

Noam Zadoff

"40 Gills of Scotch Whiskey"

A Satirical Birthday Speech from Mandatory Palestine

Jerusalem under the British Mandate was in a way a European city. Situated in the heart of the Levant, the sleepy town underwent striking changes within a short period of time. Existing neighborhoods grew and new ones were established. European urban planning and architecture brought by Jewish immigrants from the continent were increasingly discernible in the city center and the new neighborhoods.

On the social level, Jerusalem was divided into small, secluded groups defined by the national and cultural identities of their members. One such group was a private circle of intellectuals called Pilegish, which used to meet regularly during the 1930s and the 1940s in the neighborhood Rehavia.¹ Most of the participants of this circle were originally from German-speaking countries and had immigrated to Israel as a consequence of their Zionist convictions. Almost all of them were associated with the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The meetings were non-academic and dedicated to discussions of mundane matters in a humorous atmosphere and in the participants' native German tongue.

The members of the Pilegish circle were the Egyptologist Jacob (Hans) Polotsky (1906–1991), the philosopher and researcher of Gnosticism Hans Jonas (1903–1993), the classicist Yochanan (Hans) Lewy (1901–1945), the physicist Shmuel Sambursky (1900–1990), the political scientist George Lichtheim (1912–1973), and last but not least Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), the founder of the academic study of Kabbalah. Scholem stood at the center of the group and was the axis around which the meetings gathered.

¹ For more on the Pilegish circle see Noam Zadoff, "'Mit Witz im Ernst und Ernst im Witz:' Der Jerusalemer PILEGESCH-Kreis," in *Jüdischer Almanach: Humor*, ed. Giesela Dachs (Jüdischer Verlag: Frankfurt am Main 2004), 50–60; *idem*, "'Portretim Bilti Dimyionyim:' Hug Pilegish – haverut vesatira ba-universita ha-ivrit," *Cathedra* 126 (2008), 67–82.



1 Members of the Pilegesh circle:
(from left to right)
Yochanan (Hans) Lewy,
Miriam and
Georg Lichtheim,
Jacob Polotsky

Scholem's papers, preserved in the archives of the National Library in Jerusalem, contain much evidence of the meetings of the Pilegesh group, including a poem booklet in German, written by Sambursky, entitled "Nicht imaginäre Portraits." In this collection, members of the circle and their surroundings are portrayed satirically. The poems imitate the style of German poets such as Goethe, Heine, Rilke, and Stefan George; and Gershom Scholem is one of the main protagonists. Another type of document written within the circle consisted of humoristic speeches, composed in Scholem's honor, delivered at parties and celebrations held on special occasions in his life.

The original English text published here was probably read at a meeting of the Pilegesh circle on the occasion of Scholem's fortieth birthday, on 5 December 1937. The author is Jacob Polotsky, who immigrated to Palestine in 1934 after working for the Berlin Academy of Sciences on a German translation of Coptic Manichean papyri. In Jerusalem, Polotsky taught Egyptology at the Hebrew University, where he met the other members of Pilegesh.

The text is a congratulatory letter by an imaginary secretary or official of the British authorities in Palestine in honor of Scholem's birthday. It reflects on the one hand Scholem's central role in the Pilegesh circle and, on the other hand, the way Jewish intellectuals in Palestine perceived the Mandate.

The year 1937 was a crucial one in the history of the British rule over Palestine. In July, more than a year after the outbreak of the big Arab revolt, the Peel Committee recommended a territorial partition of Palestine between Jews and Arabs. The last months of 1937 were marked by increasing tension and acts of violence between the three powers present in the land. In this respect, the text presented for the first time here can be regarded as a political satire as well.

[Jacob Polotsky to Gershom Scholem, December 1937. The National Library Jerusalem, Department of Manuscripts and Archives, Gershom Scholem Archive (4°1599), File 16]]

December 1937

Dear Professor Scholem,

As you know, it has become a tradition with H[er] M[ajesty]'s Government to take a cordial interest in your person and to avail themselves of the occasion of important events in your private life to express you their hearty feelings in the form of letters of congratulation. In view of martial law prevailing in this country H[is] E[xcellency] the High Commissioner felt that the task – or rather the pleasure – of composing the present letter, on the occasion of your 40th anniversary [!], should be devolved upon the F.O.C.²

Being an eggs-on-bacon-eating Britisher not familiar with the manners and customs of your race, I applied to a comrade of mine, stationed in Tel Aviv, who has acquired a most remarkable competence in matters relating to Judaism, for a few hints that might be useful for my purpose. The information supplied was to the effect that (i) your family-name means “peace” or “Hallo!” in English; (ii) that you are a professor of Cabbala; (iii) that the number 40 is supposed to be a sort of sacred number.

To begin with your name, I feel somewhat embarrassed to state that my profession prevents me from a wholehearted appreciation of the feelings which the notion of “peace” may be apt to evoke in civilian minds. More serious still is the danger that by the very fact of people walking about with a name like yours, certain inhabitants of this country may be led to misgivings as to the firm determination of H[er] M[ajesty]'s Government to stamp out terrorism. It has, therefore, been found necessary to request you to use your name, as from to-day until further notice, exclusively in its 2nd sense, viz. “Hallo!”, which fortunately has a less direct bearing upon public security.

With regard to your research work I regret to say that I have not been very successful. The word “Cabbala” not being familiar to me – I looked it up in the Concise Oxford Dictionary

² Probably the Foreign Office Commission.

and found the meaning given as "Jewish oral tradition; mystic interpretation, esoteric doctrine, occult lore". I must confess that this is completely Hebrew to me. Yet, you will permit an unsophisticated soldier to remark that "occult lore", whatever that may mean, can hardly be a subject that ought to be taught in a decent University.

Turning now to item (iii), I am glad to announce that my comments thereupon will be of a more pleasant nature. Our first idea was to capture to-day in the hills of Galilee, whence the salvation of the world went forth, the offsprings of Ali Baba's gang and to present them to you for detention in your premises. For technical reasons, however, this idea had to be given up. Instead I undertake herewith to consume this evening in your honour 40 gills of Scotch Whisky, and remain with best wishes

Yours faithfully

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PHOTO CREDITS

The Israeli National Library
Jerusalem, Department of
Manuscripts and Archives,
Gershom Scholem Archive.