

Article

# “One Should Have Two Homelands”: Discord and Hope in Soma Morgenstern’s *Sparks in the Abyss*

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**Abstract:** Soma Morgenstern’s three-part novel *Sparks in the Abyss*, written between 1930 and 1943, exudes a spirit of serenity and optimism at the same time that its narrative is structured by repeated scenes of conflict and violence. This paper seeks to account for the place of discord in the trilogy. Morgenstern uses the interwar Galician homeland as a site to articulate the possibility of traditional Jewish life in modern Europe. By inhabiting two homes—East and West, Galicia and Vienna, secularism and piety—Jews will be able to negotiate the inevitable discord and occasional brutality that they face in the world. The lessons learned by a Western secular Jew in pluralist Galicia create hope for the negotiation of difference, if not for the complete overcoming of violence, on the eve of World War II.

**Keywords:** Soma Morgenstern; Galicia; modernism; narrative; violence; discord; difference; hope; German-Jewish; Jewish literature

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A number of themes dominate modern German-Jewish writing in the years leading up to World War II: assimilation and anti-Semitism, Zionism and anti-Zionism, the renewed interest in mysticism, Jewish philosophy and theology, and an anthropological interest in the East.<sup>1</sup> What is absent, it might seem, is any sustained exploration of religious tradition, behavior, and practice. Most German-speaking Jewish authors of this period were indeed Western, secular, and acculturated, even if they were only one or two generations removed from the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe. Their turn to the social and political dimensions of Jewish life and the philosophical dimensions of Judaism is typical and understandable, and yet it would be wrong to say that traditional Judaism is entirely absent from the modern German-Jewish literary imagination. A number of authors productive in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s were interested in precisely this matter. Born in imperial Galicia, they moved to the west in order to study, serve in the military, or flee persecution. In subsequent years, they wrote novels in which the experiences of traditional, observant, East European Jews play a central role. These works do not propose a naïve revival of antiquated forms of life; rather, they seek to negotiate the place of tradition in a modernizing world. The characters in these works are often pulled in two directions: East and West, backward and forward in time, toward religion and secular life. On the thematic, formal, and stylistic levels, these novels explore the future of Jewish tradition in European modernity with varying degrees of skepticism and hopefulness<sup>2</sup>.

Soma Morgenstern’s three-part novel *Sparks in the Abyss* (*Funken im Abgrund*, written 1930–1943) is one such work. It tells the story of the persistence of Jewish tradition and rural life in the face of secularizing and urbanizing modernity. Set in 1928, it narrates a year in the life of Alfred Mohylewski,

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<sup>1</sup> Examples include the writings of Arthur Schnitzler, Jakob Wassermann, Max Brod, Arnold Zweig, Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Alfred Döblin.

<sup>2</sup> Aside from Morgenstern’s trilogy, *Sparks in the Abyss*, the subject of this essay, other examples are Joseph Roth’s *Hiob* and H. W. Katz’s *Die Fischmanns*. See [1,2].

an assimilated Jewish student living in Vienna, who decides to return to his deceased father's birthplace in Eastern Galicia, the fictional village Dobropolje. Over the course of the trilogy Alfred learns a great deal about traditional Judaism and agriculture, in addition to numerous lessons in love, family relations, and local politics. He is also confronted with linguistic, religious, and ethnic difference and strife, especially in the form of anti-Semitism and struggles between the Roman Catholic Poles and the Greek Orthodox Ukrainians in Dobropolje. Finally, he learns the story of his own father, Josef, who left not only Galicia but Judaism altogether for secular life in the West. Despite numerous scenes of conflict, violence, and even tragedy, the work exudes a spirit of serenity and optimism. A review by Manfred Flügge from 1996 notes "the entire novel is disposed toward reconciliation, equilibrium, and harmony, which as a whole lends it the features of a legend" [3].

One could fairly characterize the novel in a few different ways. First, it is a Jewish *Bildungsroman*, or novel of education, which chronicles Alfred's development and growth and ends with his successful emergence as an educated, independent, civically-engaged young adult, equally ready for marriage and career. The novel describes a Jewish path in a German form. Second, it is a nostalgic tale about a lost Jewish world, a relic from the Austro-Hungarian Empire—"the mirage of a Galician utopia," as one recent critic calls it [4]. Alfred goes East instead of West, an unlikely trajectory, and one that signals that he is in some sense also going back in time. This does not mean that Morgenstern harbors naive or unrealistic hopes about a reversal of history, but rather that he seeks to offer a beautiful, wistful portrait about a time and place that can serve memory. Third, a close look at the details of plot and character reveals that *Sparks in the Abyss* is a novel about the challenge of pluralism—both inner-Jewish difference as well as wider ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity. Much of the plot reflects the anxieties, discomfort, and misunderstandings that accompany the confrontation with cultural difference. The specter of violence looms over these clashes, and occasionally turns into actual violence.

The third approach will be my own; as far as I know, no one has attended to the persistence of discord in the novels, and it will be my task to do so. But before I present my argument, I will outline how the first two readings delineated above are linked to specific understandings of Morgenstern's biography. According to the first, he was out to write the great Jewish novel of European modernity<sup>3</sup>. Morgenstern himself was born and raised in Eastern Galicia, where he had a religious upbringing. As a child he spoke Yiddish at home and attended both the *cheder*, where he learned Hebrew, and Ukrainian and Polish schools; he also learned German at home and later attended a gymnasium and then university in Vienna and Lemberg (Lviv/Lwów) [5]<sup>4</sup>. Alfred's story reverses Morgenstern's own, but both combine East and West, tradition and modernity, and religious and secular life. (There are also important parallels between Morgenstern's trajectory and that of Alfred's father, Josef, which add a further biographical twist to the novel). The fact that Morgenstern tells the story as a *Bildungsroman*, perhaps the only indigenous German literary genre, testifies to Morgenstern's equal commitment to the Germanness and the Jewishness of this project. The novel is Morgenstern's unique Jewish contribution to German literary history.

According to the second reading, in which Morgenstern paints a loving and nostalgic portrait of a pre-World War I Jewish idyll (even if there is considerable strife and brutality, and even if it is set in 1929), the devastating conditions under which Morgenstern wrote the trilogy have tremendous explanatory power ([4], p. 106)<sup>5</sup>. The 1930s and early 1940s were very difficult years for Morgenstern:

<sup>3</sup> Arguably Joseph Roth's novel *Job* [1] had already accomplished this, and yet Roth offers a rather bleak portrait of Galicia and religious life. Morgenstern's account is far more sympathetic, though far from naive or rosy. My goal is not to displace Roth's *Job* from its rightful place as a major novel of German-Jewish modernity, but rather to show that there are other works in this tradition.

<sup>4</sup> For more on Morgenstern's linguistic and national identity, see [6].

<sup>5</sup> There are suggestions throughout the novel that the Empire has not in fact fallen, most obviously the consistent treatment of Vienna as center and the fictional Dobropolje as periphery. The fact that Dobropolje is in fact part of Ukraine, an independent nation-state since 1918 whose capital is Kiev, is elided throughout. As Andrew Barker points out, when Welwel travels

he experienced unemployment and financial hardship as a direct result of the Nazi takeover in Germany, civil war in Vienna, the Anschluss, the outbreak of World War II, exile in France and the United States, imprisonment in several French camps, a nine year separation from his wife and child, and the death of his mother, brother, and sister at the hands of the Nazis. These were also years of intense intellectual friendship and loss: his close friends Alban Berg and Joseph Roth died, as did numerous other friends and acquaintances, including Ernst Toller, Walter Benjamin, and Stefan Zweig by suicide. The novel can thus be read as a fictional counter-narrative to Morgenstern's own experiences, a nostalgic memorial to a time of peace and hope that preceded the systematic persecution and destruction of European Jewry.

These two readings reflect not only aspects of Morgenstern's biography, but also the periods in which they emerged: the modernity reading corresponds to the interwar context, whereas the nostalgia reading is a product not simply of the postwar period, but of a post-reunification moment that was particularly attentive to the experience of Jewish exile during and in the aftermath of World War II. In his own time, writers such as Hermann Hesse, Robert Musil, Joseph Roth, and Stefan Zweig praised Morgenstern's Jewish *Bildungsroman*, having read the first published volume ([7], pp. 381–83). Zweig allegedly declared that it would become "the classic novel of the Jewish nation" and helped to secure an English translator ([8], p. 707. This is Morgenstern's English paraphrase of Zweig). It is not surprising that writers who witnessed and participated in the great flourishing of German-Jewish culture in Weimar Berlin and First Republic Austria, with their Jewish presses, journals, and cultural organizations, would have produced the first reading. Themselves surrounded by the projects of Jewish Enlightenment and German *Bildung*, these authors were primed to read Morgenstern's novel according to this paradigm. Immediately following the war, the trilogy was only known to a small audience of English speakers; all three volumes had been published in English translation by the Jewish Publication Society of America between 1946 and 1950, but the circulation was small. The complete trilogy was published in German in 1996, volumes two and three for the first time, which led to it being classified and studied as exile literature. In this post-reunification context, scholars and journalists tended to understand the work's beauty, optimism, and nostalgia for a lost Jewish world as a kind of escape or coping mechanism, consistent with the second reading outlined above. According to these readers, the timing, location, and conditions of writing, which were dominated by the rise of Nazism and World War II, explain why Morgenstern would choose to look back to a time that was better for the Jews.

Thus, each generation of readers interprets Morgenstern's trilogy according to its own experience and understanding of Jewishness: Morgenstern's contemporaries grasp the idea of a German-Jewish literary project in the service of modernity, whereas the post-reunification audience reads the nostalgic idyll as a reaction to the trauma and displacement of the Holocaust and exile. These readings reflect aspects of Morgenstern's biography as well as the critical paradigms from which they emerged. But where does this leave my own reading, which emphasizes the cultural clashes that Alfred repeatedly encounters and tries to negotiate? Earlier critics have consistently played down the dissonances that structure and motivate the narrative, perhaps because they do not fit neatly into either the old or the new critical paradigm. In other words, neither the modernity reading nor the nostalgia reading can really accommodate the persistence of discord, and yet it plays an undeniably prominent role in the trilogy.

My goal in this essay is to elaborate this third reading, which adds to rather than eclipses the earlier ones, and which sees discord as integral to Morgenstern's vision of a Jewish future. It is not that Morgenstern values conflict itself or the physical pain and emotional suffering it causes, but that

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from Dobropolje to Vienna for the Congress of the Agudat Yisrael he does not appear to cross any borders, as if he were still traveling within the confines of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. For him, Morgenstern writes "a novel whose apparent denial of modern sociopolitical realities is so engrained it still portrays Galicia as physically contiguous with republican Austria" (see [4], p. 106).

he sees it as an unavoidable aspect of Jewish history and experience. Moreover, he views the ethnic, religious, and linguistic plurality of interwar Galicia as an ideal site for overcoming it, because it is a place that requires the constant negotiation of difference. It is here that he develops, through Alfred, a vision of inhabiting two homes, literally and spiritually. Just as Alfred will not choose between Dobropolje or Vienna but will continue to inhabit both places, Morgenstern thinks that Jews should not settle too comfortably into either tradition or modernity, East or West, European *Bürgertum* or Zionism, but should instead toggle between two homes. This state of in-betweenness is necessarily rife with contradiction and conflict—since the point is to embrace and experience each home on its own terms rather than to collapse them into one—and yet it is the only mode of life that allows Jews to hold on to tradition while also becoming modern. As such, the discordant experience of two homelands is central to the hope that drives Morgenstern’s trilogy.

While Morgenstern’s interwar readers assume the compatibility of Jewish content and German form (the modernity reading), I emphasize the work of overcoming conflict and misunderstanding in order to achieve acceptance and tolerance. This is an unfinished project, but there is hope for the future. And while I do not think that Morgenstern is engaged in any sort of magical thinking about a return to a lost world (the nostalgia reading), the Habsburg myth of peaceful and productive co-existence among different ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural groups in the eastern reaches of the Empire informs the novels, in particular their message about two homes. What better place than pluralist Galicia to learn that conflict is inevitable but surmountable? Morgenstern’s vision of two homes, which he sustains through the writing of the novel but which is no longer viable when he learns about the Holocaust, expresses a hope for the future of European Jewry that is informed by contemporary ideals of German-Jewish compatibility and nostalgic memories of Galician harmony, but which refuses to gloss over the discord and violence that stand in the way of a peaceful future. For Morgenstern, the ideal of two homes is both the goal and the path. The point is not simply to choose Galicia, but to discover a way to inhabit it that is at once modern and traditional, and above all tolerant.

### 1. The Necessity of Hope in the Face of Violence

In an interview with Rabbi Wolfe Kelman in 1973, Morgenstern stated that “[a] book which doesn’t end with hope, if it is not hopeful, it is not a Jewish book” ([8], p. 712). *Sparks in the Abyss* is a hopeful book, though I would argue that neither of the previous interpretive paradigms outlined above can articulate wherein this hope lies, even if they acknowledge the novel’s optimistic tone. If pressed, the interwar writers would have said it is a naïve hope for German-Jewish symbiosis and the post-reunification readers would have said it was an unrealistic hope for a reversal of time. These answers are rather unconvincing, even if the readings from which they stem have merit. They assume that Morgenstern is a great writer, capable of producing literature of tremendous subtlety, complexity, and beauty, but that he either has a major blind spot at the center of his vision or is capable of massive self-delusion. For this reason I propose the third reading, which puts the fears, struggles, and violence that Alfred continually confronts on center stage, since it is their overcoming that fuels Morgenstern’s hope.

At first glance, it might seem strange to locate the source of hope in the novel’s many scenes of discord. As noted, previous readers have tended to overlook or suppress this aspect of the trilogy. For instance, the review by Manfred Flügge cited above argues that “the provocation of the book lies, [ . . . ] on the level of content, in the fact that the author has written a virtually idyllic novel in the calamitous years after 1933, in which anti-Semitism and ethnic hatred [Völkerhaß] are admittedly spoken about, [but] in which the threatening shadow of Germany is not even mentioned once” [3]. Deemphasizing the scenes of struggle and violence in the novel is consistent with these readers’ attachment to the novel’s message of “reconciliation, equilibrium, and harmony” [3]. Ingolf Schulte, who edited and oversaw the publication of Morgenstern’s works in the 1990s, offers a similar perspective: “Despite the heavy threat that gathers over the world of the East Galician Jews in the novel, it nevertheless offers an image of the peaceful coexistence of Jews, Poles, and Ukrainians

over long stretches" ([9], p. 180). Flügge's and Schulte's characterizations of the novel are not wrong, but they highlight the novel's optimistic tone and serene mood at the expense of acknowledging the prevalence of conflict. Moreover, while it might be fair to say that there is only one major act of tragic violence in the novel, the murder of the Jewish boy Lipusch, there are nearly countless incidents that cause psychological rather than physical harm, or in which violence is not realized but threatened, feared, dreamt, or desired. I will show that these "scenes of discord," as I collectively call them, play a central and necessary role both in constituting Morgenstern's vision of a Jewish future and in structuring its narrative articulation. This vision and this narrative cease to be viable by 1943, when Morgenstern is confronted with the devastating reality of the Holocaust, but it is worth exploring why discord is so central to his seemingly idyllic portrait of Jewish life in the period leading up to it.

The hope that Morgenstern maintains throughout the writing of the trilogy and that infuses the trilogy itself is grounded in the possibility of peaceful and productive Jewish life in Europe as well as the recovery of traditional Judaism in modernity. As I have stated, hopefulness is bound up with scenes of discord not because Morgenstern values conflict or violence in itself, but because he sees it as an unavoidable part of modern life, perhaps especially in the context of multi-ethnic and multi-faith Galicia, where differences between groups abound. Pluralism might breed discord, but it is also a testing ground and learning environment for overcoming it. This is why Morgenstern finds reason for hope in the ideal of two homelands: if one is at home in two places, one can identify strongly with two different ways of life; one maintains multiple and diverse allegiances. Moreover, at any given moment, one is both at home and removed from home, or perhaps traveling between the two, which means that one also gains an outside perspective on one's homes. It is not simply the experience of separation that Morgenstern values—this would be an idealization of exile, the notion that one can perceive one's home more acutely from afar—but rather the experience of having two homes but only being able to inhabit one of them at any given time. This creates not only a situation of constant yearning, but understanding and tolerance of difference. For Morgenstern, the point is not to reconcile the two homes or to collapse them into one, but to accept that each has its place and its value. This is the lesson I wish to draw out of the continuous scenes of discord in the novels: to have two homelands is a way of transforming discord into comprehensible difference. Thus, the relationship of discord and hope is indispensable for Morgenstern's vision of Jewish existence in modernity and for its rendering in narrative form.

## 2. Scenes of Discord I: Departure and Return as Responses to Violence

The scenes of discord that propel the novel are sometimes downright brutal. Indeed, the broad narrative of Alfred's return to traditional Judaism, the "Rückkehr" or "teshuvah," is directly motivated by an act of anti-Semitic violence, much as a similar scene of violence had pushed his father away from Judaism decades before. Thus violence proves integral to the overarching story: departure and return, devastation and hope, and apostasy and piety are all part of a single narrative.

Undoubtedly the most devastating act of violence in *Sparks in the Abyss* is the episode of ethnic unrest in the second volume, *In My Father's Pastures (Idyll im Exil)*. A longtime conflict between the Ukrainian and Polish factions of the village Dobropolje results in the murder of the innocent, precocious, and beloved Jewish boy, Lipusch or Lipale, who has come under Alfred's tutelage. While it is couched in a larger conflict between competing ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities, especially the Poles and the Ukrainians, this climactic episode is undoubtedly also a commentary on anti-Semitic violence. The main antagonist here is Lubasch, a Haman figure who comes to Dobropolje to sow unrest among its various inhabitants [10]. Alfred attempts to make peace in the form of a "celebration of brotherhood" (Verbrüderungsfest), but the festivities end tragically; Lubasch's machinations and manipulations lead directly to Lipusch's death. As Gerhard Langer notes, "this brutal murder of the boy is certainly one of the most haunting scenes of the failure of co-existence, of the eruption of blind rage against the Jewish, that has ever been described in literature" ([5], p. 61).

However this act of violence also results in an intensification of Alfred's faith. In the aftermath of the murder and in the process of mourning Lipusch, Alfred feels a spiritual connection to the boy that will prove decisive for his own relationship to Jewish tradition. Lipusch, in his death, becomes a kind of guide and a beacon of hope for Alfred.

Like all mourners, Alfred now lived in the past. Like all who live in the past, Alfred lost every interest in reality, which—insofar as it had no connection with Lipale—had become empty, insubstantial and colorless. He became scrupulously observant. During the year which he had spent at his uncle's home he had accepted the custom of praying three times daily, but till now it had been only a habit, a practice, a courteous concession to his host's way of life. Now, after the death of his young guide in piety, whose prayerful "Amen" still lived in the dead silence of Grandfather's Room—revived twice daily by its painful absence from the murmurous prayers of the mourners—now for the first time Alfred was able to tune his voice to that of little Lipale [jetzt erst vermochte sich Alfreds Stimme mit der Stimme des kleinen Lipusch im Gebet zu vereinigen]. At least he felt it so, and his melancholy piety increased from prayer to prayer, causing unrest to his uncle. Death is the greatest missionary—as is known to all priests, true and false, to all theologians, true and false, and to all religions, true and false. But Welwel Dobropoljer was not pleased with Alfred's piety ([10], pp. 73–74; [11]).

It is telling that his uncle Welwel, who has been Alfred's mentor and teacher in Jewish tradition, does not approve of his personal brand of piety. Alfred's commitment to Judaism is solidifying, as evidenced by the increased feeling with which he performs religious rituals, and yet he is clearly forging his own path within traditional Judaism. He sits in the prayer room for hours with Lipusch's father, who reads and prays, staring silently at the memorial candle. "In a mystic fervor Alfred would see the soul of the martyred child in the flame [of the memorial candle]. [Und in mystischem Erschauern sah Alfred im Totenlicht die Seele des zur Heiligung des Namens gemordeten Kindes]" ([10], p. 74; [11], p. 68). Thus the tragedy of Lipusch's death becomes the first step in Alfred's journey towards a personal form of traditional Judaism, one in which Lipusch serves as a kind of moral and spiritual guide. As will become clear in my analysis of the final pages of the novel, the memory of Lipusch will find a permanent and central place in Alfred's religiousness.

It would be wrong to conclude from this example alone that acts of violence always propel Morgenstern's characters toward increased religious devotion. In the case of Alfred's father, the opposite occurred. What is clear is that here, too, pain and loss are grounds for growth and change. The story of Josef's conversion, which is revealed in his testament in the third volume of the trilogy, *The Testament of the Lost Son (Das Vermächtnis des verlorenen Sohnes)*, offers another powerful example of how violence structures Jewish existence; in this case, however, it motivates a turn away from religious life. First Josef dispels the idea that he converted simply because Alfred's mother and her family, themselves converts, demanded this. Josef explains that he let others believe that this was his primary motive, as it was a convenient and generally palatable explanation, though not a true one [12]. Instead, he presents a childhood story as the origin of his conversion. One day Josef and his friend Katz see the old Jew Koppel the cloth-printer (Koppel der Drucker) being stoned, together with his horse, by a group of children. Two aspects of the scene seem to disturb Josef in particular. The first is that the children initially flock around Koppel, amazed by his wondrous prints, but turn into an angry and violent mob as soon as he prepares to leave:

The peasant children stand around him, holding their breath, with their fingers in their mouths and noses, marveling at Koppel's fine craftsmanship, as at pure magic. But when Koppel is finished and his horse starts moving again, when Koppel's hoarse voice is again heard in a melodious prolonged call to entice custom, the enchantment in which his craft holds their soul fades, and they are transformed into nasty, pestiferous children, howling, whistling, shouting cries of derision, singing mocking songs, throwing stones ([11], p. 137).

The shift from delight to rage is abrupt, and suggests a link between the fickleness of moods and the unpredictability of violence. The second aspect of the scene that disturbs Josef is the poignant way that Koppel and the horse protect each other as they are being pelleted with stones: the frail Koppel hides behind the horse's comparatively sturdy body, but covers the horse's eyes with his hands in order to protect this vulnerable organ:

It was only when one came nearer that one could see to what masterful heights Koppel the printer had developed the art of self-defense. As though the stones that flew around him were no more than a harmless swarm of gnats whom it was best to disregard, whom one chases away with the flick of an eyelid only when they became too annoying. Koppel the printer continued on his way calmly, his voice resounding from time to time. He accomplished the feat of protecting both his and the horse's body from the stones by employing the nag strategically: while he protected his head and face behind the arch of the nag's neck, his large, freckled, good hand moved according to the direction of the stones, at one time protecting the left, at another time the right eye of his horse, who was as poorly harnessed as Koppel was clothed ([11], pp. 137–38).

This dance of reciprocal protection is not performed, Josef makes clear, because Koppel is a great animal lover, but because the man and the horse rely on each other for their livelihood; they both need shelter, and they have only each other. Katz, armed with a club of some sort, eventually intervenes to help Koppel, and manages to disperse the rowdy children. When a child hurls a final insult at Koppel, he responds, "with the dignity of a philosopher":

"May it be as easy for you, sonny, to breathe air as it is easy for me to be a Jew." ["Möge es dir, Söhnchen, so leichtfallen, die Luft zu atmen, wie es mir leichtfällt, ein Jude zu sein."] Then, with a gesture of his hand, a very expressive gesture—so expressive that it still lingers in my memory as the wisest repudiation to all the well-meaning Aid Committees of civilized society [alle wohlgemeinten Hilfsaktionen der gesitteten Kulturmenschheit]—he rejected my friend Katz's help, rejoined his horse, and a few houses on the old game was resumed ([10], p. 142; [11], p. 138).

Thus an act of violence motivates Josef's conversion—he explicitly links the witnessing of this scene to his decision to convert ten years later—but it is also linked to the tenacity of Koppel's grip on his Jewishness. For Koppel there is dignity in enduring the continuous violence in solidarity with his horse but without outside help, for even if he is being struck with stones, he is at least able to remain himself, a Jew; whereas for Josef and Katz, who are deeply shaken by this incident and by its hopeless repetition ("The only question is whether it must continue this way to all eternity," Katz asks), the only dignity is in leaving ([11], pp. 138–39). Both decisions, to remain a Jew or to convert, are responses to acts of violence.

These scenes of physical brutality, Lipusch's death and the story of Koppel, mark decisive turning points in Alfred's and Josef's relationship to Judaism. Indeed, these two episodes must be read together, as they actually constitute a single narrative: the reason that Alfred's trip to Galicia can be figured as a *return* (Rückkehr, Umkehr) is that his life is in some sense a continuation of his father's, which is marked by *departure*. Josef left, Alfred returns; the son repents and returns in place of the father [13]. Prior to his story about Koppel the printer, Josef made clear that if Alfred is reading the testament, he has already undertaken this process. Addressing his son in his testament, Josef wrote:

If, however, you are truly my son, you are the grandson of Juda Mohylewski, the grandson of my father, to whom I was so bad a son. Regret? Regret is nothing if it is not followed by repentance. There is no more time for repentance. Repentance is called *Teshuva* in my father's tongue, that is to say, "turning back." Return! But return is only possible where there is a path to return on. My path, it seems to me, has come to an end ([11], pp. 134–35).

Though he claims never to have considered repentance or to have undertaken a return himself, Josef writes these words, which precede the story of his conversion, as he serves as a soldier in World War I on the Eastern front in Galicia. Though he has come here not to repent but to fight, it is not insignificant that it is here, “in the dream-landscape of my childhood,” that he begins to pave the way for the return of the son ([11], p. 135). Here too, this time on the massive scale of war, violence is a motivating feature of Josef’s/Alfred’s embrace of Judaism: Josef returns to Galicia to fight, but it is here that his Jewish conscience is reawakened, that he writes his testament, and that he begins a narrative of return that his son will complete upon his arrival in Galicia. Violence weaves the father’s and the son’s journeys into a single narrative of departure from and return to traditional Judaism. And yet Morgenstern’s point is not simply that encounters with violence will continue to push Jews away from and back toward Judaism indefinitely, in an endless cycle. Violence motivates characters to change course, but it does not provide solutions or answers to the underlying conflicts, and it must ultimately be overcome. Alfred’s journey, we will see, raises the possibility of hope through the embrace of two homes. This will not guarantee the end of all dissonance and discord, but it will give him the tools to approach the encounter with difference in a new way.

### 3. Scenes of Discord II: Overcoming Violence in the Dream of Two Homes

While acts of explicit and devastating violence, such as the ones just described, are present in the novel, another type of discord is far more pervasive: these are scenes in which violence never materializes though it is feared, desired, or threatened, or ones marked by a more subtle kind of dissonance or incongruousness. In these scenes, worlds collide and their incompatibility erupts in moments of confusion and discomfort. They are significant for Alfred’s development, but they are not traumatic in the way that the earlier episodes of violence were. Indeed, it is precisely their mitigated quality that lends them pedagogical power, for Alfred and the reader. For it is through these clashes, disturbing but not deadly, that Alfred comes to the novel’s central message of hope, that is, the embrace of two homes. I have chosen these particular scenes of discord because they constitute the bookends to Alfred’s journey to Galicia and renewed Jewish commitment, and yet one could discover comparable examples throughout the three novels. The first scene I discuss depicts Alfred’s initial encounter with his uncle Welwel in Vienna, and the second, the closing passage of the trilogy, takes place on the evening before Alfred’s planned visit to Vienna, the first trip back to his city of birth since he left for Dobropolje.

The first volume of the trilogy begins with a description of Welwel’s preparations for his trip to Vienna to attend the Congress of the Agudat Yisrael, the association of Torah-loyal Jews, which is also the site of his fateful meeting with his nephew Alfred. What actually brings them into contact, more concretely and immediately than Welwel’s role at this meeting and Alfred’s budding interest in Judaism, is a misperceived act of violence regarding the throwing of a bomb. Alfred attends the conference as a guest of Dr. Frankl, a journalist reporting on the proceedings and Alfred’s guardian. (Morgenstern attended the real-life meeting of Agudat Yisrael in Vienna in 1929, and his experiences there inspired him to write *Sparks in the Abyss*). Sitting in the audience, Alfred suffers a fit of laughter, and in the confusion and chaos that this inappropriate but innocent act unleashes, Welwel and his caretaker Jankel take him to be a bomb-throwing anti-Semitic terrorist. Needless to say, there is no bomb and Alfred meant no harm, but it takes some time to sort matters out. It is in the interest of clearing up this situation that Jankel seeks out Alfred, Alfred goes to see Welwel, nephew and uncle are reunited, and the plan for Alfred’s “return” to Galicia and Jewish tradition is hatched.

Alfred’s laughing fit, which follows a prayer for the dead, has great symbolic value. First, it is explicitly staged and described as a scene of rebirth, and thus functions as the origin, the starting point of his journey. The uncontrolled and explosive noise that issues from him; the darkness, confusion, and fear he feels; the “hissing and gurgling sounds” he makes; and his trembling, convulsing body—all this precedes Alfred’s incongruous vision of his dead mother: “Alfred saw: Mother is dead! But the menfolk [Mannen] of the Agudat Yisrael were stronger” ([12], p. 128; [14]). As far as Alfred is aware

at this point, his mother was the reason for the father's conversion. In his strange vision, she is now replaced by the Orthodox Jews at the Congress. The symbolism of the event is clear: Alfred's laughing fit represents the beginning of his new life, a journey that will involve bringing secularism and the Agudat Yisrael, Vienna and Dobropolje together. But for the present time, the vision is disruptive and jarring: Alfred has come into contact with a world that is both foreign and formative; he does not identify with it, and yet it speaks vaguely to some aspect of his not-yet-discovered identity. The result of this perceived disjunction is not just Alfred's laughter, but tumult, fear, and chaos at the congress. Even though there is no malice or aggression in his laughing fit, its immediate consequences are a sign that Jews in twentieth-century Europe are always on edge, so to speak, for both internal reasons (tradition and modernity have not yet found a way to co-exist) and external ones (the possibility of anti-Semitic violence). These anxieties and fears shape Alfred's rebirth into tradition.

Thus the specter of violence—in the form of a feared but non-existent bomb—haunts this gathering of Orthodox Jews, but it is also what draws Alfred toward Judaism: his laughter inadvertently insinuates him into this world and becomes the occasion for his symbolic rebirth. And yet in this scene of discord violence is a chimera; it is feared but not actual. Indeed, the episode seems to be more about misunderstanding—on the part of both Alfred and the Orthodox Jews—and the encounter with the incongruous, with the incomprehensible “other,” than it is about violence. So why *does* Alfred have a laughing fit? As I have already noted, it is not motivated by an intent to harm and causes no harm (other than Welwel's fainting spell, from which he recovers rather quickly), even if the response it elicits reflects a tense atmosphere of feared anti-Semitic violence. And yet it is not entirely innocent either, as it reveals an underlying discomfort with difference: Alfred laughs because the encounter with Chassidic Jews in cosmopolitan Vienna is, to him, strange, incongruous, even absurd. Asked to explain his behavior, Alfred cannot, though it is figured primarily as a problem of language. Alfred knows neither whether he is capable of explaining his reaction, nor whether the people around him understand German well enough to grasp what he would say. Eventually the editor-in-chief of a foreign newspaper, Neuwert, who is also there to report on the congress, intercedes on Alfred's behalf. He explains that what caused Alfred to laugh was the sight and sound of these “caftaned Jews, strange Jews, earlocked Jews” speaking German, the language of Western secular culture. Alfred perceives *their* use of *his* language as out of place [15]. Moreover, the leader had opened the session with the greeting, “You menfolk of the Agudat Yisrael!” (“Ihr Mannen des Agudas Jisroel!”), which had also been jarring to Alfred's ear. The word “Mannen,” not to be confused with “Männer” (men), is archaic and “heroic-pathetic,” as Neuwert explains, as if it came from a Wagner opera or an antiquated display of monarchical pomp. There is thus a double strangeness to the language of these traditional Jews from the East: not only are they *not* speaking Yiddish, as Alfred would expect, but they are speaking a style of German that is at once elevated and obsolete. Alfred's development over the course of the novel will consist in large part in learning to embrace these differences, and ultimately to be at home in both worlds. At this point, his laughter is a sign not only of rebirth, of a new beginning, but of the work that lies ahead of him—the work of finding an appropriately respectful and open bearing toward the “other,” so that he responds to difference with interest and sympathy, rather than discomfort and laughter. Thus the scene at the congress can be said to launch the modern Jewish *Bildungsroman*, as it lends the genre an origin (the site of rebirth) and a mission (the overcoming of cultural misunderstanding).

In my next example, from the last two sections of the final chapter of the third volume of the trilogy, the experience of physical and emotional pain, rather than violence or discord, predominates. By this point Alfred can appreciate and embrace cultural difference in a way that he could not at the start of his journey; he has worked hard to understand the various peoples who live and work in Dobropolje, and has actively tried to reconcile them in times of conflict. These sections begin with Alfred's preparations for a trip to Vienna, from which he plans to return shortly in order to found a school of agriculture in Galicia for young Jews who wish to settle in Palestine. On the evening before his departure, he meets his (non-Jewish) girlfriend Donja on his way home. Angry and distraught, she tells Alfred she is on her

way to the city to give herself over to a soldier. The reason, it turns out, is that her father wants to force Donja to marry someone she loathes, Kyrylowicz, and has already arranged her dowry. Alfred's Jewish family has also had a hand in arranging the marriage. Her father's command but above all Donja's defiant wish to debase herself enrages Alfred: "Alfred felt a lustful desire both to smash a clenched fist into the snub nose of her insolent face and to strike her in such a way that for goodness sake no damage would be done to the dear face . . . In this dilemma, he lifted his foot and kicked the satchel out of Donja's hand" ([11], p. 351, translation modified). This is a perfectly understandable expression of rage on Alfred's part, which stems from a desire to protect someone he loves. The fantasy of violence is tame: despite his rage, he cannot imagine actually harming Donja. Moreover, by kicking the bag out of her hand, an act that reveals it is empty and that she has no intention of following through with her threat, Alfred actually seeks to disrupt her rash and self-damaging act. He thus redirects violence toward protection rather than causing harm. Once Donja explains the situation, Alfred comes up with a plan to help Donja by giving her land, which will make her economically independent and thus free to wait to marry; he has reason to believe that Welwel and Jankel are willing to offer a substantial plot of land. The section ends with Donja's revelation that she has learned Yiddish (Alfred has already learned Ukrainian), Alfred's promise that he will return from Vienna, and their first kiss, all of which seems to promise their eventual marriage. Donja's distress, Alfred's violent but protective urges, and their shared pain are necessary steps in the path toward their union, which is grounded in a two-way linguistic transfer and an acceptance of religious and ethnic difference. The overcoming of these cultural and linguistic incompatibilities is a sure sign of Alfred's development, even if it does not guarantee the elimination of discord altogether. It manages conflict and domesticates violence.

After this meeting, Alfred returns home to sleep. He dreams of meeting a stork, a recurrent symbol in the novel, who says he is a friend of the dead Lipusch. Alfred and the stork speak about Lipusch and Josef, and about Alfred's impending trip. It is in this final scene, which directly precedes Alfred's temporary return to his original home (which is announced but not narrated), that the novel's central message is articulated. "I am happy to go back to the city where I was born, and I am deathly unhappy to leave Dobropolje which I love as my second homeland," Alfred explains ([11], p. 356). The stork responds: "You have expressed that well. We migrant birds understand that. We have taught men that one should have two homelands. But few of the children of men have hearts strong enough to bear our wisdom" ([11], p. 356). Alfred says he wants to learn this lesson, and so the stork imparts his wisdom:

"We storks have two homelands. We love them both. But the peak [hohe Zeit] of our stork life is neither here nor there. [ . . . ] The peak of our life is the path, the flight, the passage. [ . . . ] In our bellies the power of one homeland, in our eyes the sun of the other homeland:—that, child of man, is our life! Then our stork hearts become as wide as the world . . . " ([10], p. 352; [11], p. 357, translation modified).

The Hebrew word for stork, we learn, is "*hasidah*, pious one," which lends even more weight to its lesson. Indeed, this lesson seems to contain the novel's central message—"one should have two homelands"—which in turn reveals the answer to the novel's persistent linking of discord and hope. Alfred's need for two homes, Dobropolje and Vienna, is clear enough, but the significance of the flight is perhaps less evident. It suggests the need to maintain both homes without collapsing them, to consider the first from the perspective of the second and the second from the perspective of the first, and to be fully alive in one place while longing ardently for the other. It is precisely this condition of active and alert in-betweenness that is essential, for it allows Alfred to embrace difference rather than to be thrown out of joint by it, as he was in the opening scene at the congress. To live between two homes requires one to avoid complacency and not to take the norms and standards of one place for granted. It allows one to meet the seemingly incongruous with compassion and openness, rather than with laughter or aggression. The flight will always contain conflict—this is a sign that the homes are indeed two, not one, that there is difference—but the stork gives reason for hope, not despair. The hope is vested in reconciliation, or at least the management of conflict through the embrace of difference.

Having shared his wisdom, the stork asks a favor of Alfred: to pluck the dead feathers from his body so that he can fly again. The dead feathers symbolize the vestiges of an intolerant and inflexible traditionalism, a hasidism unwilling to accommodate modernity—this was at least in part what drove Josef to conversion years earlier. The removal of these feathers is essential for Alfred's path as a Jew, since it signals the restoration of tradition but a liberation from its antiquated strictures.

Alfred stretched forward his hand, to do Lipusch's friend the service of love. But hardly had his finger touched the outspread wing of the stork, when the bird plunged its beak through his hand like a dagger. A fire burned his hand. Flames shot out of the clapping stork beak ([11], p. 358).

The stork will not fly and the beautiful dream turns into a painful and frightening experience. It might seem that the hope for two homes has been dashed, and yet I think Morgenstern's message is less bleak than this: the dream of two homes is not yet realized, but perhaps one day it will be. The Jewish light—the lamp belongs to Pesja, the Jewish housekeeper at Welwel's estate—is a source of warmth, enabling the dream, but also of pain, disabling its complete fulfillment. Alfred awakens to discover that he had fallen asleep with the petroleum lamp at his bedside still burning, and was trying, in his unconscious state, to extinguish it with his hand. For a second he regrets his carelessness, but then realizes the necessity of the painful experience: “had it not been for the painful touch of the heated glass of the lamp, this dream would not have come. Since the boy's death, every night had been a confusion of dreams and images. This was the most beautiful. Lipusch is a narrating judge. [Lipusch ist ein Erzählender Richter]” ([11], p. 359). It is significant that Pesje had admonished Alfred to turn out the light before saying the bedtime prayer; that is, she anticipates the harm that will befall him, and she wants him to avoid it, to take the path of least resistance. But the narrator tells us that the dream is more important than Alfred's comfort and safety, for it contains the novel's message of hope, even if it can only articulate it through pain. Alfred must endure the lamp, the beauty of its light and the sting of its flame, if he is to grasp that the source of Jewish hope lies in the ideal of two homelands.

The novel closes with Alfred's image of the pure and good Lipusch, dressed in white, ready to tell a story: “he has a story to tell. As always” ([11], p. 359). He then recalls how Lipusch recited the “shema al ha-mitah,” the bedtime prayer, the words of which constitute the final lines of the trilogy. The prayer signifies how steeped in Jewish tradition Alfred has become, even if the path to it has been strewn with conflict. It seems Alfred can only find rest, and the novel can only find an end, with the words of this prayer, which are doubly mediated, first through the memory of Lipusch and second through the German language. Its connection to Lipusch, a beacon of hope whose tragic murder has turned him into a martyr, points to the project of overcoming discord and conflict through tolerance. Moreover, its inscription in German shows Alfred's and the novel's negotiation of tradition and modernity, piety and *Bildung*, East and West. The closing scene exemplifies Alfred's flight between two homes and the continued need to traverse that path in both directions.

#### 4. Conclusions

My analysis of *Sparks in the Abyss* has suggested that the persistent violence in the trilogy is not gratuitous or negligible, but instead serves an important purpose. It spurs Morgenstern's characters to explore new paths and seek new homes, or in some cases to consciously renew their commitments to their existing homes. In Alfred's case, which is inseparable from Josef's, these explorations lead to the idea that one should have two homelands. It therefore seems that the fear or threat of violence that looms over the encounter with religious, cultural, and linguistic difference is essential to the journeys these characters take. Having two homes allows one to be simultaneously an insider and an outsider, i.e., to see one's own home from an external perspective. This makes it possible to embrace the incongruous, rather than to fear or laugh at it. And yet having two homes also insures that differences will persist, as it is the opposite of living exclusively among “one's own.” It guarantees the encounter with the “other” and forces one to develop strategies for managing the discord that such a life involves.

As noted earlier, it is no coincidence that Morgenstern situates this project in interwar Galicia, where the reality of pluralism and the myth of its harmonious and tolerant manifestation, especially in the Habsburg period, can be called upon to support the vision of two homes. The setting of Galicia allows Morgenstern to articulate the struggle to understand, negotiate, and accept difference, which is in turn the source of Morgenstern's hope for Jewish existence in modernity.

The ideal of two homes represents a powerful model of hope for Jewish life in Europe, even if it does not eliminate violence or guarantee security. It shows a way to inhabit Galicia, which is shorthand for a way to live as a traditional Jew in modernity. This hope is certainly limited by certain conditions and to certain people, but it is undeniably hope. Given Morgenstern's conviction that a Jewish book must be hopeful, by his own standards he seems to have succeeded in writing one. This does not mean that the idyll has been achieved, but that it is conceivable. Even if the stork's flight is stalled, there is a sense that Alfred's will not be. In fact the novel ends at the brink of hope, on the threshold to a future that may or may not involve the successful negotiation of difference and management of discord, since we do not know if Alfred will actually return and, if he does, what his adult life will look like. But it certainly does not rule out the possibility that he will successfully live between Dobropolje and Vienna, between Jewish practice and secular *Bildung*, between Yiddish and Ukrainian, Hebrew and German.

The hope that is so central to Morgenstern's narrative also fueled the writing of the novel. He sustained the hope that he invests in Alfred through the writing of the novel, but it disappeared abruptly and irrevocably when he was confronted with the devastation of World War II. Morgenstern finished the trilogy in 1943, an exile in New York, and it was at this point that the hope that had structured and motivated his narrative was no longer viable. In a 1975 account of the genesis of *Sparks in the Abyss*, he wrote:

Six months after the completion of the Trilogy, the horrible news and documentation about the destruction of Eastern European Jewry began to arrive. The ink with which the manuscript had been written had scarcely dried when a contemporary work thus became a historical novel—an occurrence probably unique in the history of world literature ([9], p. 175; [16]).

What changed in 1943, such that a “contemporary” work became “historical”? Morgenstern was of course aware that life in Galicia, where Jews had experienced poverty, degradation, and persecution for decades, was a struggle. This was already true in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, years that include the setting of the novel and its writing; the persistent violence of the narrative attests to this awareness. And yet the novel could remain “contemporary” as long as this violence could be linked to hope, as long as Alfred could struggle to work out how to be a Jew in the modern world by having two homes—one in the East and one in the West, one in tradition and one in modernity. The work became “historical” when this hope died, which is to say, when it was no longer possible to assimilate the experience and narration of violence into a story of Jewish existence in modernity. The recovery of tradition, the return to Galicia, and the restoration of Jewish life in Europe might have seemed unlikely in the years 1928–1943, but it was a project worth hoping for and describing in literature; indeed, Morgenstern's novel gave this hope substance and form. By 1943, the violence is so brutal, tragic, and devastating, that it could only end lives and stories, not motivate them. At this point, the hope for two homelands was lost, and the novel became “historical.”

Early in his exile, Morgenstern spent some months in California, where he first encountered photographs and filmed footage from the war. These images, it seems, put an end to the hope he had harbored for European Jewry during the writing of *Sparks in the Abyss*.

I was at a “Newsreel” yesterday. There were many images from the occupied countries. Also many images from the war fronts. Horrific images. From the Russian winter campaign: the corpses of frozen Nazis. Frozen arms, hands, fingers stretched out in the final paroxysm and already frozen over the icy snow cover. Dead Russians too, farmers and farmers' wives and children murdered by the German murderers. Relatives of the murdered, Russian farmers, fathers, mothers, brothers, searched in these ghastly

heaps for the mutilated, smashed, shattered faces of their sons, their brothers, their wives, their fathers, their children—searched, found, and recognized the remains of the dead... ([17], p. 573, translation mine).

There was nothing to be learned from violence on this scale: no new path to explore, no story to be told, no message or lesson to be gleaned. Jewish life in Eastern Europe was being systematically and brutally eliminated, which meant that the hope that had driven Morgenstern and his novel was gone. In the face of this overwhelming violence and in the absence of hope, Morgenstern found himself unable to write:

I had misgivings in touching this theme of the horrors which happened to the Jews in Europe in the German language. But it's my language, a language in which I could express myself. I was for a long time inarticulate because I had seen too many of these pictures of the concentration camps and what happened there, and I became inarticulate. So I sort of gave up my writing ([8], p. 711).

This comment is particularly poignant when considered in the context of the closing lines of *Sparks in the Abyss*, which reproduce the bedtime prayer, doubly mediated through Lipusch's memory and the German language. Until 1943, Morgenstern was able to write not only a Jewish story of hope in German, but one that reflected a deep familiarity with Jewish tradition and a thorough commitment to its broad transmissibility. This year is a caesura for Morgenstern not only because it puts an end to the vision of two homes and its narrative articulation through stories of flight, struggle, conflict, and reconciliation. It is also a turning point in Morgenstern's own relationship to the German language, which had now become an uncomfortable linguistic home for him. Morgenstern died in New York in 1976. He would never again revisit the ideal of two homes, and yet he would find a way to write another Jewish novel of hope and a way back into the German language. His Holocaust novel, *The Third Pillar (Die Blutsäule, 1955)*, is a work in which Jewish religious tradition, anti-Semitic violence, and the German language co-exist in a thoroughly new constellation. It is a work whose content is brutal and whose style and language are jarring—which is to say, a work that lacks the serene and positive tone of *Sparks in the Abyss*, but amplifies its focus on pain and violence. And yet it is a Jewish book by Morgenstern's own definition—a novel of hope, only one in which the source of hope rests in Zionism, not in the Galician homeland. Alas, that is another chapter in Morgenstern's personal and literary biography.

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