



Spring 2024

# The day Kafka's last wish became Agnon's nightmare

[Jeffrey Saks](#)

Newly revealed evidence shows that a fire that devastated S.Y. Agnon's house 100 years ago bears Kafkaesque coincidences.

“I was five years old when I wrote my first poem,” remembered the author S.Y. Agnon (then 79), in his famous speech in Stockholm upon receiving the Nobel Prize. But his youthful writing met a bitter fate. “Of all the poems I wrote, nothing remains,” he lamented. The boys of Buczacz, his Galician hometown (now in western Ukraine), who sang his songs, were “burned in the ovens of Auschwitz with their sisters who had adorned our town with their beauty and sung my songs with their sweet voices.” From the reference to the tragedy of the Holocaust and its effect on the obliteration of his writings and those who read them, Agnon slid into a prior personal trauma: “The fate of the singers who, like my songs, went up in flame was also the fate of the books that I later wrote. All of them went up in flame to Heaven in a fire which broke out one night at my home in Bad Homburg.... Among the books that were burned was a large novel of some seven hundred pages, the first part of which the publisher had announced was about to go to press. Together with this novel, titled *Eternal Life*, everything I had written since the day I had gone into exile from the Land of Israel was burned, including a book I had written with Martin Buber [a compilation of Hasidic tales] as well as four thousand Hebrew books, most of which had come down to me from my forebears and some of which I had bought with money set aside for my daily bread.” While we do not have a catalog of the destroyed library, it no doubt contained the classical “Jewish Bookshelf,” from the Bible and its commentaries, through Rabbinic literature, medieval philosophical writings, and the early classics of modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature. This was the canon that Agnon had been distilling and pouring out into the mold of modern Hebrew literature—a genre he was both helping to invent even as it flowed from his pen. It is little wonder that Agnon mentions in the same breath the burning of his house and the great historical catastrophe, the Holocaust.



The morning after the fire, photographed Thursday, June 5, 2024 (courtesy: Agnon House).

That fire, a profoundly formative event in the life of Israel's greatest novelist, broke out 100 years ago, at the beginning of June 1924, while Agnon was living with his wife Esther and their two children in Bad Homburg, Germany. With the burning of his manuscripts, and the loss of an entire library, and almost all of the family's property, the productive 12-year period in Agnon's life in the Weimar Republic came to an end. At that time a group of writers and intellectuals were gathered in Bad Homburg, and Agnon enjoyed the company of publisher Shoshana Persitz, Y.H. Rawnitzki, Ahad Ha'am, and most significantly of all: the “national poet” H.N. Bialik, with whom he would take long walks almost every day.

The name of the house, a four-story building on Kaiser-Friedrich-Strasse, was the “Villa Imperial,” after the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII of England, who used to rent the house for months at a time when he came to take the waters in the spa town. The house is located near a large public garden, the Korffpark, where a walking path named after Agnon and a monument to commemorate the period of his sojourn in the city can be found today.

On the night of the fire, the writer lay in hospital, recuperating from hernia surgery. The residents of the building were miraculously saved but the stately house was reduced to ashes.

In a letter that Agnon wrote to M.E. Jacq (Zhernensky) three years later he accused Erich Meir, his downstairs neighbor, of arson: “A Jewish heretic had insured his merchandise and set fire to the house, and the city of Hamburg did nothing to put out the fire, for it had not bothered to properly maintain the fire engines.” To his patron S.Z. Schocken he wrote: “All day I see I see parchment burning, but its letters are flying to the heavens”. The evocative phrase is borrowed from the Talmud’s description of the martyrdom of Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion, who was burned alive by the Romans while wrapped in a Torah scroll (*Avodah Zarah* 18a). The figures of the apostate arsonist Erich Meir and his accomplices appear in Agnon’s well-known, surrealistic story “A Whole Loaf,” in the guise of the demonic figure, the incarnation of the Evil Impulse, Mr. Gressler.



Agnon’s home in Bad Homburg, early 1920s. The author’s family lived two floors above the ground floor. S.Y. and Esther Agnon appear on the balcony on the right (courtesy: Stadtarchiv Bad-Homburg).

The story of the fire and its place in Agnon’s consciousness are well documented both in his various memoiristic pieces and in his stories (though, as always, it is important to distinguish between his use of autobiographical raw material in his fiction and “history” per se).

Moreover, the episode is always pointed to as a significant and influential event in scholarship on Agnon, whether in the literary interpretations of the many stories in which it appears, or, of course, in the biographical writing about Agnon, such as that of Emuna (Agnon) Yaron, Haim Be’er, Avner Falk (in his somewhat problematic psychoanalytic biography in English), and most importantly in the work of the late Prof. Dan Laor, author of the monumental Hebrew book *Hayye Agnon* (“The Life of Agnon,” Schocken, 1998).

Nevertheless, for years the exact date of the fire remained shrouded in mystery. Due to inaccuracy and uncertainty as to the date, a rather “surrealistic” coincidence has escaped the notice of Agnon scholars and literary enthusiasts until only recently, 100 years after the fact.

Haim Be’er noted that the fire broke out on the “evening of the 4th of Sivan, 5684,” that is, between Thursday night and Friday, June 5-6. Dan Laor had fixed the date as “Friday night, June 6, 1924” (in that year Shavuot fell on that Saturday night, a fact not mentioned by Agnon or anyone else who has researched the episode). In a conversation I held with Emuna Yaron, Agnon’s daughter, she reported that although she was only about three years old at the time, she was certain that the disaster did not occur on a Friday night, i.e., the evening of Shabbat, but in the middle of the week.

And now, through digital resources not available to previous researchers, and thanks to the help of the municipal archives in Bad Homburg, it is possible to establish with certainty that the fire started on the evening of Wednesday night, June 4, and continued until the next morning. In an archival newspaper clipping, only recently made available, smoke was reported as early as 10:00 p.m according to the testimony of the neighbors in the adjacent building. It seems the arsonist together with his accomplices had intended to set a small fire in his storageroom with a view to make an insurance claim. They had not immediately reported the fire to the authorities because they thought they had put it out themselves, but the flames lingered, got out of hand, and the entire building was soon ablaze. As Agnon also writes, the fire brigade and rescue services tarried, and arrived only around midnight, by which time the flames had burst through all the windows of the house. At 2:00 a.m. the central stairwell of the building collapsed.

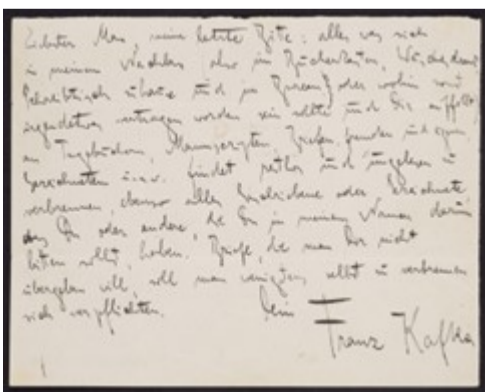
How did it happen that a meticulous scholar like Laor made a mistake regarding the date? In his biography of Agnon (p. 668, n. 110) he cites as a source a *Frankfurter Zeitung* newspaper article published on June 7, 1924 (the day after the fire according to Laor’s reckoning). But there is no mention of the Bad Homburg incident in the three issues of this newspaper published on the morning of June 7 (two morning editions, and an afternoon supplement), nor on the days

before or after. However, in the Bad Homburg local paper, the *Taunusbote*, of Thursday, June 5, 1924, we find an item which testifies to the correct date: the night between Wednesday, June 4, and Thursday, June 5. This was, according to the Jewish calander, the evening of 3 Sivan—the beginning of the three-day period leading up to the Shavuot holiday known as the *sheloshet yemei hagbalah*, in which the Israelites prepared themselves to receive the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai which, “was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace” (Exodus 19:18). It would have been surprising if Agnon overlooked this coincidence.

How, then, did Laor move the date to Friday night, two days later than it actually occurred? A charitable interpretation can be offered to explain this slip by the great biographer of the Nobel laureate. In a letter dictated from his sickbed on Saturday, June 7, Agnon informed S.Z. Schocken: “On the night of Friday, 6 June, as I lay in the hospital, the sad news reached me that the house in which we lived had been burned, and all that was in it was consumed by fire. My wife and children were saved by the mercy of God upon me”. We may infer that the actual morning following the fire, Thursday, June 5, Esther and her children awoke in the nearby branch of the Red Cross, where they were billeted as “guests for the night” until they relocated to stay with relatives (as Emuna Yaron relates in her memoir, *Perakim mi-Hay’yi*). All day Thursday and Friday Esther toiled and fretted to provide for their needs, including clothing and basic necessities. For this reason she arrived at the hospital with the bad news only on Friday night—some 48 hours after she and her small children had escaped the fire in their nightgowns. Apparently, with no source to indicate any other date, Laor mistakenly concluded that “the hard news had reached the hospital the night of the fire itself,” and the next day Agnon delivered the sad tidings to Schocken. As we now know, this was not the case, and we should read Agnon’s letter more precisely, that he had received the news that day, *not* that the fire had occurred that night.

What importance could this fact have beyond a researcher’s urge to be meticulous in the details of a historical datum? Agnon’s house was burned, his manuscripts were consigned to the flames, and the text of two almost-completed books “flew to the heavens” and never saw the light of day. The trauma remained with the author and left its mark in his many books and stories written over the next forty-plus years. To whom does it matter if the disaster occurred a century ago on the 4th or the 6th of June? Short of scholarly footnotes, presumably this trivial pursuit contributes nothing to the appreciation of the rich depth of Agnon’s writings.

And yet, the determination of the correct date points to a coincidence that has hitherto escaped our notice due to the uncertainty as to the exact timing of the fire, which is, as demonstrated, June 4, 1924. As it turns out, only one day before the disaster the death of the great Jewish author Franz Kafka in his native Prague occurred. This season marks the centenary of his untimely passing from tuberculosis at the young age of forty. After his death, Kafka’s friend and confidant Max Brod found a note that served as a “last will and testament”:



Kafka to Brod (courtesy: Kafka Archives, National Library of Israel)

“Dearest Max,

My last request: Everything I leave behind me . . . in the way of notebooks, manuscripts, letters, my own and other people’s, sketches and so on, is to be burned unread and to the last page, as well as all writings of mine or notes which either you may have or other people, from whom you are to beg them in my name. Letters which are not handed over to you should at least be faithfully burned by those who have them.”

And so, it transpired that the very next day, Kafka's last wish became Agnon's nightmare. This story itself seems to have the characteristics of a Kafka-Agnonesque tale, and we could imagine it being lifted from Kafka's diary or from a draft of a story from Agnon's modernistic collection "The Book of Deeds" ("Sefer HaMa'asim"): On June 3, 1924, the tormented Kafka passed away in the hope that his literary estate would ascend heavenward up the chimney. When the flames were denied their due in Prague they jumped to Bad Homburg and sated their appetite in Agnon's study.

As is well known, Brod did not carry out Kafka's final request and in 1939 (at the eleventh hour) he fled Europe, arriving in Tel Aviv with a suitcase full of manuscripts, and thanks to him Kafka's work became enshrined in the Western Canon and his name became immortalized. Many readers and scholars have woven webs of connections between the two writers, a fact that endlessly agitated Agnon, leading him to state in 1962: "What is said about me and Kafka is a mistake. Before I published my "Book of Deeds" I knew nothing of Kafka's stories except for his *Metamorphosis*, and even now, except for *The Trial* ... I have not taken a Kafka book in hand.... Kafka is not of my soul's root, and whatever is not of my soul's root I do not absorb." How familiar or not Agnon may actually have been with Kafka is irrelevant. The frequent use of the term "surrealism" and pointing out similarities between the two writers obscure a deeper connection from the eyes of readers.

The scholar Arnold Band observed, already in Agnon's lifetime, that certain parallels between two writers do not necessarily indicate the influence of one on the other, but rather, more likely, that both drew from the same well. In this case one can point to the stories of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov as a common source, which, pardon the anachronism, have a distinctly Kafkaesque quality. In a further coincidence, the writings of Rabbi Nachman were also burned or suppressed (at his request) and, as with Kafka and Agnon, his writings, teachings, and stories were largely only printed after his death. And here is another three-stranded cord: each of the authors in our tale was blessed with a "Hasid" who cared for his legacy and fame in spite of fires and death (Rabbi Nathan, Nachman's disciple; Brod, Kafka's friend; and Emuna Yaron, Agnon's daughter).

The meta-literary question that burns in Agnon is how can writing preserve the past from oblivion (e.g., the memory of his destroyed hometown in his magnum opus, *A City in Its Fullness*), and what is the fate of stories that have been forgotten, destroyed, burned, or lost? How much of their metaphysical immortality remains when the parchments are burned? (As in the stories "A Book That Was Lost," "Forevermore," "The Sign," "According to the Sorrow the Reward," and others.)

When Martin Buber informed the philosopher Franz Rosenzweig of the fire and the fate of his joint work with Agnon on the collection of Hasidic tales, Rosenzweig consoled him:

"When I received your letter and read about the misfortune that had struck Agnon, I naturally thought first that something had happened to him or to a member of his family, so that as I read on, I felt a great sense of relief. Certainly books and manuscripts are not simply material goods, but even though they are part of the *body*, they are still a replaceable *limb*. Frederick the Great rewrote the *History of the Seven Years' War*, which his valet had used for kindling; and Carlyle's *French Revolution* was also a second draft—the complete first draft was burned while in the possession of [John Stuart] Mill. No, death alone erases, not fire" (*The Letters of Martin Buber*, #306).

Now, a century after the coincidence of death and fire, we can appreciate how the works of these two great writers still enthrall readers and scholars the world over. They and their stories have not been erased.

The author would like to thank Dr. David Bollog for his aid in deciphering German archival records and to the staff of the Bad Homburg Stadarchiv.



Subscribe

We hope you have enjoyed this article! Unlike many other publications, we do not have a paywall. In order to continue this way, and to make sure that our writers are paid fairly for their work, we are totally reliant on those who can afford to do so, and who care about the Tel Aviv Review of Books, to help support our work. Please consider [making a donation](#). Many thanks!

[Previous: Sabras in Outer Space](#)

## Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked \*

Comment \*

Name \*

Email \*

Website

Post Comment

### Related Articles

#### [Nissim / A Short Story](#)

[Olga Lempert](#)

Small and raggedy, his scowl still terrified me. This was when he knocked on my door and announced he had come to stay with me. He looked like he was having a tougher time than most. Shallow unshaven cheeks, angry burning eyes set deep into black circles, shaggy brows. He said his name was Nissim. I gave him some towels and sheets and left him to get on with it.

[Cassandra](#)

[Orlan Zakai](#)