

Alterman - poet, publicist, translator

Nathan Alterman was born on July 14, 1910 in Warsaw. His parents were teachers and supporters of the Jewish "national revival". They created a kindergarten in Warsaw, where they spoke only Hebrew with children. Therefore, Hebrew, along with Yiddish, was absorbed by Nathan from his babyhood. During the First World War, the Alterman family moved into the depths of Russia, and the end of the war and the time of revolutions caught them in Moscow, where the father of the poet Yitzhak Alterman opened Jewish pedagogical courses in early 1917. Since then, Russian for life has become for Nathan Alterman the language of reading, the language of Russian and world literature.

Meanwhile, political events in Bolshevik Russia developed unfavorably with respect to Hebrew and Zionism. In 1919, the Alterman family left Moscow and, after a brief stay in Kiev, moved to Romanian Chisinau. But when anti-Semitic sentiments intensified in Romania, the family, consisting of a grandmother, parents and two children, Nathan and his younger sister Leah, moved to Tel Aviv for permanent residence. In 1925, Nathan was sent to the "Herzliya" gymnasium, which he successfully graduated in 1929, although it seemed that he did not differ in his special abilities in school years and remained in the memory of teachers as a silent, shy, reserved lad.

His father, Itzhak Alterman, was an insightful man who could recognize the dirt and blood behind a beautiful ideological facade. Thanks to his father, Nathan, unlike Abraham Shlionsky, Alexander Pen and many other creators of the new Hebrew culture, never had a fond feeling for the Soviet regime.

Itzhak Alterman, to whom his new homeland was dreaming like a blooming garden, wanted his son to become an agronomist. Nathan, who from childhood wrote poems in Hebrew and vaguely felt his vocation, did not oppose his father's will. For Jewish immigrants in Mandatory Palestine, agriculture was more important than poetry.

After finishing school, Nathan went to France, studied agriculture in Paris and Nancy, where he received an agronomist diploma. However, he practically did not work in this specialty. A similar path approximately fifteen years earlier was done by the poetess Rachel, but, unlike Rachel, who by that time had the experience of a farmer and who was guided by the desire to master the secrets of the life of useful plants, Alterman attracted completely different interests to Europe.

Several years in France proved to be extremely important for the formation of Alterman as a poet and person. In Paris, he realized the universality of culture and felt the harmony of the world as a combination of the most incredible things.

There, in France, Alterman keeps his eye at the literary life of Jewish Yishuv in Palestine. When it seems to him that several of his poems are worthy of appearing in print, he writes a respectful letter to the poet Abraham Shlionsky and puts his poems into it asking him to correct what is wrong and help with the publication. Alterman deliberately chose Shlionsky as his patron - Shlionsky understood that this young poet is the future of a new Hebrew poetry. For many years, Alterman will retain loyalty to Shlionsky, defeated later by his student's talent, although over time he will publish poems and essays not only in magazines and newspapers edited by Shlionsky. However, Alterman did not take part in the war, which Shlionsky declared to the patriarch of Jewish poetry Bialik, and generally did not enter into literary controversy.

In the summer of 1932, Nathan Alterman returned to Palestine as an already formed poet. His poems are increasingly appearing in print and are perceived as a phenomenon in the intellectual world of Tel Aviv.

That city was very different then. Adjacent to the exotic Arabic Jaffa are ugly boxes of Jewish houses. And next to them, on the sand by the sea, housed the tents where the then intellectual elite lived. These were people who were open not only to the winds blowing from the sea, but also to all the trends of art. Such classics as Byalik, Agnon and Ahad Ha-Am lived and worked in Tel Aviv. They were hard pressed to the side by the young rebels - Shlionsky and Ratush. Nathan Alterman and Leah Goldberg joined their group "Together".

Two reputable newspapers were published in Tel Aviv - "Davar" and "Haaretz". In the Tel Aviv theaters were staged the same plays as in Paris. In a small town, somewhere on the outskirts of the British Empire, spiritual life pulsed, which had nothing to do with provincial mustiness. Today, that period of a specific Tel Aviv culture is associated primarily with the name of Alterman.

Alterman was, along with Shlionsky, an outstanding reformer of the petrified language of antiquity. His poetry, which absorbed the colloquial vocabulary, gave Hebrew a formerly lightness. Returning to the word its living expression, Alterman created his own system of rhythms, images, intonation.

If we draw analogies, then Alterman can be considered both Mayakovsky and Pasternak of modern Hebrew poetry. But he didn't become Then a national poet because he did not responded to the topic of the day, like Mayakovsky, or advocated a holistic and indivisible Israel, like Uri Zvi Greenberg.

The breadth of his creative range is impressive. For years, he wrote topical poetic feuilletons in the Ha'aretz and Davar newspapers under the heading "The Seventh Column", capturing the dynamics of life in Eretz Israel on the eve of and after gaining state independence. For his poetic chronicle, Alterman created a capacious form in which the metronome seemed to disappear, obeying the easy step of the verse. Interspersed in poetic text fragments of rhythmic prose expand the narrative possibilities of this genre.

The "seventh column" was very popular. The numbers of the newspaper with Alterman feuilletons were passed from hand to hand, stored as relics. The British authorities, who received verse slaps from Alterman, sometimes forbade the publication of his feuilletons, but they still found their way to the reader, becoming part of the "Jewish samizdat" of that time. In his materials, Alterman expressed support for the militarized Jewish organizations of HAGANA, ETSEL, Palmach and Lehi.

He also wrote sketches for cabaret theaters, hit songs that were performed by Tel Aviv's most famous singers, for example, Shoshana Damari.

In the summer of 1938. Nathan Alterman published the first book of his poems, "Stars outside", which became (and remained) his most popular work (and, in general, one of the most popular collections of Hebrew poetry).

The main characters of the book are the poet himself, the city in which he lives, the feminine in the world (including the image of a woman, beloved and inaccessible). The interrelated themes of nature, road and creativity, permeating the entire collection, can be combined into one theme of the creative process. All these elements are already declared in the first poem, "Comes the tune".

The book is a single whole, the elements of which are united not only by the characters, the place of action and the plots, but also by purely poetic means: one size of verse prevails in it - anapaest; images, epithets, comparisons are transferred from one poem to another (with the richest imagination of the author and an excellent command of the language).

Alterman avoids specifying a particular scene of action and characters, thereby enhancing the symbolic meaning of the poems. In their texts, a smooth transition from one episode to another is often deliberately broken. The reader must be prepared for sudden changes in the size and rhythm of the verse.

In the book of 67 poems, combined in four parts. The construction of the book, clearly deeply thought out, still causes the literary scholars the need to give it their explanation. So well-known Israeli literary critic Dan Miron saw in it a correspondence to the sonata form characteristic of classical music. Such an analogy may be useful for understanding the structure of the work and the poetic means used by the author.

There are lines and phrases in the book whose purpose is difficult to decipher. However, N.A. defended the right of poetry to be for some time (perhaps long) incomprehensible, because for deep insight into the essence from the reader requires no less inspiration than from the poet, which happens infrequently with a few.

The title of the book, "Stars Outside", is a quote from the second poem, "Meeting without end", as well as a hint that the poet must leave the house and directly perceive the light of the stars burning in the sky in order to see the hidden essence of life and become the "star". (By the way, the night is present in half of the poems of the first, largest, part of the book).

The book "Stars outside" immediately demonstrated the originality and strength of the talent of Nathan Alterman. At the same time, it is also influenced by Western European symbolists (especially S. Baudelaire and E. Verhaeren), Russian poets of the "Silver Age" (especially B. Pasternak) and, of course, by Abraham Shlinsky - the elder modernist leader in the Hebrew poetry .

The book of Nathan Alterman influenced the further development of Hebrew poetry - both in the poems of direct followers of the poet and the opponents of his path from among the young poets of the fifties, "rebels" against "fathers", as A. Shlionsky once "rebelled" against Bialik, the founder of modern Hebrew poetry. Matured in the years of war, which accompanied the creation and formation of Israel, they were not limited to symbols, but introduced into their works the specifics of the surrounding life and personal experiences "here and now." And their poetic means were completely different. It was the book of Alterman that became the target for the "tools" of their criticism.

In 1941 at the moment of the highest danger for the existence of the Jews of Palestine, Alterman's big poem "Joy of the Poor" was published. Its plot consists of two lines: 1) the dead is jealous of the living wife and 2) the besieged city is preparing to take the last battle. The poem is imbued with deep philosophy and is still the subject of study by specialists. "Joy of the Poor" is one of the peaks of Alterman and all Hebrew poetry.

The catastrophe of European Jewry shook Alterman. The publication of the poem "The Day of Remembrance and the Ghetto Fighters" made the poet almost an outcast in the circles of young intellectuals who despised the Jewishness of the diaspora, which was hopelessly saturated with slave psychology. In his poem, Alterman went so far as to openly speak out in defense of the Judenrats, the Jewish self-government bodies created by the Nazis in the occupied territories. One can only wonder at the poet's insight. Today, based on facts that became known only in relatively recent times, historians quite differently assess the role of the Judenrats than they did then. From the members of the Judenrats removed the stigma of Nazi accomplices.

But at that time they were considered a disgrace to the Jewish people.

Nathan Alterman said to his friend Abe Kovner, a former ghetto prisoner and commander of a partisan detachment:

- No one will convince me that the color of our nation was scum. If I were in the ghetto, I would be with the Judenrates.

The cycle of poems "Songs of Egyptian Executions" (1944), some critics tend to regard as a response to the Holocaust of European Jewry. If this is so, then the Catastrophe served as the impetus for Alterman to create a work for all times.

He is far from the classical biblical interpretation of events that occurred in ancient Egypt over a thousand three hundred years before the new era. For him, Egypt symbolizes all of humanity, in torment and pain, striving for some ideal, the very humanity unknown, but originally laid down in it by the Creator of all things.

"Songs of Egyptian Executions" - one of the most perfect creations of Alterman. Condensed metaphor, the rapid movement of the verse fascinate, and the interweaving of muscles and nerves in each stanza and the tangible visibility of images make us remember great works of art.

But Alterman's poetry was full with longing for European culture. The poet was disturbed by the present and future of the Yishuv and the diaspora. His journalistic poems, known as "The Seventh Column", constitute two weighty volumes in the collected works. There are, in particular, poems devoted to the "Italian captain", who in 1945 conducted the fragile boat "Hana Senesh" through the barrier of the British marine guard and landed illegal immigrants on the bank of the Land of Israel, in Nahariya. In the person of the Italian captain Ansaldo, the poet thanked all the navigators who, at the risk of their lives, transported Jews to Palestine, contrary to the rulings of the British Parliament.

* * *

Alterman led a secular lifestyle, but on Saturdays he went to the synagogue and knew the Jewish traditional texts perfectly well. In his picture of the world, God was assigned the role of the Creator of the universe and the accomplice of Jewish history. The Bible, Alterman believed, is a document that affirms Jews right to Canaan, to the Land of Israel. Therefore, he was worried about dissociation from the religious tradition in the Zionist school education. It was the acceptance of religious tradition that determined Alterman's position on the borders of Israel. He was a strong supporter of the movement "for indivisible Israel." Nathan Alterman was not afraid to stay in an unpopular minority in his beliefs. Such, for example, are his poems, which appeared in the newspaper a few days after the execution of the ship "Altalena" where he justified the order given by Ben-Gurion.

In December 1947, he published his famous poem "The Silver Dish" - it was published in the "Seventh Column" two weeks after the historic vote at the UN on November 29, 1947, when Jews in Yishuv and around the world rejoiced: to them was promised the state in the Land of Israel. For two weeks the poet got used to this thought, lived with it, weighed the present and the future. And now, at the height of the universal joy and sensation of a well-earned and deserved political victory, he writes a poem that starts with the words of Chaim Weizman, which sounded recently in Europe, he chose the epigraph: "The state is not presented to the people on a silver dish".

During the War of Independence, Alterman had very little to do with this topic. He believed that only those who directly participated in the battles have the right to do so. True, he was mobilized and assigned to the mortar battalion of the 8th Brigade, but its commander, General Yitzhak Sade, who put Alterman above all poets, always took care that he was in

the rear during the battles and eventually demobilized him. But together with Shlionsky, Alterman came up with titles for officers and soldiers of the IDF.

The fact of the proclamation of the State of Israel and the War of Independence that followed it, for many poets and writers, served as a signal to revise their aesthetic position and creative credo. They focused on the specifics of the time and place of action, avoided pathos and generalizations, the symbolism in their work was replaced by realism, and the rhymed, strictly rhythmic verse became white verse. This was also caused by a general political and cultural reorientation towards Anglo-American designs and literary tastes.

In 1957 A new big book of poems by Nathan Alterman "Pigeon City" has been published. Alterman remained true to his aesthetic principles, but the size of the verse became less strict, the rhymes were more modest, the metaphors more transparent. There was a colloquial intonation, repetitions, recognizable features of Israeli reality. Compositionally, this collection is not so clear and complete, as "Stars Outside". The first part, which gave the title of the book, is devoted to civil topics, other cycles are not connected with it by a natural community, and the last one - "The Song of Ten Brothers" - was written mainly long before the whole book. However, the level of poetic skill remains very high.

Alterman translated a lot, mainly for the theater: Shakespeare, Moliere, Racine. He freely read in French, in English and in Russian, but almost did not translate from this language - with the exception of a few works for children, for example, "Doctor Aibolit", "Barmaley" and "Limpopo" K.I. Chukovsky. But in the private library of Alterman was widely represented Russian and Soviet poetry.

The creative heritage of the poet is huge. Fifteen respectable volumes that have been published include most of the writing, although not all.

The fundamental biography of Nathan Alterman, begun by his childhood friend Menachem Dorman, and continued by Dvora Gilula, answers many questions.

Alterman understood early that without preserving his internal integrity he would not fulfill his mission. It also requires full dedication to professional purposeful work. The poet needs special energy, the courage of a special tempering, in order to protect his originality and preserve the internal heat, without which you can never achieve the magic glow of words.

Hence, there is a conflict with the outside world, which is differently revealed to each artist.

Alterman's youth comrade Pinchas Lender recalls:

"From him breathed a hidden cold, not allowing the slightest familiarity. A shy smile that never left his lips seemed to protect him and give charm to his whole angular figure, tall, with exorbitantly long legs and hands like poles. He walked, swaying, swinging his poles, very much like a "ship of the desert" on the march, that is, a camel. He spoke little and reluctantly, as if pushing words from somewhere out of the depth, listening with surprise to their sound. Sometimes I didn't say a single word for hours, I understood that he was now in his inner world, where no one had access to ..."

You can also find out about one feature of Alterman's character from the memoirs of the country's President Shimon Peres. Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, learning that the poet lives in an uncomfortable apartment on a noisy street, told to offer him the best apartment and place of residence, adding that this, of course, cannot prevent him from further criticizing both Ben-Gurion himself and his politics. But Alterman, on reflection, refused: it is possible to criticize, but it will be awkward to praise.

You can add that he was simple-minded, generous, gentle, charming. And he was still hidden, alien to pathos, theatricality. He protected his inner world from any encroachments. He had many friends, and yet he condemned himself to loneliness, for he considered only this kind of self-defense reliable. He had to sacrifice too much to save the sophistication of perception and refinement of feelings. What was good for poetry turned out to be a misfortune for him.

He needed dope to pull his strap, and alcohol became such a dope for him ...

* * *

Two women, two muses, two angels were near him, protected him

He owes them absolutely everything. Without them, his life would be hard labor - and only ...

True, he also had an adored daughter Tirtza, who inherited the beauty and talent of a dramatic actress from her mother, and a poetic gift from her father.

Rachel Marcus, a dramatic actress, became the wife of Alterman. He met her in 1935 in a Tel Aviv cafe, where artists and poets gathered. "From the time I saw him," Rachel recalls, "I haven't looked at anyone else in the world for the rest of my life." And Rachel also says: "I lived with Nathan, like at the foot of an active volcano. You know, because an eruption can happen at any moment. For weeks, absolute tranquility lasts. Nathan is immersed in himself. There is intense internal work. I understand what is happening, and I take for granted his departure from reality. Not that it does not grieve me. I just resigned. And I waited ... But what happiness it was when Nathan read me his new creation. It lifted me to heights I could never reach without him. The emotional takeoff, which I experienced in these moments, is destined to be experienced by very few. I always knew that it was not easy to be the wife of a great poet. And not scared. There is power in me to endure all. I have never been angry with him ..." (See Alterman's Poem "Song of the Three Answers") Rachel Marcus was a good actress, played with cold, selfless detachment, and loved her profession as much as her family. Her memory resembled an unorganized archive, so full of plays and dramatic scenes from her vast repertoire. In the days of performances and rehearsals - and there were a great many of them - Rachel disappeared for whole days, not forgetting, however, to cook dinner for Nathan and Tirtza.

Tsilia Binder, an artist, was his beautiful lady (and illustrator of some of his books). When they met, she was nineteen, and he was over forty ...

Since then — for more than twenty years — her life has not gone down from the orbit of his life. She was happy because she loved and suffered because she had so little meaning in his life. So it seemed to her ...

Here is an excerpt from her letter, from which it becomes immediately clear how this woman knew how to love: "My Alterman, what should I do with my longing for you? What should I do with my love, which is getting bigger every hour, every minute? She is bigger and stronger than me. Help me, my Alterman. After all, I was destined to remain forever on the sidelines of your life. You will never be mine. I will never iron your shirts. But for me it would be the highest happiness. I do not need anything in life except your love ... "

Rachel knew about the existence of Tzili. And she managed to suppress in herself both pain and jealousy ...

The tragedy of these complicated relationships had a worthy ending.

On March 17, 1970, Alterman went to the hospital for an operation of a stomach ulcer. After the operation, he did not regain consciousness. Rachel and Tirtza did not leave his bed. This is what Menachem Dorman wrote in his diary:

“March 19 I came to the hospital quite early. Rachel sat in the hallway, tired and tense. I silently sat near. She asked:

- Are you on good terms with Tzili?

“Well, yes,” I admitted, not without embarrassment.

“Nathan thought he had cancer,” Rachel said. “When he went to the hospital, he asked me to give something to Tzili.” I want to see her. Not today ... Maybe tomorrow ... Tell Tzili that I need her ... You know, I could not hate her. I never said a bad word about her ... And why was she to blame? Love is not a crime ... Tirtza is a different breed. For her, the very thought that Nathan unfaithful to me was unbearable. Nathan hardly managed to convince her that with this woman he is all over. Tirtza had a nervous breakdown when she found out the truth ... ”

Leaving the hospital, where there was already a special atmosphere of sadness, usually preceding the death of a loved one, Menachem Dorman drove to Tsili. Straight, with dry, inflamed eyes, with a face hardened from grief, she heard him and headed for the car without saying a word.

Dorman recorded in his diary the meeting of these two women at the bedside of the dying man.

Tsili - in a black dress, still young, elegant, fully retaining her imperative charm ...

And Rachel, an elderly lady, plump, casually dressed, with a faded face.

“Even if Nathan survives, I can never tell him about this silent duel, which in its dramatic intensity surpasses even his creative imagination,” Dorman decided.

Nathan Alterman died without regaining consciousness on March 28, 1970. In his testament, he asked to be buried without speeches and honors, "as a simple Jew among ordinary Jews." Alterman bequeathed a quarter of his property to Tzili Binder. “She sacrificed much more for me,” he wrote, “but there's nothing you can do ...”

Alterman's testament was executed exactly. Tzili survived the poet, but because of the all-consuming love for him, she never created a family, she did not have children.

Tirtza idolized her father and could not come to terms with the dark recesses in his life. She never ceased to love him, but the feeling of bitterness caused by illusions that had deceived her expectations was mixed with this love.

The life of Thirza was tragic. She played in the theater, wrote good poems, was married twice, rushing, acutely experiencing her restlessness and helplessness in front of a bad life. She experienced a fear of life, which often caused nervous stress. At one of these moments, her father wrote for her a beautiful poem “Song of the Guard”, set to music by composer Sasha Argov.

However, her second marriage was successful. She became the mother of two wonderful children, and found peace and faith in herself.

Seven years after the death of her father, Tirtza died. Perhaps she committed suicide ...

Bibliography:

Hebrew:

1. A. Balaban "Stars that remain outside" - interpretation, forms and rhetoric. Tel Aviv, 1981

2. M.Dorman "Nathan Alterman. Chapters from the biography". Tel Aviv, 1991
3. D.Miron "Four faces of modern Hebrew poetry". Tel Aviv, 1962
4. D. Miron "From Particular to the Main." Tel Aviv, 1980

Russian:

1. An article on the Internet by Vl. Framer "Poetry as a form of life. Nathan Alterman
2. Lecture on the Internet Z. Kopelman about Nathan Alterman
3. Article Z. Koppelman in the Anthology of Hebrew Poetry
4. Collection of poems by Nathan Alterman "Silver dish"