

Wall Texts

Exhibition

Heidi in Israel. Searching for Traces

The mountains are Heidi's world and these have become a place of longing for countless readers. The two books—"Heidi: Her Years of Wandering and Learning" and "Heidi: How She Used What She Learned"—were written by the Swiss author Johanna Spyri (1827-1901) and are now embedded in the global cultural memory.

The books became an immediate success after they were published in 1880 and 1881. With an estimated 60 million copies sold and translated into more than 70 languages, the story is one of the best known in the world and, for more than 70 years, has become integrated in the canon of children's literature in Israel as well. Other genres such as theater and film have also taken up the story of the orphaned Heidi and adapted it, making it better known to an even wider audience. The exhibition traces this success story in greater depth and takes visitors on a journey through time in a search for traces of Heidi in Israel.

Johanna Spyri—"Heidi's" creator

The Swiss author Johanna Spyri became world-famous as a result of her two "Heidi" books. After the copyright on Spyri's complete works expired in 1931, countless translations and adaptations came onto the market, the scope of which can hardly be reconstructed in its entirety any longer. Today, the figure is associated primarily with the Japanese animated film series. "Heidi" however also found an audience as a radio play, television and movie production—in Israel as well. Through her novel Johanna Spyri significantly influenced Switzerland's image abroad and contributed to Switzerland being associated with "Heidi" throughout the world.

From the third print-run in 1881 onward, the first illustrated editions with drawings by Friedrich Wilhelm Pfeiffer (1822-1892) appeared. In 1882, the first translations were published simultaneously in England, France, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and the Netherlands. At the time of her death the author had seen her book translated into eleven languages. In the USA alone, some 20 million copies had been sold by 1936.

Friedrich Wilhelm Pfeiffer

The painter and illustrator Friedrich Wilhelm Pfeiffer, who was living in Munich at the time, first illustrated Johanna Spyri's books in 1881, capturing key episodes from the story "Heidi" in pictorial form: tending the goats with Peter on the alp, Heidi's shock after the writing materials fell on the floor at Sesemann's in Frankfurt, and her joy at being allowed to return to her grandfather on the alp. The artist showed a fine sense of intuition in his selection of scenes for his illustrations, which have never been left out of any synopsis of Spyri's story ever since.



"Heidi and the goats went skipping and jumping joyfully beside Peter. After a climb of more than three-quarters of an hour they reached the top of the mountain, where "Old Öhi's" hut stood on a projecting rock, exposed to the winds, but where every ray of sun could rest upon it, and a full view could be had of the valley beneath."

Heidi: Her Years of Wandering and Learning, 1880

Heidi is taken by her aunt to "Öhi," Heidi's grandfather who, feeling resented, lives a withdrawn life in the Alps. Heidi not only manages to win her grandfather's heart but also experiences happiness and joy herself for the first time. Every day Heidi accompanies the goatherd Peter to the pastures and playfully becomes familiar with her new *heimat*. Her affinity with nature and her love for the goats become deeply rooted within her.



“Heidi would go and sit in a corner of her lonely room and put her hands up to her eyes that she might not see the sun shining on the opposite wall; and then she would remain without moving, battling silently with her terrible homesickness until Clara sent for her again.”

Heidi: Her Years of Wandering and Learning, 1880

Heidi is sent to Frankfurt to play with Clara Sesemann, who is confined to a wheelchair, and where she is to grow up in an upper-class household and be taught and educated. This takes place under the strict supervision of Frau Rottenmeier who tries in vain to teach Heidi conventions and bourgeois manners. This fails however as Heidi cannot settle in this world and lives in emotional turmoil. An old straw hat which Heidi has brought with her from home becomes her “portable *heimat*.” Only when Heidi is almost consumed by homesickness is the decision made to take her back to her grandfather in the mountains.



“And the old man himself said nothing. For the first time for many years his eyes were moist and he had to wipe his hand across them. Then he unloosed Heidi’s arms, put her on his knee, and after looking at her for a moment said: ‘So you have come back to me, Heidi.’”

Heidi: Her Years of Wandering and Learning, 1880

Back in the mountains Heidi blossoms once again. The grandfather is so overcome by the unexpected return of his grand-daughter that this triggers a fundamental change within him. Heidi succeeds in reconciling him inwardly with god and convincing him to seek contact with the villagers once again. In the second part of the story Clara comes to visit in her wheelchair. Thanks to the mountain air, the new impressions she gains and the care provided by the grandfather, Clara miraculously learns to walk again. Clara’s recovery marks the beginning of a lifelong friendship between the two girls and the grandfather.

Heidi—An Orphan

Johanna Spyri does not use the word “orphan” herself directly in her “Heidi” books, whereas Heidi is explicitly called a “poor” or “little orphan” in various Hebrew translations. The word for an “orphaned child” regularly appears in reviews as well, regardless of whether these are of new books, films or plays.

In the post-war period, orphans were a sad reality. In 1938 and 1939, for example, thousands of children of Jewish descent were saved from the Nazis through the *kindertransport* rescue effort. Traveling by train or ship, these children were permitted to leave without their parents or relatives. Jewish aid organizations had as many of them as possible taken to the safety of former Palestine where most were accommodated in *kibbuzim* or in youth camps. The majority of these children never saw their parents again and were often the sole survivors of the Shoah in their families.

Heidi’s Family

Although Heidi is described as an orphan, she is never alone or lonely. She is able to see the world with open eyes and grows to love others who become her surrogate family. This image of an alternative family constellation is incorporated in the title of the Hebrew translations: “Heidi Bat HeHarim” and “Bat HaAlpim” which means “Heidi, Daughter of the Mountains” and “Daughter of the Alps.” The word *bat* [daughter] refers to Heidi’s ability to re-define the family.

The openness and curiosity inherent in the character “Heidi” played an important role in young Israeli society in the years immediately after the war. Many orphans whose relatives had been murdered went to Israel and were then often able to experience a new kind of communal life in *kibbutzim*. Hebrew-language children’s literature in the first few years after the founding of the State of Israel was designed to give its young readers a forward-oriented and positive attitude to life.

On the Alp and in a Kibbutz

The countryside and agricultural work played an identity-forming role in political Zionism. Communal life in a *kibbutz*, in particular, presented as the more preferable alternative to “life in the city,” was idealized. Symbolically it stood for the life in Europe left behind and, therefore, also for “life in the diaspora.”

“Heidi” was described as an “ode to the joys of the simple life” by literary critics in Israel. Her life in the countryside was associated with rural life in a *kibbutz* that is often depicted as an ideal in children’s literature, a genre that was still young in Israel. However, the descriptions of the countryside and the mountains in Spyri’s novel were like memories of a world left behind. Heidi’s world stood for something that many emigrants had lost when they fled Europe and with which they could identify.

Language and Identity

Learning modern Hebrew was essential to building a new cultural identity in what was then Palestine and later Israel. Children’s and youth literature is particularly important within this context. New poems and stories were written in Hebrew while at the same time many works were translated. A special focus was placed on the translation and adaptation of so-called “classics” of 19th and early 20th-century literature in order to establish a European-influenced literary canon.

It was primarily the younger generation which communicated in the “new native language,” while the immigrant adult generation in the first decades after the war still mostly spoke the languages of their countries of origin. A book like “Heidi” served as an important aid in this respect to help others learn a new language through familiar material. Heidi’s Alps were a well-known cultural region, especially for emigrants from German-speaking Europe. The first Hebrew translation seemed deliberately aimed at this readership: the Newman

publishing house called “Heidi” “Daughter of the Alps” [*Bat HaAlpim*] and not, as in later translations, “Daughter of the Mountains” [*Bat HeHarim*].

Ambivalences

“Heidi” was translated from the German into Hebrew in 1946, one year after the Shoah. As such, the tense complexity of a new beginning, that was also marked linguistically, and a backward-looking attachment to German-speaking culture became very apparent. Some names from Spyri’s novel were translated, as in the French edition where Peter is called Pierre and the Sesemanns are known as the Gérard family. Only the name of the strict governess Fräulein Rottenmeier was not changed in the Hebrew translation. Differences also became apparent in stage versions. In a 1956 production, Heidi was not taken to “gray Frankfurt” but to “sunny Venice” instead. In later performances, references were made to a “big city,” without any concrete mention of any one place. Over the decades to follow, and the further removed from the Shoah, new translations became closer to the original, picking up new mentality and history-related phenomena and references and capturing the *zeitgeist* in this way.

“Heidi’s” Film Debut

Even before the first official Hebrew translation, “Heidi” had found its way into the spotlight in what was then Palestine. In the US film adaptation of 1937 with child star Shirley Temple as Heidi, the character from the novel once again became famous throughout the world. The film ran almost continuously in movie theaters in Palestine between 1938 and 1941 and was enthusiastically received by the public. It was shown in the original English version with subtitles in German and French.

The image of “Heidi” at that time was strongly influenced by the film. Shirley Temple as “Heidi” was not only in the cinemas but could also be heard in the radio version. As there was still no Hebrew translation of the novel in those days, the book was read in other languages or even translated independently.

“Heidi” in Hebrew

With the emerging enthusiasm for “Heidi” triggered by the Shirley Temple film adaptation, the first Hebrew translation appeared in 1946 under the title “Heidi Bat HaAlpim” [Heidi, Daughter of the Alps], published by Newman in Tel Aviv. This translation was reprinted at least six times and was a great success. Newman not only published Johanna Spyri’s children’s classic but also the popular sequels by Charles Tritten. In addition, other publishing houses brought out their own, much abridged and colorfully illustrated versions of “Heidi” under the title “Heidi Bat HeHarim” [Heidi, Daughter of the Mountains].

The two Swiss films “Heidi” (1952) and “Heidi and Peter” (1955) were shown in Israeli movie theaters over a long period, while Menachem Golan’s “DoReMi” theater first brought the story to the stage in Israel.

Curtain Up!

For the Hanukkah festival in 1963, director and producer Menachem Golan brought a new production of “Heidi Bat HeHarim” [Heidi, Daughter of the Mountains] to the stage of the “Tilon” theater. Six years later, Avraham Luria’s “Theater of Oz” brought back the play in a revised version. In the movie theater “Heidi” remained part of the repertoire.

“Heidi” was available to listen, watch, and play. The story was pressed on vinyl, broadcast on the radio, and from that time onward could also be seen on television. A board game appeared in the shops and kindergartens created their own nursery rhymes. “Heidi’s” presence can also be traced on the book market: new editions of the first translation from 1946, the only “official” translation of the book into Hebrew up until that time, appeared again and again until the late 1960s. In 1975, a new, linguistically more modern translation appeared on the book market in Israel.

The Journey Continues

The media continued to develop and with them “Heidi”, too. In the 1980s and 1990s radio plays and video cassettes came on the market. Well-known personalities in the entertainment business in Israel, such as Shoshik Shani and Yossi Banai, were taken on as narrators. With their voices and interpretations they have made a lasting impression on the image of “Heidi” in Israel.

Further film versions and adaptations appeared in cinemas and on television; in addition, new Hebrew translations became available. In particular, the 1983 translation by Shlomo Nitzan, which is still well-known today, was read by many children at the time. A four-paged coloring book was probably the shortest version of the story, while other editions included additional information on the author and Switzerland.

Becoming a Children’s Classic

Today, it is not possible to think of the film and literature canon in Israel without “Heidi.” Since the turn of the millennium, other popular adaptations and licensed editions have been produced for the Israeli book market. Well-known radio plays and VHS cassettes have been re-released as CDs and DVDs. The children’s literature classic continued to be shown on stage as well: “Heidi” was performed as a family musical in 2001, 2014, and 2020. The figure is also regularly mentioned in the daily press. Travel reports and tourism advertisements in particular frequently refer to Johanna Spyri’s story whereby the stereotypical images and references go far beyond Switzerland and the Alps.

On social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram, where users themselves take on the role of Heidi or pick up the theme through association, the term “Heidi Bat HeHarim” [Heidi, daughter of the mountains] can readily be found in descriptions or comments. In all its varieties and facets the “daughter of the mountains” is deeply rooted in the cultural memory of Israel today and continues to remain so due to its diverse reception. The latest Hebrew translation by Hanna Livnat from 2020 supports this success story.