude mentioned that Thon was born to a very poor family. In his family, an orthodox one, were some important Jewish scholars; also his father was a man of letters.²⁴ His father, Moshe Thon, was an intelligent and erudite person, but he had poor health and could not provide for his family. He worked as a bookkeeper in a very small hat workshop for a minor salary. Therefore, Thon's mother, Clara (nee Bender), a simple but energetic and gentle woman, had to earn their living as a peddler. In the evening she would return home to her hungry children with one loaf of bread which she cut to six pieces. The parents and their four children, two girls and two boys (Yehoshua was the second, and the youngest brother Ya'akov,²⁵

¹⁸ Thon, "Demuyot mi-Lvov," 344–345.

¹⁹ Ehrenpreis was born in 1869, and Thon and Braude in 1870.

²⁰ Ehrenpreis, *Beyn mizrah*, 14. The Temple was opened in 1844. Encyclopedia Judaica, vol. 13: 290.

²¹ The reform chief Rabbi of Lwów, Abraham Kohn, was murdered in 1848. For the sequence of events that led to this sad incident see: Michael Stanislawski, *A Murder in Lemberg: Politics, Religion and Violence in Modern Jewish History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

²² Thon, "Demuyot mi-Lvov," 345.

²³ Hereinafter more about these two organizations. See also notes no. 47, 57.

²⁴ Bałaban, "Dr. Ozjasz Thon (1870–1936)," 122.

²⁵ Ya'akov Thon (1880–1950), was also an important figure in the Zionist movement. He immigrated to Palestine in 1907 and became an activist and a leader of the Jewish community

was born 1880), lived in poverty.²⁶ Braude mentioned that although Moshe Thon was an honest man, he was also impulsive and grumpy who could not control his temper, so the children sometimes suffered much from his severe pedagogical approach.²⁷ In a memoir written a year after his death his daughter Nella Thon-Rostowa also confirmed that Thon's father Moshe was a harsh person and a conservative Jew, and he wanted his son to become an orthodox Rabbi. Yehoshua Thon had to conceal from his father that he studied much more than the strict Judaic books. At home he hid the secular books which he borrowed from friends because if his father found them he would have torn them up. Therefore, Thon read them at night while the others slept.²⁸ Thon, never mentioned such details in his memoir. What is even more interesting, Thon illustrated figures from Lwów and also mentioned some far members of his family; however, one cannot find in his memoir anything about his family life: not a word about his mother, brother, and sisters, and he mentioned his father in passing only three times. The only family members that Thon mentioned with great admiration were his uncles (Nisan Zis, Shmuel Goldberg) who were worth recalling due to their knowledge of Judaism.²⁹

Thon's house was rather traditional and he studied in *heder* till the age of ten. He was such a brilliant pupil that when the *Melamed* (teacher in *heder*) could not teach him anything more, he left the *heder* and continued studying without teachers under the supervision of the publisher and the printer Rabbi Uri Ze'ev Wolf Salat.³⁰ Thon recalled this man with great respect and admiration. He was the most influential personality, from whom he acquired all his knowledge of the Torah and good virtues. Thon described him as a genius, who had many talents and skills. Apart from being a publisher, he was an erudite scholar, a teacher, a leader, a guide, an educator, an intellectual, and a poet.³¹ The greatest admiration and gratefulness Thon directed not to

in Palestine. He was the founder and the first chairman of the Provisional Council (Ha-Va'ad Ha-Zemanni) of the Jewish community and later on of the Va'ad Le'ummi presidium. See: Encyclopedia Judaica. Vol. 19: 708

²⁶ Pfeffer, *Ozjasz Thon*, 12.

²⁷ Ehrenpreis, *Beyn mizrah*, 15–16; Braude, "Zikhronotav shel," 47. See also, Nathan Michael Gelber, "Dr. Yehoshua Thon," in *Sefer Kroke: ir vaaem be-Israel*, ed. Aryeh Bauminger et al., (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kuk, 1959), 355–357.

²⁸ Thon-Rostowa, *Wspomnienia córki*, 8–9.

²⁹ Thon, "Demuyot mi-Lvov," 346–349.

³⁰ Frankel, *Ozjasz Thon*, 6; Braude, "Zikhronotav shel," 66–67.

³¹ Thon, "Demuyot mi-Lvov," 350–352.

his father or other family members but to Uri-Wolf Salat: “my master and venerable teacher who went ahead of me like a pillar of fire to lighten my way.”³² Thon’s daughter reminisced that Salat took care of Thon not only spiritually and intellectually, but also looked out for his health. Because of the poor conditions at home, the young Thon’s health was very fragile. She remembered her father talking about his childhood with words such as cold, hunger, and poverty. He was very weak and ill because of physical work and studies so Rabi Salat sent him for two months to the countryside, there he gained a positive energy and strength for his life. In the countryside he was thinking, dreaming, writing, and for the first time in his life he was close to nature. Nella Thon concluded, that Uri-Wolf Salat was his guardian angel.³³

Thus, without, as Thon admitted “any help of his parents and teachers” he was studying in the house of Uri-Wolf Salat, who had a great Talmudic library. There, until the age of seventeen, he studied the Torah and Talmud during the days and in the nights in the Beit Midrash (the house of Torah study). Thon described the unconventional way of teaching of Uri-Wolf Salat, a method that helped Thon to become an independent thinker and a Talmudic scholar.³⁴ Uri-Wolf Salat was the one to give Thon the first ordination as a Rabbi when he was sixteen, it had a private character, but Thon always appreciated it more than his formal ordination in Berlin.³⁵ Salat was one of the most famous Jewish scholars in Lwów and the fact that he invested so much time and care for young Thon shows how promising was the brilliant young pupil.³⁶ Thon’s encounter with Salat was decisive in his life, and contributed a lot to his future. Salat invested much time in the education of the young boy and in doing so encouraged Thon who then was not yet confident in his skills.³⁷

Mordechai-Marcus Braude described the ten year old Thon as an extraordinary pupil. When Braude was also ten years old, his father, Rabbi Aryeh Leib Braude, brought him a new friend – Yehoshua Thon. Rabbi Aryeh Leib met the young and witty boy in the Yeshiva of Pinhas Kalish, a rich man who had no children of his own and opened this Yeshiva for talented children from poor families. Braude’s father, who took on himself to be the

³² Ibid, 350.

³³ Thon-Rostowa, *Wspomnienia córki*, 9–12.

³⁴ Thon, “Demuyot mi-Lvov,” 352–353.

³⁵ Thon-Rost-Hollander, *Preacher, Thinker, Politician*, 12; Frankel, *Ozjasz Thon*, 6.

³⁶ Gelber, “Dr. Yehoshua Thon,” 355.

³⁷ Thon-Rostowa, *Wspomnienia córki*, 9–13.

inspector for the quality of studies, was impressed by the sharp answers of young Thon. Braude admitted that he did not like Thon at first sight, “green small boy in yellow suit,” but when they start to talk and play together he came to like him for his attentiveness and cleverness. Since that day the three friends – Braude, Ehrenpreis, and Thon – met almost every day after school, usually in Ehrenpreis’ home. They became very close friends who shared the same ambitions and inspirations for the Torah and Haskalah. Braude wrote that they had mutual influence on each other and while Ehrenpreis introduced them to Hebrew literature, he himself introduced his friends to general, not religious, knowledge, and to the European way of life and way of thinking: sciences, philosophy, and literature.³⁸ About Thon, Braude added that he was very talented, was clever, and had a great memory. For example, in his Bar-Mitzvah Thon impressed all the guests with his knowledge and wisdom. Wolf Salat who was so impressed by Thon crowned him as a genius. This, wrote Braude, was a mistake because Thon on the one hand, having great ambitions, was filled with pride, but, on the other hand, it also caused him to feel inferior, because of the poverty in which he was living. Young Thon felt great pain and misery, because he could not have an easy access to secular/external (not Jewish) studies, while Braude, the grandson of the distinguished rabbi of Lwów – Tsevi Hirsh Orenstein – had private teachers and as many books as he wanted. Thon and Ehrenpreis could not afford even books and had to borrow from schoolmates and friends.³⁹ Ehrenpreis also depicted young Thon as a brilliant person. As he wrote, Thon showed a great rhetorical talent already in school. He could talk for a long time with well-built sentences, rich and ornamental language, and logical arguments. No wonder, added Ehrenpreis, that Thon became one of the prominent speakers in the Polish parliament.⁴⁰

Thon recalled with great affection the home of Braude’s family, the grandfather Rabbi Orenstein his son-in-law Aryeh Leib Braude (Mordechai Braude’s father), and their wives. Majer Bałaban wrote that Rabbi Orenstein was the model of rabbi that Thon tried to follow all his life.⁴¹ Even if Bałaban exaggerated, after all Orenstein was a traditional rabbi, Thon remembered him with great respect.⁴² Braude’s house was of great scholarship but also

³⁸ Braude, “Zikhronotav shel,” 47.

³⁹ Ibid, 77.

⁴⁰ Ehrenpreis, *Beyn mizrah*, 28.

⁴¹ Bałaban, “Dr. Ozjasz Thon (1870–1936),” 123.

⁴² Thon, “Demuyot mi-Lvov,” 362–364.

immense sensitivity, and in fact Thon felt that it became his own home, from an early age.⁴³ “In this house the three of us were raised: Mordechai Braude in his own home, and Mordechai Ehrenpreis and me as his friends. So we were together since the age of six till adulthood. ... In this house we were studying and prepared ourselves, with discussions and disputes, for our complicated roles in life, which awaited each of us.”⁴⁴ Ehrenpreis remembered another place where they used to meet and have long walks: the Jesuit park in Lwów. There, during the 1880s, the three close friends went arm in arm immersed in deep and vivid conversations. Mature before their time, they were more serious than their peers. The relations between them were never severed until Thon’s death. He also noted that since their early years the three of them had a strong sense of mission: to release their people, the Jewish people, from external and internal slavery.⁴⁵ During their daily walks they had stormy discussions. Braude remembered the long hours of their discussions regarding Judaism, and the fate of the Jewish people. The threesome were deeply indebted to Judaism, but also were influenced by modern ideas, science, Haskalah, and nationhood. Braude mentioned the difference between them: he wanted to find the golden middle between traditional Judaism and science and for Ehrenpreis this tension between tradition and modernism was material for literature, but for Thon the contradiction between these two worlds was a source of spiritual pain. They shared the will to form a Jewish worldview that would be the foundation for their national consciousness, however, as Braude wrote, while he was conservative both his friends tend to much more radical and revolutionary opinions. Nevertheless, all the three wanted to be active and struggle for their ideas.⁴⁶

All three were eager to obtain knowledge besides Judaic studies, which would enable them to study at a German university, and the necessary step was to pass the final examinations of German gymnasium. Braude, as a son of a wealthy family, had numerous private teachers and the necessary books, however both Thon and Ehrenpreis had to study by themselves. Fortunately,

⁴³ As opposed to Braude who wrote that they met at the age of ten, Thon writes that they were friends from the age of six. Thon and Ehrenpreis were friends from such an early age probably because they were relatives, shared the same great grandmother (Thon, “Demuyot mi-Lvov,” 349), and after so many years of friendship Thon added Braude to the threesome group from the age of six.

⁴⁴ Thon, “Demuyot mi-Lvov,” 365.

⁴⁵ Ehrenpreis, *Beyn mizrah*, 15.

⁴⁶ Braude, “Zikhronotav shel,” 77–78, 81–84.

at this time, 1883, Rabbi Dr. Joseph Kobak returned to Lwów and established *Mikra Kodesh* (Holy Convocation) association,⁴⁷ which became for a while their cultural home.⁴⁸ *Mikra Kodesh* was a free of charge academic association at the gymnasium level, for young Jews from the age of 13 (Bar Mitzvah). Its educational schedule combined Jewish and religious studies with secular studies, sciences, and Hebrew language and literature, all in the spirit of the Haskalah in Galicia⁴⁹ and also with Jewish national and Zionist aspirations. The target groups for *Mikra Kodesh* were two different groups of Jewish youngsters. On the one hand, it catered those who came from assimilated families, educated in state schools, who lost contact with their tradition, but were disappointed by anti-Semitism in their non-Jewish environment, and hoped to find a new identity in national Judaism.⁵⁰ On the other hand, it attracted young boys like Thon who studied in *heder* and Yeshiva and who knew the Jewish tradition and religion perfectly, but were autodidacts in other fields of knowledge, secular studies, and sciences, which were for them a fascinating sphere. The secular studies in *Mikra Kodesh* were the perfect transition to German gymnasium for such ambitious young Jews. Ela Bauer claims that *Mikra Kodesh* was the first stage in the intellectual and public path of its members and the frame in which young people from different background became the Jewish intelligentsia in Galicia.⁵¹

Kobak arranged a group of students and gymnasium pupils who volunteered to teach the Yeshiva boys for free. From Kobak himself the pupils could learn much about *Wissenschaft des Judentums* but, as Braude emphasized, what the pupils, among them Thon, were most enthusiastic

⁴⁷ About Mikra Kodesh and Josef Kobak see: Nathan Michael Gelber, *Toldot ha-tenu'a ha-tsiyonit be-Galitsyah*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 1958), 92–146. About the ideological background and atmosphere related to the establishment of *Mikra Kodesh*, and the “chaos of ideas” connected to it see: Shanes, *Diaspora Nationalism*, 51–69; Bauer “The Intellectual”; *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 13: 290; Joshua Shanes, “Mikra Kodesh,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, vol. II, 1169.

⁴⁸ Ehrenpreis, *Beyn mizrah*, 24–25

⁴⁹ Bauer, Ela. “Ha-moreshet ha-maskilit shel ha-inteligntsia ha-yehudit bi-Lvov ba-asorim ha-achronim shel ha-mea ha-tsha esre,” (paper presented at the Conference, Megale Tmirin: 200 shana le-haskalat Galitsyah, Jerusalem, December 22–25, 2013). In contrast to the spirit of the Haskalah of Berlin, Ela Bauer underlines the importance of maskilim from Galicia to the members of *Mikra Kodesh*, and the difference between the Haskalah in Galicia and that of Berlin.

⁵⁰ Shanes, *Diaspora Nationalism*, 54–55. Ela Bauer, “Ha-moreshet ha-maskilit.”

⁵¹ Ela Bauer, “Ha-moreshet ha-maskilit.”

about was National and Zionist ideas.⁵² In *Mikra Kodesh* the students had classes also in hard sciences, German language, Jewish history, Hebrew language, and Hebrew literature of the Middle Ages. The teacher of modern Hebrew literature was the Hebrew writer Re'uven Asher Braude, to whom Thon and Ehrenpreis became attached and spent together long hours.⁵³ Polish literature was taught by the artist and public activist Alfred Nossig.⁵⁴ Ehrenpreis noted that *Mikra Kodesh* was the bridge between the Talmudic world and the general culture.⁵⁵ It is interesting to note that in his memoirs Thon expressed reservation and distance from *Mikra Kodesh*. He named it a “strange association” with a strange composition of members and a strange name that even today (when he wrote his memoir), he could not understand. Thon remembered Joseph Kobak with appreciation: he was a wise man with great knowledge, especially of Judaic studies, but Thon added that when Kobak returned to Lwów and established *Mikra Kodesh* he was already an old and broken man so he could not do really much. Thon’s attitude towards the association was skeptical, although some worthy teachers were there he concluded “we were in *Mikra Kodesh* for a while, till we found it unattractive, and in addition, we did not learn there much.”⁵⁶

With time, the young activists, led by Thon, Ehrenpreis, and Braude, were uncomfortable with the association and wanted to change it into an organization which would express more strongly their national aspirations. They felt that European culture was open for them, but did not want to resign their Jewish culture and wanted to intensify the national element in their Jewish identity. Therefore, they decided to establish a new association, and that is how *Zion* came into life in 1888. Then, they did not know, as Ehrenpreis wrote, that they were one of the first to start the Zionist

⁵² Braude, “Zikhronotav shel,” 78.

⁵³ Thon, “Demuyot mi-Lvov,” 378.

⁵⁴ Gelber, *Toldot ha-tenu’a*, 96. About the extremely intriguing figure Alfred Nossig see: Shmuel Almog, “Hayav u-moto shel Alfred Nossig,” *Yahadut Zmanenu*, 2(1985): 73–98; Ezra Mendelsohn, “Wilhelm Feldman ve-Alfred Nossig: hitbolelut ve-tsiyonut bi-Lvov,” *Gal-Ed*, 2(1975), 89–111; Shoshana Ronen, “Kitvey et ivri'im be-Varsha be-mifne ha-me'ot: Beyn ha-le'umiyut ha-ivrit la-sviva ha-polanit,” in *Historya mitnageshet ve-kiyum meshutaf*, edited by Daniel Blatman, (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2014), 162–167; Ela Bauer, “Alfred Nossig,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, vol. II, 1274.

⁵⁵ Ehrenpreis, *Beyn mizrah*, 25.

⁵⁶ Thon, “Demuyot mi-Lvov,” 367–369.

movement, a decade before Herzl.⁵⁷ Compared to Braude and Ehrenpreis, Thon was reserved in his estimation of *Mikra Kodesh*. However when he wrote about *Zion* he was much more enthusiastic than his friends, perhaps his deep Zionist worldview made him evaluate the two associations in different ways. After years he still remembered *Zion* as a very authentic initiative, stemming from the depth of their souls. They were listening only to their hearts not to anyone from the outside. Then Zionism was a utopian vision and they could not imagine that it would become such a great power in the Jewish world.⁵⁸ Thon became an engaged Zionist activist already then, with the establishment of *Zion*, and he never ceased to be one all his life, but the enthusiastic buds of his rich Zionist activity began in his youth in Lwów. Then, as he noted, they were ready to be not only observers but real actors on the stage of history. Then “we developed fully the idea that the salvation of Israel will not come from the old world of Torah and not also from the Haskalah and knowledge of *Mikra Kodesh* but only from the vision and splendor of *Zion*.”⁵⁹ Like Ehrenpreis Thon also apprehended *Zion* as one of the first buds of political Zionism, although without clear plans and not yet with the idea of “Jewish state.”⁶⁰ But over the years *Zion* developed, flourished, and became the center for a great spiritual work, a university for the “officers and commanders of Zion – Zionism.”⁶¹

Another important figure in Thon's life was Emanuel Frankel. He was also a spiritual teacher of Thon, but not in traditional Jewish studies as Wolf-Salat, but in general studies. Thanks to Frankel he came to know European culture. He had a huge library and Thon borrowed books from him. “In his guidance I read all the masterpieces of German literature, and English and French literature translated into German, and also philosophy. He dedicated to me many hours and explained me books that then I could

⁵⁷ Braude, “Zikhronotav shel,” 96; Ehrenpreis, *Beyn mizrah*, 26. More about the circumstances that led to the establishment of *Zion*, its ideology and activities see: Gelber, *Toldot ha-tenu'a*, 120–135; Shanes, *Diaspora Nationalism*, 82–94; Bauer “The Intellectual.” About Jewish nationalism in Galicia before Herzl see: Joshua Shanes, “Neither Germans nor Poles: Jewish Nationalism in Galicia before Herzl, 1883–1897,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 34 (2003): 191–213.

⁵⁸ Mojżesz Kanfer, “Godzina u pos. Thona,” *Nowy Dziennik*, 71(17.3.1930): 19.

⁵⁹ Thon, “Demuyot mi-Lvov,” 369.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 370.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 375. For the history of the Zionist movement in Galicia see: Avraham Saltz et al., “Shalosh te'udot,” in *Pirkei Galitsyah*, edited by Israel Cohen and Dov Sadan, (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1957), 57–80.

not understand by myself.”⁶² Frankel was a member in *Shomer Israel* society, an intellectual association of Jews who wanted to modernize the Galician Jews and introduce them to European, especially German, culture and which promoted the ideas of Haskalah.⁶³

Abraham Goldfaden, the father of Yiddish theater, a playwright, a director, and a poet, also had a significant impact on Thon's life.⁶⁴ Thon dedicated to him an important place in his memoir. The connection developed in the last year and a half which Thon spent in Lwów, before and after his matriculation exams. He recalled Goldfaden with great admiration and warmth; he was a real great artist, and a beautiful soul. This deep friendship can point to the fact that apart from serious studies and reflections on life and the future of the Jewish people, Thon could have great pleasure also from more light artistic forms.⁶⁵ The encounter with Goldfaden perhaps also influenced his future writing style. In an interview for his sixtieth birthday Thon was asked about his attitude to theater. Thon answered, that if one would look at any of his articles one would notice that the article was written as a drama. Each of his texts had a dramatic structure. When he was writing he always saw in front of his eyes a reader with whom he entered into a dialogue. He also wanted to gain the reader's mind, to convince him/her with his ideas. That is why drama always interested him.⁶⁶ Perhaps the seeds for his interest in drama and dialogue were planted in him in the days of the Yiddish theater in Lwów.

As mentioned, Thon and Ehrenpreis wanted to enroll in the eighth class of the German gymnasium, as a preparation for studies in a German University. The preparation for the entrance examinations took about two years. They were studying by themselves. Ehrenpreis described how they both were closed in a room in his house for weeks and studied alone biology, physics, and chemistry without experiments and labs. They studied day and night, only Ehrenpreis's mother disturbed them a few times a day bringing their meals.

They did not succeed and were accepted only to the sixth class. It was too ambitious to study materials of six years in two years and without teachers. In the humanities they were above the average, but in the sciences they were

⁶² Thon, “Demuyot mi-Lvov,” 372.

⁶³ Shanes, *Diaspora Nationalism*, 41–45, 65–67

⁶⁴ See: Seth L. Wolitz, “Goldfaden Avrom,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, vol. I, 610–6012.

⁶⁵ Thon, “Demuyot mi-Lvov,” 380–385.

⁶⁶ Kanfer, Mojżesz. “Godzina u pos. Thona,” *Nowy Dziennik*, 71(17.3.1930): 20.

at the level of the third class. But after all, the three years they spent in the gymnasium were not so awful, and studying with younger colleagues from different cultural backgrounds was even pleasant: we “learned how to be young” wrote Ehrenpreis.⁶⁷ This serene tune of Ehrenpreis goes hand in hand with Braude’s testimony. Always when he met hardship in life Ehrenpreis was calm, never lost his peace of mind, while Thon, as Braude wrote, almost became ill from disappointment and grief. The same as with coping with poverty, Ehrenpreis accepted it with stoic agreement while Thon suffered tremendously.⁶⁸ Young Thon, an extremely talented and brilliant mind with great ambitions, was also psychologically fragile and suffered a great deal from his hardships in life. Nevertheless, both friends finally graduated the German gymnasium and for the academic year 1891–1892 they headed off to Berlin for studies.

Berlin: Maturity

The few years Thon spent in Berlin (1891–1897) were rich in a variety of activities.⁶⁹ Berlin was a necessary step for Thon to become a thinker and a Jewish leader; as his daughter wrote, Berlin was the beginning of a real intellectual life. It is interesting to read in his daughter’s memoir the fact that Thon, who came from a very poor family, could afford living and studying in Berlin because his sisters supported him.⁷⁰ In Berlin, as in the *Zion* days in Lwów, Thon combined great engagement in his studies with Zionist activity. Already in these early days in Berlin one can observe the main fields in which Thon would be active throughout his life: philosophy, Judaism, Hebrew literature, Zionism, and social and political activity.

This meeting with the West, as Ehrenpreis describes their encounter with Berlin, was overwhelming. Thon and Ehrenpreis came to Berlin on one murky October day. They were extremely tired and, fortunately, Braude, who came to Berlin a year earlier, waited for them at the train station and

⁶⁷ Then, they took the exam in 1888, both were 18 years old, so they had to study with younger pupils. See: Ehrenpreis, *Beyn mizrah*, 27.

⁶⁸ Braude, “Zikhronotav shel,” 109.

⁶⁹ In the memoirs of Braude and Ehrenpreis one can find some interesting details about the first period of Thon in Berlin. See also: Frankel, *Ozjasz Thon*, 9–13.

⁷⁰ Thon-Rost-Hollander, *Preacher, Thinker, Politician*, 8. Worthy to note is that nothing more was written about these sisters, not even their names.

*Dalsza część książki dostępna w wersji
pełnej.*

