

The Habima—Israel's National Theater  
*A Study of Cultural Nationalism*



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THE HABIMA—  
ISRAEL'S  
NATIONAL THEATER  
1917–1977

*A Study of Cultural Nationalism*

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EMANUEL LEVY

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*TO MY MOTHER*



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MY INTEREST in studying the Habima theater began in 1972, when I wrote a brief research paper for a course entitled "Intellectual Groups in Palestine" given by Dr. Abraham Cordova at Tel-Aviv University. In 1974 this paper was expanded and presented in a research seminar entitled "Historical Dimensions in Social Research" given by Professor Sigmund Diamond at Columbia University. The comments of Professors Diamond and Cordova and those of the students in these seminars helped to clarify the research design of this book.

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EMANUEL LEVY



# *Introduction*

THIS STUDY was prompted by an interest in the artistic and cultural expressions of nationalism—more specifically, in the role of the theater in political and nationalist movements. In the life of a nation, the theater is certainly a social institution which can express the cultural and national aspirations of a people. The theater is not only able to reflect the people's national feelings, but can itself be an effective means of national socialization. Nowhere are language, history, and literature used and interpreted as in the theater. Moreover, unlike many other art forms, the theater is a collective and shared experience and is, therefore, ideal as an expression and instrument of nationalism.

Since Zionism, the Jewish national movement, involved a revival of language and culture, the Hebrew theater would naturally have been a powerful manifestation of this national rebirth. The Habima theater, the first institutionalized Hebrew theater, which later became Israel's National Theater, constitutes the focal point of this study.<sup>1</sup> The Habima was intimately related to Zionism and played a significant role in the revival of modern Jewish nationalism and in the diffusion of the Hebrew language.

The main concern of this work is to account for the political, ideological, and artistic roles of the Habima theater between 1917, when it was founded in Moscow, and the present. The central problem of this study is to identify underlying patterns of change in the roles, structure, and functions of the Habima theater. The major objective is to describe the specific changes in its ideology, mission, repertoire, organization, and audiences between 1917 and 1977 and to analyze the causes and consequences of these changes. The development of the Habima is examined over a time span (sixty years) long enough to permit identification of the major determinants and dimensions of change that the theater underwent.

This study examines five clearly defined periods in the history of the Habima: the formative years in Russia (1917–1926); the period of extensive tours in Europe, the United States, and Palestine (1926–1931); the early years in Palestine<sup>2</sup> (1931–1948); the Habima in the State of Israel (1949–1968); and the Habima as a State Theater (1969–present). An attempt is made to relate the changes that the theater underwent between 1917 and 1977 to changes in the social, historical, and institutional settings within which it operated.

The book's conceptual frame of reference is sociological: it focuses on the social processes of foundation, institutionalization, and secularization with regard to the Habima theater. The Habima is studied with reference to its ideology, functions (political and artistic), social structure, and patterns of relationship between the theater, the drama critics, and its audiences. Systematic comparisons are made with respect to the five periods in the history of the Habima.

The theoretical approach employed is structural-institutional, as exemplified in the writings of Robert K. Merton and Joseph Ben-David.<sup>3</sup> It is the working hypothesis of this study that the various settings of the Habima, in terms of their demographic, age, and political structures, influenced and accounted for the changes in its roles, functions, and repertoire. The institutional approach is fruitful for the explanation of such different issues as the role-definition of the Hebrew actor, the level of theatrical activity, the values attached to the theater by the larger society, theatrical content and style, and the uses made of the theater. In short, the institutional setting shaped not only the activities and organization of the Habima, but also the content that it presented.

The sociological study of art, literature, and drama is a fairly late arrival; unlike other sociological areas, there is no established body of knowledge called the sociology of art. Furthermore, there are scholars who still believe that art is a unique and subjective experience which defies sociological-scientific analysis.

The sociological approach to the study of art departs from other scholarly approaches. Many literary critics, for instance, see literature as a self-enclosed enterprise and approach it in terms of inner structure, plot, delineation of character, and the like. Their work is primarily a textual criticism, focusing on the intrinsic qualities of drama. By contrast, the sociologist employs an extrinsic approach; he analyzes drama in terms of social conditioning factors, such as the demographic, political, and age structures of the society in which it emerges, the ideological and value systems, the social status of the playwright, the significance which a particular play exerts on widely different audiences, and the ways in which it is actually received.<sup>4</sup>

Today, the sociology of art and literature is primarily a European, and particularly French, endeavor. Here, an attempt is made to follow the late Georges Gurvitch's program for research in the sociology of theater. Gurvitch suggested six major issues: the nature and diversity of the public on which the theater depends; the relationship of plays, styles of production, and theatrical tradition to the contemporary social setting; the acting profession, its organization and structure; the relationship between the contents of plays and the social structure in which they were written; the different interpretations that these themes are given at different times and in different societies; and the function of the theater in the social life of its period.<sup>5</sup>

The significance of this study is historical, artistic, and sociological. Historically, the Habima, as a theater intimately related to Zionism, can be seen as a cultural representation of the nationalist revival in twentieth-century Judaism. Moreover, the Habima played a considerable role in the diffusion of the Hebrew language and the Zionist philosophy in the Jewish Diaspora, in Palestine, and in Israel.

Artistically speaking, the Habima was a highly innovative theater which affected and inspired the contemporary modern theater. The Habima grew out of one of the best dramatic schools in the world—the school of Stanislavsky and Vakhtangov. The Habima's 1922 production of

*The Dybbuk* was one of the most famous productions in the history of the modern theater. It was universally acclaimed as one of Vakhtangov's most remarkable productions. The Habima was one of the first theaters in Russia (and in the world) to use the new artistic style of expressionism on the stage. Indeed, its work has been highly acclaimed by the world's best drama critics.<sup>6</sup> Hence, this study can contribute to the understanding of the social and cultural factors that accounted for the Habima's artistic innovation.

But the study of the Habima theater also has sociological significance. Here the Habima is studied as an example of the political and ideological use of a cultural activity. This study will therefore enable us to throw some light on the general problem of the role of art in political and nationalist movements. This book may thus contribute to the comparative political sociology of art, focusing on the relationship between art and the political arena.

Although this book deals in an intensive way with only one theater, it also has comparative aspects. The Habima is compared in some detail with three other theaters: the old Yiddish theater (until 1918) and the Yiddish theater in the United States in the late twenties; the Ohel theater—the workers' theater (1925–1969)—the Habima's major competitor in Palestine; and the Cameri (Chamber) theater (1944–present), the Habima's current major competitor. The intent of these comparisons is to examine whether the problems that the Habima theater faced—ideological, artistic, and financial—were unique to its operation. Brief comparisons are also made between the Habima and the Russian theater in the late teens and twenties, when the Habima was in Moscow, and between the Habima and the American theater in the late twenties, when the theater visited there.

It is noteworthy that so far no history of the Habima has been written in Hebrew or English, although some paragraphs devoted to this theater can be found in almost every book dealing with the history of the modern theater. Consequently, the history of the Habima has had to be constructed first in order to subject it to sociological analysis. But in the absence of any book which gives the major historical and contemporary details, it was necessary to include much information which might otherwise have been omitted.

The materials on which the research is based are, for the most part, historical, and include primary sources as well as a large number of secondary sources. The primary sources are of five different kinds. First, archives and manuscripts of the Habima's collective and Board of Directors from 1918 to 1968. These archives provided an invaluable information on the artistic policy of the theater in different historical periods; its organizational structure; and its economic and financial practices. They also provided data on the admission of new actors and on every important decision made by the Board and the actors' collective. Second, a large number of files of statistics, which enabled the compilation of the number of performances of each production and the size of the theater's audience in every season. Third, a systematic content analysis, quantitative and qualitative, of the over three hundred productions presented by the Habima. A special emphasis is placed on the Jewish and Israeli plays presented in order to examine the relationship between the content and ideas of these plays and the dominant ideology and social structure prevailing at the time of their presentation. Fourth, a thorough analysis of reviews of all of the theater's productions between 1918 and 1977. This analysis provided information on the yardsticks with which the drama critics approached the Habima's productions in various periods, and on the differences between the artistic taste of the critics and that of the large, lay audiences.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the critical response (as reflected in the critics' reviews) was compared with the audience's response (as reflected in the box-office success). Finally, the primary sources included personal interviews with twelve of the Habima's major actors and actresses (see bibliography). Secondary sources include historical works on Palestinian and Israeli society, works on Zionism and Russian Jewry, books on Russian society and theater, and works on the Hebrew and Yiddish theater.

The sources for this study are located in various libraries and archives: the Habima Archive and the Archive of the Labor Movement, Tel-Aviv; the National Library and the Central Archive of Theater, Jerusalem; the Columbia University Library, the Zionist Archives and Library, and the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, all in New York City.



The Habima—Israel's National Theater  
*A Study of Cultural Nationalism*



❧ ONE ❧

*The Habima  
in Moscow:  
1917–1926*



# ❧ ONE ❧

## *The Founding Group*

THE Habima theater was founded by Nachum Zemach in Moscow in 1917. Zemach was born in 1887 in Rogoshnitsi, a tiny village in Byelorussia, to a lower-middle-class family.<sup>1</sup> He was educated in the *cheder*, the Jewish elementary religious school, and the yeshiva, the religious academy, where he studied the Talmud, the Bible, and the Hebrew language. The ancient language fascinated him and soon became his main interest. He was greatly influenced by Herzl's *The Jewish State*, the first Zionist pamphlet to attract widespread attention, and he was caught by the idea of reviving the Hebrew language. His exposure to a good deal of secular literature created in him the feeling that the small village was limiting his perspective. Determined to make a change in his life, he went to Krinski and after a short time arrived in Bialystok.

Bialystok was then an effervescent center of Jewish cultural life and Zionist associations. Zemach was attracted to a Zionist group called Lovers of the Hebrew Language that strongly urged the revival of the Hebrew tongue. He earned his living as a tutor in Hebrew. Zemach's main concern was to establish a Hebrew art theater, although he had

never attended a serious theater before. He spent his free time organizing a number of Hebrew shows with school children, and in 1909 presented a play by Molière. Some of the young players were recruited from the yeshiva and, except for Zemach and a few others, most of the participants did not speak Hebrew. The show, which was presented twice, is considered to be the first play acted in Hebrew in Russia.

Zemach called his amateur group *Habima Halvrit*, the Hebrew Stage. *Habima* also means the raised stage in the synagogue from which the Torah is read. Since Zemach conceived of the theater as a sacred place, he used this religious symbol as the name of his group.<sup>2</sup> But the governor of Bialystok soon banned theatrical performances in Hebrew and Yiddish, and Zemach was forced to leave the city and move to Vilna. He was already committed to the idea of establishing a Hebrew theater despite the lack of Hebrew plays, actors, or any apparent means of achieving his goal.

In Vilna, Zemach organized a group of adult amateur actors and presented with them a play called *Shema Israel (Hear, O Israel)* by Ossip Dymov, the Jewish Russian dramatist. On opening night, May 26, 1912, Zemach delivered a speech in which he said: “I have sown a seed in the ground and it will grow. My aim is Eretz Israel—the Habima in Eretz Israel.”<sup>3</sup> The audience consisted of the Jewish intelligentsia, writers, teachers, and students, but Zemach did not get the support he had expected. Besides, in Vilna, as in Bialystok, performances in Hebrew were not permitted by the governor.

Zemach next attempted to gain support for his idea at the Zionist Congress in Vienna in 1913. Here he presented another play by Ossip Dymov—*The Eternal Wanderer*, a historical drama. The director of this play was Yehoshua Bertonov, whom Zemach had discovered in a provincial Russian company. Zemach taught Bertonov Hebrew in a hurry, and the latter taught the amateurs the art of acting and directed the play.<sup>4</sup> The performance in Vienna was not an artistic achievement, but it symbolized Zemach’s ambition to present an entire play in Hebrew. As in his previous attempts, Zemach’s intent was to demonstrate the use of the Hebrew language on stage rather than to present a high-level artistic performance.

The financial support for which Zemach had hoped did not materialize. Unfortunately, the play was presented only once. According to one

source, the Zionists delegates did not attend the performance because it was not scheduled in the program of the meetings.<sup>5</sup> But a delegate who attended the show later wrote that it did not succeed because the creation of a Hebrew theater was not seen as an important issue at that time, and the small audience that did come did not know enough Hebrew to enjoy the performance.<sup>6</sup>

The failure at the Zionist Congress left the troupe penniless, without even the funds to travel back to Bialystok. Exhausted by his labors and disappointed at his failure to gain moral as well as financial backing for his cause, Zemach fell seriously ill.

A few weeks later, the group reorganized itself under Bertonov and Zemach's brother, Shimon. Their intent was to center the dramatic group in Warsaw and from there to tour other Jewish communities. They first appeared in Warsaw, in a one-act play by Sholem Aleichem, *Mazal Tov* (*Good Luck*). Then they went on tour to Minsk, Bobruisk, Vilna, and other cities with *The Eternal Wanderer*. The tour was sponsored by the association of Lovers of the Hebrew Language but was very badly organized and after a few months the group disbanded.<sup>7</sup> Living in Warsaw, Zemach resumed his work as a Hebrew teacher, but soon he met Menachem Gnessin, a Hebrew teacher and actor who had arrived from Palestine. At their meeting, which took place in 1913, the idea of establishing a Hebrew theater called the Habima was reborn.

Gnessin was born in 1882 in Poland.<sup>8</sup> He was a descendant of a rabbinical family and the brother of Uri Nissan Gnessin, a noted Hebrew writer. Gnessin had been attracted to the theater since his early childhood. At the age of eighteen, he went to Gomel—one of the centers of the Zionist movement—and riding the wave of Zionist enthusiasm he emigrated to Palestine, conceiving it his destiny to become the founder of the Hebrew theater there.

In Palestine he worked as a teacher in a Hebrew high school. In 1904, a group of teachers fond of the theater organized themselves at the Secondary School for Girls in Jaffa. They first called their group Lovers of the Dramatic Art; later, Lovers of the Hebrew Stage. The first play to be presented by the group was *Uriel Acosta*, in which Gnessin played the leading role. Their essential goal was "to present shows for the purpose of spreading the Hebrew language,"<sup>9</sup> but they faced a number of difficulties: there were not enough volunteers who knew the language

well enough to dare speak it on stage, there were no plays in Hebrew, plays on Jewish topics were scarce, translations were both a technical and financial problem, and audiences were limited. Despite its amateurish character and the lack of supporting conditions for permanent theatrical activity, Lovers of the Hebrew Stage flourished for almost a decade (until 1914). The group's durability is explained not only by its being the only dramatic group in the country, but also in that the group was proving the vitality of the Hebrew language. Gnessin, however, went abroad in 1912; he was the only one in the group of amateurs who thought of the stage as a vocation and therefore felt that he needed further professional training.

The first decision made by Zemach and Gnessin was to draw the attention of rich Jews to their venture; but since well-to-do Jews were not excited by the idea of a Hebrew theater, the two men decided to continue their efforts on their own and, consequently, both resumed their work as Hebrew teachers. One of the main obstacles which they faced was to find theater amateurs who spoke Hebrew. This was especially difficult because they preferred to recruit young and inexperienced amateurs who had not been spoiled by what they felt to be the low-level Yiddish-speaking theaters. Looking for young people who spoke Hebrew, they applied to the director of a Hebrew Seminary for Infant School Teachers in Warsaw who recommended Hanna Rovina, one of the teachers at the Seminary.

Hanna Rovina was born in 1888 in Brazino, Minsk.<sup>10</sup> She received a Hebrew education in a Reformed Yeshiva for girls. Her first teacher was a militant Zionist, and it was he who introduced her to the theater world by giving her parts in the biblical plays that he wrote and presented at school. As she herself later recalled: "I was raised in a small village where a theater troupe never visited. My life would have been completely different had I not had a teacher like Robintchik."<sup>11</sup> She had a strong desire to live in a large city where she could continue her studies, so she moved to Yekaterinoslav, a change which tremendously influenced her spiritual development. But earning a living was difficult there, and six months later she moved to Condesa, where she worked as a tutor. Two years later she returned to her family but, being restless again, moved to Warsaw. In Warsaw, she attended the Seminary for Infant School Teachers, where she took courses in Hebrew, pedagogy, and



Hanna Rovina as Leah in Anski's *The Dybbuk* (1922), the Habima's best-known production.

education. Teaching was regarded by her as the desirable profession. When she was approached by Zemach and Gnessin about the new venture, she was reluctant to join; after considerable hesitation, she agreed.

The first work presented by the new group was Mark Erenstein's one-act play, *The Eternal Song*. Again, the use of the Hebrew language on stage was the chief element of the production. The second offering was *Marriage*, by the Russian playwright Gogol. The members did not have professional training, nor did they work with an experienced director.

Consequently, the productions lacked artistic merit, and doubts regarding the value of the work spread through the group. In July 1914, with the outbreak of the First World War, the company disbanded, but Zemach, Gnessin, and Rovina decided that no matter what happened, they would not give up the idea of the Habima theater.<sup>12</sup>

Zemach returned to Bialystok where he resumed his teaching. Two years later, in 1916, he moved to Moscow—at that time the center of the theater arts in Eastern Europe. Gnessin and Rovina also resumed their work as teachers, but remained in contact with Zemach. In 1917, both joined Zemach in Moscow.

### The Formation of the Theater

There had always been a very small Jewish community in the Moscow of tsarist Russia. In 1890, that community numbered some thirty thousand people who lived there legally or semilegally. An imperial ukase published in 1891 ordered the expulsion of the Jews from the city. It is estimated that in 1894 nearly ten thousand Jews resided in Moscow, this in comparison to over five million Jews in all Russia, most of whom lived within the Pale of Settlement, the poorest part of Russia.<sup>13</sup>

Until 1917, the right to reside wherever one chose and to travel freely throughout Russia belonged only to Jews with university degrees, dentists, pharmacists, and artisans (under certain conditions). It is noteworthy that in 1915 the Minister of Internal Affairs granted permission to Jews to reside in all urban communities, but they were still barred from the capitals, Moscow and St. Petersburg.<sup>14</sup> During the war years, hundreds of thousands of Jews were ruthlessly deported from the border areas to interior provinces. Since it was impossible to resettle them within the Pale of Settlement, Jews were now permitted to reside outside the Pale, and many of them came to Moscow.

The Russian liberals and democrats who assumed power in February 1917 stated that one of the guiding principles of the Provisional Government would be “the abolition of all class, religious and national disabilities.”<sup>15</sup> The promulgation of this act ended a long chapter in the history of Russian Jewry. Under the tsars the Jews suffered from constant persecution and frequent pogroms; there were severe limitations on the

rights of Jews, including restrictions on residence, military service, participation in elections, and schooling. In tsarist Russia, Zionism had been illegal. The Revolution of February 1917 removed these shackles and led to an unprecedented expansion of the movement. An all-Russian Zionist convention met at Petrograd in May 1917 and was attended by 552 delegates who represented 140,000 shekel-holders in 700 Jewish communities. The Zionist-sponsored educational society, Tarbut (Culture), maintained over 250 Hebrew educational institutions throughout the country. By September 1917, there were thirty-nine Zionist periodicals in Yiddish, ten in Hebrew, and three in Russian. By the end of 1917, there was a strong, well-organized movement with some 1,200 local groups and a membership of 300,000 people.<sup>16</sup>

Zemach arrived in Moscow as a merchant, and this permitted him to stay there. Later, he worked for the sugar industry of Zlatopolsky, the Russian Jewish industrialist, and as a clerk in a bank.<sup>17</sup> From these jobs he was able to save some money. The liberal policy of the Provisional Government and the expansion of the Zionist movement encouraged Zemach to apply for an official permit to establish an association entitled the Hebrew Theater—the Habima. The application was prepared by two famous Jewish lawyers and was signed by Rabbi Joseph Mazeh, the Chief Rabbi of Moscow. The mayor of Moscow approved and signed the permit, which granted Zemach permission to found a Hebrew theater under the name of the Habima.

Soon thereafter a circle of friends of the Habima called Agudat Habima (the Habima Association) was established with Rabbi Mazeh as its head. This association raised twenty thousand rubles from some of the well-to-do Jews in Moscow, with which Zemach leased a theater for one year.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the first financial backing, which was indispensable for the start of the theater, was provided by a group of wealthy Jews, including Zemach's two brothers, Levi and Shimon. However, this support did not last very long; most of the well-to-do Jews left Moscow soon after the October Revolution.

Upon their reunion in Moscow, Zemach and Gnessin began to recruit actors for their theater. At first, they published announcements in *Ras-zviet*, the Russian-language magazine, and in other magazines, calling for young people to come to Moscow and enter auditions for a Hebrew theater. They received many letters from youths who expressed their wish

to come to Moscow but could not afford travel expenses.<sup>19</sup> Since recruitment through magazine announcements proved ineffective, it was decided that Zemach himself would go to various Jewish communities and recruit theater amateurs who spoke Hebrew. This recruitment program was not easy because of Zemach's requirements and high standards: the ideal member was to be young, a master of the Hebrew language, fond of the theater, possessing some acting skill, and, most important of all, ready to devote himself physically as well as spiritually to the theater.

The first group of actors included, in addition to Zemach, Gnessin, and Rovina, six members. This handful of actors began work in the summer of 1917. David Pinski's Yiddish drama *The Eternal Jew* was chosen as the first play, with Mark Erenstein directing. After several weeks of rehearsals the group was dissatisfied with the traditional approach of the director and their own poor training. The members did not want to establish "just another routine theater with the low standards of the Yiddish-speaking theaters."<sup>20</sup> Their newly established theater should be innovative, they believed, a theater that would "justify our performance in Moscow, the center of the theatre-arts."<sup>21</sup> One thing was clear: if they wanted to build a high-level theater, it was necessary to get rid of theatrical stereotypes and to learn, with reverence and devotion, the art of acting. It was decided that Zemach should approach Konstantin Stanislavsky, the director of the Moscow Art Theater, and ask for his advice.

Stanislavsky was then at the height of his fame and influence in the Russian theater world. The Moscow Art Theater, founded in 1897 by him and Nemirovitch-Dantchenko, was one of the world's best theaters by virtue of its extraordinary personnel, notable repertoire, and high standards of production. To approach Stanislavsky was a courageous decision on the part of Zemach, who was not an intellectual or a man of culture and whose theatrical knowledge was quite limited. After all, he was a Hebrew teacher from Bialystok who had hardly seen serious theater until he came to Moscow.

Two major factors motivated Zemach to approach Stanislavsky. The first was the policy of the government toward national minorities. This policy of national cultural autonomy led to a great revival of cultural life among the small minorities in Russia. Every nationality had the right to use its own language and develop its own culture. In addition, the revolution of February 1917 had abolished tsarist censorship, freeing the

theaters from the strict control of censor, police, and clergy. The theaters were also granted much greater autonomy in the choice of plays and in administration.<sup>22</sup>

Second, Stanislavsky, in order to carry out his ideas, had developed several studios consisting of a small number of advanced students from the dramatic school of the theater.<sup>23</sup> Stanislavsky was constantly seeking new forms of expression in the theater, and he was willing to lend his hand to almost any theatrical experiment if he believed that it would help him to improve his artistic approach. He also had a special interest in ethnic matters and dreamed of exhibiting on stage the native drama of all national minorities.<sup>24</sup>

The meeting of Zemach with Stanislavsky was set for Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), the most sacred day in the Jewish calendar, but Zemach did not dare to postpone the meeting. Years later he recalled this fateful meeting:

I summoned up all my courage and found an opportunity to tell Stanislavsky about Hebrew culture and our struggle to create an original Hebrew theatre. I went to him in awe, as one goes to a holy man. . . . I spoke to him about the fate of the Jewish people and their longing for Eretz Israel. I explained to him that the Hebrew language, which had for centuries been considered dead, like Latin, in fact never lost its continuity, from the Bible until our modern Hebrew literature. I told him the language is in the heart of the people, that in Hebrew the Jews have expressed and continue to express their longing and desires.<sup>25</sup>

Zemach also told Stanislavsky about the great Jewish actors who had worked in foreign theaters and thus helped to cultivate foreign art. He emphasized that there must be an end to being the guests at foreigners' feasts and that the time had come for the Jews to have a theater of their own.

Zemach was a gifted orator, even in Russian, although he was not fluent in that language. He was a man of extraordinary energy, fanatically—almost insanely—devoted to the passion of his life, the establishment of a Hebrew art theater. He conceived of himself as a prophet with a sublime mission.

Zemach must have impressed Stanislavsky, because the latter replied that the cause was close to his heart, and immediately went on to discuss

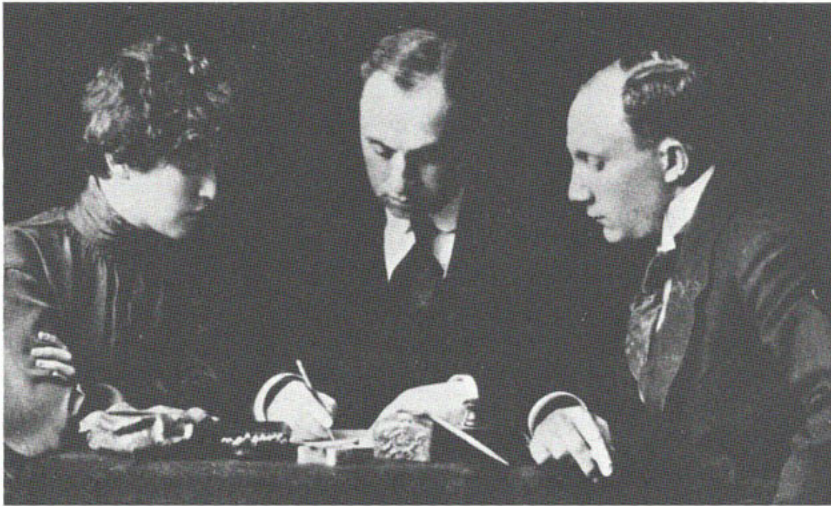
practical matters. Stanislavsky appointed his best pupil and protégé, Eugene Vakhtangov, the director of the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theater, to serve as director. Although he was a very busy man, he offered to teach the Habima players (and he later did), and he promised to take the theater under the wing of the Moscow Art Theater. Indeed, Stanislavsky remained the Habima's mentor, counselor, and supporter till the troupe left Russia in 1926.

At his first meeting with the actors, the new director, Vakhtangov, ordered the group to stop the rehearsals for *The Eternal Jew* and leave the big theater hall that Zemach had leased. They were to sit down and learn the art of acting from the beginning; this process would last a year or two. The opening performance of the Habima theater, *Neshef Bereshit (Evening of Beginning)*, took place on October 8, 1918, almost a year after their meeting with Vakhtangov.

### Recruitment

In the spring of 1917, there were only three members: Zemach, Gnessin, and Rovina. All three had met and performed in Warsaw in 1914. For all three, the theater was a calling rather than an occupation, and each had been committed to the Zionist cause and the Hebrew language prior to the establishment of the Habima in Moscow. Zemach, Gnessin, and Rovina represented the spirit of the group and highlighted its purpose. They were the core of the founding group and played central roles in the organization of the theater and in the formation of its ideology.

Recruitment to the theater was determined to a large extent by turning points in the artistic work of the troupe. The twelve players who participated in the first public performance on October 8, 1918 belonged to the first recruitment wave. The second wave occurred between opening night and the premiere of the second production, *The Eternal Jew*, in December 1919. In the years 1920–1921 there arose the need for additional actors because of the large number of parts in Anski's play *The Dybbuk*, which the theater was then rehearsing. This was the third and largest recruitment wave, in which more than ten actors joined the theater. From the opening night of *The Dybbuk*, on January 31, 1922, until



The three founders of the Habima theater: Gnessin, Zemach, and Rovina.

the company left Russia in January 1926, only four additional players were admitted.

Most players were recruited in the years 1918–1920. This means that most actors studied with and were trained by Stanislavsky and Vakhtangov. Stanislavsky's lessons were given at the Habima in the winter of 1921, and Vakhtangov worked with the group on *The Dybbuk* between 1919 and 1922. The exact point at which each member joined the Habima was of great importance, because the earlier he joined, the better and longer he was trained. And the longer he trained and worked with Vakhtangov, the higher his social position and prestige within the group. Long after the Habima left Russia, members still ranked each other in terms of the duration of their membership in Moscow.

There were three main patterns of recruiting actors to the group: recruitment through announcements in various magazines and in the street, informal recruitment through personal contacts and acquaintances, and recruitment done or supported by nonmembers. Recruitment through magazines was used by Zemach in the beginning, but on the whole was ineffective. In later years, instead of announcements in magazines they posted announcements, in Hebrew and Russian, in the streets; still, only a few candidates showed up.

Informal recruitment based on personal contacts was the dominant method. The evidence suggests that at one time or another the players met each other, and these meetings—usually accidental—resulted in their joining the theater. For instance, Starobinitz and Grober were recruited by Zemach in Moscow, but they had first met in Bialystok. In the case of Grober, Zemach had attended a concert in Bialystok in which Grober sang in Russian. Impressed by her singing, he later sent his brother to Kharkov, where Grober lived, to influence her to join the Habima. Until then, Grober's wish had been to become an actress on the Yiddish stage; but as she later wrote, "I joined the Hebrew theater due to an accidental meeting with Zemach."<sup>26</sup>

Recruitment was also supported by Chaim Nachman Bialik, the famous Hebrew poet, and Vakhtangov. Bialik had heard Shoshana Avivit reading the Bible in Russian and impressed by her talent recommended her to Zemach, who a few months later called unannounced at her home in Odessa. Zemach affected her by his powers of persuasion and his "holy madness." Zemach, as if in a trance, said to her: "We will appear in all countries, before all nations, we will sail the seven seas, we will carry out what is extremely difficult, we will cross a bridge over an abyss . . . we will eventually arrive in our safe harbor—Jerusalem."<sup>27</sup> Vakhtangov influenced several Jewish members of two dramatic studios—one in Hebrew, the other in Russian—in Kharkov (when he visited there with the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theater) to move to Moscow and join the Habima.

Recruitment to the theater was in many cases accidental and unplanned. A case in point is the recruitment of Aaron Meskin—all the more interesting because Meskin was to become the greatest actor of the Habima and the Hebrew stage. Born in 1898, he was educated at the *cheder* and later studied at a Russian high school. Zionism and Hebrew were far removed from him during his adolescence. In 1918, he came to Moscow as an officer of the Red Army. On one of his first evenings he saw a production of Stanislavsky's at the Moscow Art Theater. It was the first time he had ever visited a theater, and the impact was so great that he began attending performances almost every night. At that time he met two men from his home town who were members of the Habima. They visited him quite often for the simple reason that as a government employee he enjoyed the luxury of a room of his own and plenty of coal to heat the stove. Until then Meskin had not thought of becoming an

actor, and certainly not in Hebrew, which he did not speak. However, when he heard that the great Stanislavsky himself would teach at the Habima, he could not resist joining.<sup>28</sup>

It should be pointed out that apart from Zemach, Gnessin, and Rovina, all other members passed auditions before they were accepted into the theater. However, it is difficult to estimate the significance of the auditions for admission. It is plausible to assume that there was some screening. But one gets the impression that at times the auditions were not so much a weeding-out process as an initiation rite for all new members. This is likely to have been true in the case of Yehoshua Bertonov. Bertonov's theatrical career began as early as 1905. He was an experienced actor who had performed extensively in many Yiddish and Russian theaters. However, Bertonov's wide experience and the fact that he had performed with Zemach in 1913 did not exempt him from the requirement of auditioning at the Habima.<sup>29</sup>

At the auditions, most candidates chose to declaim a song or poem by Bialik; usually it was his poem *The City of Slaughter*. This poem was a dirge on the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, written with the indignation and moral fury of an outraged prophet. The choice of Bialik's most violent poem was not an accident. No one before or after Bialik has expressed the Jewish will to live in words of such beauty and poetic force. Indeed, Bialik's *Poems of Wrath* had a tremendous impact upon Jewish youth.<sup>30</sup>

Recruitment and admission into the theater were ideally based on three criteria: knowledge of the Hebrew language; possession of talent and acting skill; and willingness to devote time, energy, and other resources to the cause. In practice, only a few members met all these demands. Knowledge of Hebrew, though only one of the requirements for acceptance into the Habima, was at times more important than acting skill. On the other hand, the evidence suggests that youngsters who were fond of the theater and displayed some acting talent, but nonetheless did not speak Hebrew and were far removed from Hebrew culture and Zionism, were also accepted. Zemach was not happy with the situation but he had to compromise and accept those youngsters who had some acting skill and, more importantly, were willing to join such an odd venture as a Hebrew theater in Moscow.

Indeed, the founders attached great importance to the motivation and readiness of the candidates to devote themselves wholeheartedly to the theater. Miriam Goldina (later Zemach's wife) recalled that in her first