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IN SEARCH OF JEWISH-RUSSIAN LITERATURE:  
A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Introduction

A Jewish-Russian writer has always been and remains both an in-looking outsider and an out-looking insider.<sup>1</sup> Evgeny Shklyar (1894-1942), a Jewish-Russian poet and a Lithuanian patriot who translated into Russian the text of the Lithuanian national anthem and was murdered in a Nazi concentration camp outside Kaunas, wrote in the poem "Gde dom?" ("Where's Home?" 1925):

Есть в Иудействе боль и тайная есть сила  
Цветы изгнания выращивать вдвойне,  
И в глубине души, на самом страшном дне,  
Их выбирать, и выбрать, как мерило, —  
Идти-ль туда, где чуждо все, но мило,  
Или туда, где все — в прекрасной старине?...

In Judaism fierce, hidden strengths appear  
To nurture twice exile's flowers  
And deep within the heart's most buried bowers  
To pick amongst them and to make it clear  
You're going either where all's alien but dear  
Or where the majestic past regales the hours ...

[trans. Maxim D. Shrayer and Andrew von Henty].<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on the editor's general introduction I contributed to the recently published anthology of Jewish-Russian literature; see "Toward a Canon of Jewish-Russian Literature," in: *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature: Two Centuries of Dual Identity in Prose and Poetry, 1801-2001*, 2 vols., edited, selected, and cotranslated, with introductory essays by Maxim D. Shrayer (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), Vol. 1: xxiii-lxiv. In the context of Jewish-Russian history and culture, the juxtaposition between a "divided" and a "redoubled" identity goes back to the writings of the critic and polemicist Iosif Bikerman (1867-1941(42?)), who stated in 1910, on the pages of the St. Petersburg magazine *Jewish World* (*Evreiskii mir*): "Not dividedness [*razdvoennost*] but redoubledness [*udvoennost*]" ; quoted in Shimon Markish, *Babel' i drugie*, 2nd ed., (Moscow and Jerusalem: Personal'naia tvorcheskaia masterskaia "Mikhail Shchigol'," 1997), 186.

<sup>2</sup> Shkliar, Evgenii, *Posokh. V sbornik stikhov* (Riga: n.p., 1925), 48; Shrayer, *An Anthology*, vol. 1, 444. Hereinafter, unless indicated otherwise, all translations from the Russian are my own.

The poem was composed at a time when dreams of a Jewish state were becoming much more than a poet's parable. The land "where all's alien but dear" is, of course, Shklyar's native Pale of Settlement, while the place where "the majestic past regales the hours" is Shklyar's vision of Israel. The duality of a Diasporic Jew's dividedly redoubled loyalties is both political-ideological and cultural-linguistic. In the poem's final line, envisioning his own life as a Jewish-Russian poet and translator of Lithuanian poets into Russian come to Israel to hear children "greet [him] with words of welcome in *ivrit*," Shklyar employs the italicized (and transliterated) Hebrew word for the ancient Jewish tongue. The poet's word choice in the final, rhyming position also underscores the duality of his identity: linguistically and culturally at home in the east European abode where "all's alien but dear" and spiritually, if symbolically, traveling to the land of Israel, "where the majestic past regales the hours," and yet where Shklyar's Jewish-Russian poet is culturally a foreigner.

"Exile" in Shklyar's poem is the Diaspora, where Jews have added Hebrew-Farsi, Ladino, and Yiddish to their Hebrew, while also translating their identities, albeit never fully or completely, into Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, French, German, English, Polish, Russian, and many other languages spoken in the places of their dispersion. But Shklyar's "exile" is also the Jewish poet's exile from his literary home, his Russian tongue, and this duality renders nearly meaningless debates about the legitimacy of "Jewish" literatures in "non-Jewish" languages.

In the two centuries that followed the spread of the Haskalah in the late eighteenth century, linguistic self-expression in non-Jewish languages was central to the Jewish experience and Jewish survival in Diaspora. For the Jews of Russia, starting with the 1860s Jewish literary culture created in the Russian language increasingly served as one of the main receptacles into which the traditions of Jewish spirituality were poured. Varieties of Jewish self-awareness have been channeled and transmitted through Jewish-Russian literature. Quite often, while an uninformed reading of a Jewish text created and published in the literary mainstream reveals only superficially Jewish references, a rereading shows how much of the Judaic heritage is captured and preserved in its pages. A classic example of such a dual, non-Jewish and Jewish, model of (re)reading is Isaac Babel's novel-length cycle of stories *Red Cavalry* (first book edition 1926).

Russia was the last European nation to gain – through western expansion – a large Jewish minority and also the last to free its Jews of oppressive legal restrictions. Since the 1860s the Jewish question has occupied a prominent place in Russian – and later Soviet – history. By the early twentieth century, the Russian Empire had the highest concentration of Jews in the world: in 1897, about 5.2 million (about 47 percent of the world's Jewish population), and in 1914, at the beginning of World War I, still about 5.5 million, including Poland's 2 mil-

lion (about 41 percent of the world's Jewish population). According to the same census of 1897, 24.6 percent of Jews in the Russian Empire could read and write in Russian, but only 1 percent considered Russian their mother tongue. In growing numbers, the nonemancipated Jews strove to enter the Russian social and cultural mainstream. Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), an astute student of the Jewish question, remarked as he sketched a southern provincial town in "Moia zhizn'" ("My Life," 1896) that "only Jewish adolescents frequented the local... libraries."

Why, despite all the misfortunes and pressures, have the Jews of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union survived without losing their selfhood, even though so many have lost their religion and living ties to Yiddish and Hebrew? One of the most fascinating cultural paradoxes of Russian Jewry is that, against all the historical odds, even during the post-Shoah Soviet decades, it continued to nurture its dual sense of self, both Jewish and Russian, and Russian letters became its principal outlet for articulating this duality.

Russia offers the student of Jewish literature and culture a challenging case study of contrasting attitudes, ranging from philosemitic dreams of a harmonious fusion to antisemitic fabrications and genocidal scenarios. To measure the enormity of the religious, historical, and cultural baggage that the Jews brought to Russian letters would mean much more than merely to examine Jewish history through the prism of Russian literature created by Jews. And to state that the Jews have made a major contribution to Russian literature would be to commit a necessary truism. Of the four Russian writers to have been awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, two were born Jewish: Boris Pasternak, whom the Soviet authorities forced to turn down the prize in 1958; and Joseph Brodsky, a Russian poet and American essayist banished from the USSR, who received the prize in 1987. For a Jew in Russia or the Soviet Union, the act of becoming a Russian writer often amounted to an act of identity revamping. In some cases, a Jewish-Russian writer's gravitation to Christianity and abnegation of his or her Jewish self completed the process of becoming Russian (e.g., Boris Pasternak [1890-1960]). In other cases, deeply devotional Judaic thinking (Matvey Royzman [1896-1973]) or a militantly Zionist worldview (Vladimir [Ze'ev] Jabotinsky [1880-1940]) was combined with an acute aesthetic sense of one's Russianness. Jewry gave Russia its arguably most European poet of modernity, Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938); its most talented and controversial mythologists of the Revolution and the civil war, Isaac Babel (1894-1940) in prose and Eduard Bagritsky (1895-1934) in poetry; its mightiest voice of the people's resistance during the years of the Nazi invasion, Ilya Ehrenburg (1891-1967); its savviest herald of the Thaw, Boris Slutsky (1919-1986); the greatest underground keeper of avant-garde freedom in the late Soviet era, Genrikh Sapgir (1928-1999); and even Russia's most admired literary comedian of the late Soviet decades, Mik-

hail Zhvanetsky (b. 1934). And Jewry also gave Russia many distinguished Jewish-Russian authors, such as Mark Aldanov (1886-1957), Dovid Knut (1900-1955), and Friedrich Gorenstein (1923-2002), who later became exiles and émigrés while remaining Russian writers. Others yet, like Elsa Triolet (1896-1970), had started in Russian but in exile switched to writing in western languages. By writing in Russian, a Jew becomes a Russian writer.<sup>3</sup> But to what degree does he or she also remain a Jewish writer?

Critics have been debating the nature and definition of Jewish-Russian literature since the 1880s-1900s, when it came into the larger public's eye. To this day, with some questions still unanswered, Alice Nakhimovsky's definition of a Jewish-Russian writer as formulated in her *Russian-Jewish Literature and Identity* (1992) still stands: "any Russian-language writer of Jewish origin for whom the question of Jewish identity is, on some level, compelling." My own term of choice to describe this fascinating body of literary texts is "Jewish-Russian literature," by close analogy with such terms (and the respective phenomena they describe) as African-American literature, French-Canadian literature, and Jewish-American literature. I prefer the term "Jewish-Russian literature" to others because it strikes me as the most direct and transparent one: the first adjective determines the literature's distinguishing aspect (Jewishness) and the second the country, language, or culture with which this literature is transparently identified by choice, default, or proxy.<sup>4</sup>

In this overview, I will present both a diversity of approaches to Jewish-Russian literature and a history of their formulation and publication (see below *Jewish-Russian Literature: A Selected Bibliography*). I seek to investigate the dilemma of Jewish-Russian cultural duality by attempting a brief survey of the debates surrounding the nature and definition of Jewish-Russian literature. In attempting a brief history of the study of Jewish-Russian literature from the 1880s to the present, I will highlight the dynamics of the principal discussions of the contents and criteria of its canon.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Alice Nakhimovsky's observations about Jewish-Russian writers made in connection with the career of David Aizman. See Alice Stone-Nakhimovsky, "Encounters: Russians and Jews in the Short Stories of David Aizman," *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, 26, no. 2 (April-June 1985), 175-84. I previously discussed the subject of a Jew becoming a Russian (and/or Soviet) writer in *Russian Poet/Soviet Jew: The Legacy of Eduard Bagritskii* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Throughout the essay, the term "Jewish-Russian literature" will be used, except in those cases where I quote other critics and authors who have used a different term.

## The Tsarist-Era Debates

The first major statement on Jewish-Russian literature belonged to the journalist and prose writer Mikhail N. Lazarev (1851-1912, also known under the pen name Optimist). Titled "The Goals and Significance of Russian-Jewish Belles Lettres," Lazarev's two-part "sketch" appeared in 1885 in the St. Petersburg Jewish-Russian magazine *Sunrise* (*Voskhod*). Lazarev argued that "[Russia's Jews] simultaneously experienced the feeling of being both Russians and foreigners, were interested in all-Russian political and social concerns and, at the same time, in living their own uniquely Jewish life. This dividedness [*razdvoennost'*] in the life of Russia's Jews was inevitably going to be reflected in their literature." Writing of the "gap" – huge, "in their eyes" – that the early writers had to fill by writing about the Jew in the Russian language, Lazarev characterized this literature: "the literature of Russian Jews, like their life, is strange and abnormal," a literature of a "transitional time in the life of Russian Jewry."<sup>5</sup> Regarding Jewish-Russian belles lettres as a kind of barometer of the prevalent sentiments of the Jewish intelligentsia in Russia, Lazarev argued, that the early writers found themselves in the nearly impossible predicament of trying to be artists faithful to truth and reality and to be defenders of their fellow Jews. The polemical and tendentious thrust of early Jewish-Russian literature, Lazarev claimed, stifled the development of great prose while stimulating the growth of lyrical poetry.

The issues fleshed out by Lazarev continued to be debated in the Jewish-Russian press for the next two decades before bursting into the Russian mainstream in the 1900s. The so-called "debates of 1908" deserve special attention because their participants included both renowned Russian critics and prominent Jewish thinkers and activists. (Coincidentally or not, the 1908 debates about Jewish-Russian literature occurred during the same year as the Czernowitz Conference, whose participants produced an authoritative statement on Yiddish as a Jewish national language.) In January 1908, Korney Chukovsky (1882-1969), then a leading Russian book critic and subsequently a major Soviet children's author, published the essay "Jews and Russian Literature" in the St. Petersburg newspaper *Free Thoughts* (*Svobodnye mysli*). Chukovsky's essay was reprinted at least twice in 1908, an abridged version appearing in the Jewish-Russian review *Dawn* (*Rassvet*, known as *Dawn* "3"). "[The Jew] is so close to Russian literature," Chukovsky wrote, "and yet he has not created in it any eternal values. This is almost a mystery: Tolstoy, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Pisemsky, Leskov, Andreev – among them there is not one Jew." Speaking admiringly of what he knew, in Russian translation, of Hayyim Nahman Bialik's (Hebrew) poetry and Sholem Aleichem's (Yiddish) fiction, Chukovsky asserted with deep

<sup>5</sup> Lazarev, 30.



regret that the “heirs of David’s Psalms” played “auxiliary roles” in Russian literature: not the “birth mother” but the “midwife.” Apparently failing to see that Jewish literature in Diaspora is both multilingual and multicultural, Chukovsky maintained that the “national spirit” cannot be expressed except in the “national language.” His essay stirred up a polemic, extending even to the pages of the right-wing Russian press. The status of Jewish-Russian literature was hotly debated by Jewish-Russian authors and critics, among them S. An-sky and N.A. Tan (Bogoraz). The person to publish the most important response to Chukovsky was none other than Vladimir Jabotinsky. Sharing Chukovsky’s skepticism about the Jewish contribution to Russian literature, Jabotinsky, in his feuilletonistic essay “On the Jews in Russian Literature,” took issue with Chukovsky’s view of what determines the “nationality” of literature. “In our complex times,” Jabotinsky wrote, “the ‘nationality’ of a literary work is determined not nearly by the language alone in which it is written. [...] A decisive factor is not the language, and [...] not even the author’s origins, nor even the story; the decisive factor is the *disposition* [*nastroenie*] of the author – for whom he writes, to whom he addresses his works, whose spiritual aspirations he has in mind when creating his works.” Thus, Jabotinsky insisted on figuring both the Jewish-Russian author’s intent and his or her intended audience into a critical judgment of his or her works. In 1985, perceptively reexamining the legacy of the debates of 1908, the émigré scholar Ilya Serman, husband of the late writer Ruth Zernova, commented that the original critics of Jewish-Russian literature would have been better served by “proceeding from the literature itself, and not from schemas, however thoughtful and persuasive.”<sup>6</sup>

The first encyclopedic assessment of Jewish-Russian literature was written, emblematically, by one of the founders of the New Hebrew poetry, Saul Tchernichovsky [Chernikhovskii] (1875-1943). Tchernichovsky’s article in the sixteen-volume Russian-language *Jewish Encyclopedia* (*Evreiskaia entsiklopediia*), published in St. Petersburg in 1908-13, in which a number of Jewish-Russian, Hebrew, and Yiddish authors took part, echoed Lazarev’s largely unenthusiastic view of Jewish-Russian prose: “in Russian-Jewish literature, there is not a single truly artistic work.” Like Lazarev, Tchernichovsky also asserted that “while devoting his works to his people, the Jew who was a writer [*evrei-pisatel*] never forgot that his reader lived not only in [a Jewish] environment but also in the surrounding society, and because of this he weighed his every word out of a fear that he would be misunderstood; not infrequently he was given to apologetic rage, owing to which he deprived himself of objectivity in creative writing and became tendentious.”<sup>7</sup> Only when Jewish-Russian literature repudiated tendentiousness, Tchernichovsky argued, when it “believed in the need for its existence

<sup>6</sup> Serman, 174.

<sup>7</sup> Chernikhovskii, 641.

as an expression of the spiritual life of an independent group, which has a right to its independent existence [...] [did it] reach its highest artistic importance."<sup>8</sup> It seems clear that the skepticism and low assessments stemmed mainly from the fact that many of the critics, both Jewish and non-Jewish, measured the emerging Jewish-Russian writers of the 1860s-1900s by the highest standards, looking for and not finding, as it were, the Jewish Tolstoys and Dostoevskys. At the same time, they refused to characterize as *Jewish* those several notable writers of Jewish origin who, like Nikolay Minsky (1855-1937), had entered the Russian cultural mainstream in the 1880s, 1890s, and early 1900s.

### The Early Soviet Years

By the time Vasily Lvov-Rogachevsky (1874-1930), a non-Jewish critic of Marxist convictions, embarked on the first book about Jewish-Russian writers, a number of them had made themselves known to the Russian public during the Silver Age of Russian culture. Lvov-Rogachevsky started his book during World War I and completed it after the 1917 revolutions. Published in 1922 in Moscow, *Russian-Jewish Literature* was a thematic and chronological survey, from the 1800s to the 1910s, from Leyba Nevakhovich to Andrey Sobol. Lvov-Rogachevsky treated the works by Jewish-Russian authors mainly in light of history and with a shallow knowledge of the Jewish background, but his book was a critical milestone. In some respects, Lvov-Rogachevsky's argument echoed Jabotinsky's: "The nationality of a literary work is determined not by the language in which it was brought to life but the author's dominant mood, his commitment to a particular nation, the affinity of the author's soul with the soul of his native people, with its culture, its capturing of the past, the present, and the future of this people; it is determined by [his] response to the question of whom he works for and whose national interests he defends."<sup>9</sup> Lvov-Rogachevsky's optimism heralded the arrival on the early Soviet literary scene of Jewish-Russian writers of the first magnitude: "The thrice-shackled people has created a literature in which its shackles manifest themselves too much. A free people in a free land will have new bards who will sing new songs. [...] And this will happen. And this cannot but happen."<sup>10</sup>

The next major critical statement appeared, not surprisingly, as a polemical response to Lvov-Rogachevsky's book. In 1923, critic and translator Arkady Gornfeld (1867-1941) contributed "Russian Letters and Jewish Creativity" to the Petrograd-based *Jewish Almanac* (*Evreiskii al'manakh*). Here Gornfeld criticized Lvov-Rogachevsky for focusing on the contribution of Jewish-Russian writers to the Jewish social consciousness, not to Russian literature. Gornfeld

<sup>8</sup> Chernikhovskii, 642.

<sup>9</sup> Lvov-Rogachevskii, *Russko-evreiskaia literatura*, 49.

<sup>10</sup> Lvov-Rogachevskii, 162.

argued that Jewish contributions to Russian culture ought to be measured by their cultural self-worth rather than by their love and enthusiasm, as the philosemitic Russian critics often did, some patronizingly. Gornfeld went on to make a crucial if debatable point that “a given literature is an *otherbeing* [*ino-bytie*] of a given language; that national literature is a carrier and a creation of a national tradition.”<sup>11</sup> Gornfeld consequently advanced a distinction between the “belonging” of Jewish authors to Jewry and their works in non-Jewish languages to the literatures in those languages: “Meïr Aron Goldschmidt, Catulle Mendes, and Bernhard Kellermann belong to Jewry, and Jewry has a right to speak of their creations in its cultural history, but the writings of Goldschmidt belong to Danish literature, the poems of the Parnassian Mendes, to French, Kellermann’s novels, to German.”<sup>12</sup> Gornfeld’s ideas colored his assessment of Jewish-Russian writers:

While they are not too significant [...] they have said in Russian literature what without them no one would have said. They came from the Russian (more from the semi-Russian) periphery, from an alien cultural world; in their families they still spoke Yiddish; they brought with them their memories, their skills, their linguistic irregularities and peculiarities, their world vision, and their images. In an alien tongue, which through school and peers, through literature and the press became for them their native tongue, they certainly could not have been independent; on the contrary, the alien literary tradition remained for them an unsurmounted law. [...] They were themselves, and thus, being Russian writers, they were Jews. They introduced novelty into the Russian literary language; this novelty may horrify the purists and infuriate nationalists, but it is more enduring than the horror and the fury.<sup>13</sup>

Notes of eulogizing may be heard in Gornfeld’s essay, as though he thought that the history of Jewish-Russian literature had already ended. In 1922 Iosif Kleinman and Boris Kaufman, the future coeditors of the landmark 1923 collective *Jewish Almanac* (*Evreiskii al'manakh*), tried to jump-start the Jewish-Russian press in Petrograd on the platform that “there is a practical need to restore the Russian-Jewish press [...] [since], besides the national and popular press [in Yiddish], we should continue the work for Jewry in the Russian language.” Kleinman’s and Kaufman’s other venture, the monthly magazine, *The Jewish Messenger* (*Evreiskii vestnik*), failed after having released seven issues in 1922. By the early 1930s, discussions of Jewish-Russian literature had disappeared from the pages of Soviet publications. Hebrew had been suppressed, while Yiddish was (temporarily) given the go-ahead as the “national” language

<sup>11</sup> Gornfel’d, 185-186.

<sup>12</sup> Gornfel’d, 186.

<sup>13</sup> Gornfel’d, 192-193.



of Soviet Jews. With astonishing speed Jewish-Russian literature was reduced to a nonentity in the Soviet critical and academic discourse of the late 1920s and early 1930s as literary production itself became a part of the government apparatus on the eve of the First Congress of Soviet Writers (1934). Only a writer working in Yiddish would be officially recognized as a "Jewish writer" (*evreiskii pisatel'*); Jews writing in Russian could only be "Russian writers." Some of the early Soviet students of Jewish-Russian literature did not anticipate that the official days of Jewish-Russian writing were numbered, as becomes apparent when one considers the essay by Iosif Kleinman "Jews in the Newest Russian Literature," published in Moscow in 1928 in the edited collection *The Jewish Messenger* (*Evreiskii vestnik*). After surveying the previous debates, from Lazarev all the way to Gornfeld, Kleinman turned to the Jewish-Russian writers who had gained acclaim in the 1920s. Kleinman echoed Lvov-Rogachevsky in his enthusiasm and faith in the future of Jewish artistic expression in the Russian language:

many pages of [Isaac] Babel, and even in places [Ilya] Ehrenburg, and even Iosif Utkin, must be perceived by us and are perceived as an enrichment of Russian-Jewish literature. But, in truth, this Russian-Jewish literature has had a happier destiny than the works of [Osip] Rabinovich, [Lev] Levanda, [Miron] Ryvkin, [S.] An-sky. It does not live under the sign of Russian doubting. It is not deprived of common acceptance, it does not live outside the sphere of Russian literature proper, and it does not exist solely for the Jewish ghetto. [...] But because it is artistic, it is true literature, and it is earning this right for itself both for Russian literature and for the Jews. The Revolution has destroyed many divisions and partitions, also removing the drastic boundary between Russian and Russian-Jewish literature. And it has called new active forces to the creation of art. Jewish creative forces also participate in this movement. They flow widely into the sea of Russian artistic life, as equal and equally valued creators of Russian letters. And if this is the case, and if Russian-Jewish literature is alive, then it needs its own literary receptacles, it needs its organs and tools of dissemination – and it needs the Russian-Jewish audience, its compassion and concord.<sup>14</sup>

Buoyant with Bolshevik rhetorical clichés, Kleinman's hopes that the Soviet state would support the new Jewish-Russian literature came to naught. The silence about Jewish-Russian writers of the prerevolutionary past and the Soviet present continued from the 1930s until the late 1970s. While Jewish-Russian literature was, one might say, one of the ill-kept secrets of Soviet literary scholarship and Russian culture of the Soviet period, critical discussions did not spring up until the rise of the samizdat underground press in the late 1960s-early

<sup>14</sup> Kleinman, 166.

1970s. And, ironically, the first officially condoned or official remarks about Jewish-Russian writers entered the public discourse in the late 1970s in the speeches and publications of representatives of the emerging ultranationalist Russian cultural movement, who were then embracing openly antisemitic positions. Arguing that Jewish-Russian writers were, in most cases, incompatible with the "humanistic" (and Christian) traditions of Russian culture, the poet and essayist Stanislav Kunyaev, the critics Pyotr Palievsky and Vadim Kozhinov, and other Russian authors on the cultural right inadvertently acknowledged the existence of a large (and to them threatening) body of Russian literary works by Jewish writers. A systematic study of Jewish-Russian literature did not resume in Russia and the former USSR until the post-Soviet years.

### Western and Émigré Scholarship

In the west, Jewish-Russian writing was brought to the larger critical attention in *Russian Literature and the Jew* (1929), a pioneering book by Joshua Kunitz (1896-1980). Although his main focus was on Russian writers' treatment of Jewish characters and topics, Kunitz also surveyed works by a representative group of Jewish-Russian writers from the beginnings and until the Soviet 1920s. It fell to émigré critics to introduce western students of Russian and Jewish literature to the rich body of Jewish-Russian literature. The émigrés served as conduits between the severed scholarship in Soviet Russia and western scholarship. For example, consider "Reflections on Russian Jewry and Its Literature" by Y. Kisin (1886-1950), a Yiddish poet, translator, and critic. Writing in 1944 in *Jewish World* (*Evreiskii mir*), the organ of the Union of Russian Jews in New York, Kisin, after Lazarev and other early students of Jewish-Russian literature, emphasized that from the beginning, from the "hapless [sic] versicles" of Leon Mandelstam, the works had expressed a "dividedness."<sup>15</sup> In his essay, Kisin paid tribute to the splendid book *Spanish and Portuguese Poets, Victims of Inquisitions* by the poet and translator Valentin Parnakh (1891-1951). Originally created for publication in France but published in Moscow in 1934, Parnakh's book was both a critical study and an anthology of translations. Adroitly drawing a parallel between Jewish-Russian writers and Spanish and Portuguese Marranos, Kisin quoted from Parnakh's introduction: "Some Marrano writers gave their lives simultaneously to the Jewish cause and the cause of Spanish [and Portuguese] literature. [...] *Odi et amo*: I hate and I love! In exile, some of the members of the Jewish-Spanish and Jewish-Portuguese intelligentsia did not wrest their gazes from Spain and Portugal."<sup>16</sup> Kisin's pathos is particularly well placed, considering that he was himself a Jewish exile writing these lines during

<sup>15</sup> Kisin, 165.

<sup>16</sup> Kisin, 171.

the Shoah on America's shores. Other émigré critics and scholars were less eager to consider Jewish-Russian literature as a "spiritual home" of the Jewish people. Writing in 1944 in the same issue of *Jewish World*, the émigré critic turned American professor Marc Slonim (1894-1976) was skeptical of the idea of a contemporary Jewish-Russian literature: "There is not and there cannot be any distinct 'Russian-Jewish' literature in the USSR. Only one question may concern the historian and student of art: What influence have the writers who are Jews [*pisateli-evrei*, in contrast to *evreiskie pisateli*, 'Jewish writers'] had on Russian literature? [...] One can only assess them within the framework of Russian literature, and segmenting them into a separate group is aesthetically incorrect."<sup>17</sup> Slonim's skepticism had its roots in the prewar émigré discussions of Jewish culture. Prevalent in the Jewish-Russian émigré milieu were versions of Korney Chukovsky's position (of 1908, see above) that language and language alone determines the literary identity of a writer. It is illuminating to consult the short essay "Do Writers Who Are Jews Exist?" by the notable Jewish-born émigré Yuly Aykhenvald (1872-1928), printed in 1927 in Riga's Russian daily *Today* (*Segodnia*), one of the leading émigré newspapers of its day. Aykhenvald declared:

In particular, the writer who is a Jew ceases to be a Jew when he becomes a writer. He remains a writer who is a Jew only when he writes in [a Jewish language]. Having accepted the power of another language over himself and entrusted his soul to this other language, he is thereby the other [*drugoi*], no longer a Jew [*uzhe ne evrei*], and his pages are no longer the pages of Jewish literature. [...] With his Jewish head [the Russian original also implies 'his Jewish mindset'] the Jew *does not* betray himself if he writes not in [a] Jewish [language] but in a European one. [...] In German literature there are no Jews, only Germans, just as there are no Jews in Russian literature, only Russians.

The study of Jewish-Russian literature nearly came to a standstill during the 1950s and 1960s. The New York-based émigrés Sofia Dubnova-Erlikh (1885-1986) and Vera Alexandrova (1895-1966) were almost the sole advocates for Jewish-Russian writers. Writing in 1952, Dubnova-Erlikh was not hopeful about the future of Jewish-Russian literature in the USSR after World War II. A decade and a half later, Alexandrova was considerably more positive about the growth potential of this literature in the Soviet Union. Her great insight was to suggest that the sources of Jewish-Russian writers' creativity, even among the most assimilated and acculturated authors of the second and third Soviet generations, continue to emanate from Jewish spirituality and culture:

<sup>17</sup> Slonim, 163.

It would be erroneous to suppose that the humanistic strand woven into Soviet literature by Jewish writers was merely a tribute to the ancient tradition of Russian classical literature, with its humanitarian thirst for justice. The sources of Jewish humanism must be looked for more deeply: they are embedded in the most ancient humanitarian culture of Judaism. Quite independently of the personal inclinations and the literary methods of the Jewish writers, these profound wellsprings impregnated their creative work, and thus enriched contemporary Russian literature of the Soviet period.<sup>18</sup>

After the Shoah and postwar Soviet antisemitic policies had threatened the very survival of Jewishness, Alexandrova's argument justly called for a broad and inclusive approach to Jewish-Russian literature of the Soviet period. A conviction that Jewish culture survives and endures even under the greatest historical threats and pressures also resounded through the scholarship of Maurice Friedberg, arguably the only American Slavist in the 1970s to write with care and attention about Jewish-Russian writers.

### Shimon Markish

Jewish-Russian literature enjoyed its most prominent student in Shimon Markish (1931-2003), the son of the martyred Yiddish classic Perets Markish (1895-1952) and the brother of the Russian-Israeli writer David Markish (b. 1938). In his latter years as a professor at the University of Geneva, Shimon Markish demonstrated a passionate commitment to the systematic incorporation of Jewish-Russian literature into the curricula of both Russian and Jewish studies. Despite the residual indifference if not resistance of many Western Slavists to the study of Jewish-Russian literature, by the 1990s Markish's ideas had won supporters. An exilic keeper of the flame of Jewish-Russian writing, Shimon Markish died without publishing a book-length history. However, his numerous articles, including an extensive survey (1995) and a monographic 1994 entry, "Russian-Jewish Literature," in *The Short Jewish Encyclopedia* published in Israel, amount to a cumulative history of Jewish-Russian literature. In 1995 Markish offered this definition of Jewish-Russian literature: "Jewish literary creativity (broadly conceived) in the Russian language [...] one of the branches of the New Jewish letters."<sup>19</sup> One of Markish's premises was the fundamental notion of a unity of Jewish culture across the languages in and of Diaspora. This premise was in many respects an application of the argument of the great Jewish historian Shimon Dubnow (1860-1941), specifically as Dubnow expressed it for

<sup>18</sup> Alexandrova, 327. Alexandrova's essay had originally appeared in Russian in 1968, but I quote its modified, English-language version of 1969.

<sup>19</sup> Markish 1995, 219.

the émigré audience in the essay "The Russian-Jewish Intelligentsia in Its Historical Aspect" (1939):

We must remember that inadvertent language assimilation in Diaspora does not yet mean inner assimilation and departure from the national unity. In all epochs of our history, many of the best representatives of our people spoke and wrote in alien tongues, which had become their own, and expressed in them ideas that became the foundation blocks of Judaism. From the cohort of the builders of Judaism one cannot exclude Philo, Maimonides, [Moses] Mendelssohn, [Heinrich] Graetz, Hermann Cohen, and many other thinkers. The future generation will not forget the contributions of the newest Russian-Jewish intelligentsia, which has created a national literature [in Russian] alongside the literature in both languages of our people [Yiddish and Hebrew].<sup>20</sup>

It is hardly surprising that Shimon Markish poured much of his energy into making the works by Jewish-Russian writers available to readers in the West and in the post-Soviet states. He edited *The Native Voice* (2001), the only reader of Jewish-Russian literature to have appeared to date in Russian. Featuring works by twenty-four writers of the nineteenth and the first three decades of the twentieth century, from Osip Rabinovich to Isaac Babel and Dovid Knut, *The Native Voice* was meant to serve as a text to introduce today's readers and students to the heritage of Jewish-Russian literary culture. Along with a collection of his essays gathered in *Babel and Others* (1997), *The Native Voice* stands as a monument to Shimon Markish's peerless contribution. Markish's widow, the Hungarian scholar Zsuzsa Hétenyi, has continued her husband's work.

Markish's views, as is usually the case with solitary thinkers of his fervor and caliber, are not free of internal contradictions. Perhaps his most emblematic shortcoming was his unwillingness to extend, save for a few exceptions, the history of Jewish-Russian literature beyond the boundary of the 1930s. Markish considered 1940, the year of Babel's execution in Moscow (and Jabotinsky's death in America), to be the end of Jewish-Russian literature. Whether or not one disagrees with some of Markish's precepts and aesthetic predilections, the legacy of Shimon Markish will continue to enlighten and inform us in the decades to come. His achievements are legion.

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<sup>20</sup> See Semen Dubnov [Shimon Dubnow], "Russko-evreiskaia intelligentsia v istoricheskom aspekte", *Evreiskii mir. Ezhegodnik za 1939 god*, (Paris: Ob"edinenie russko-evreiskoi intelligentsii v Parizhe, 1939), 11-16.



## The Late 1980s to the Present

Three ground-breaking studies of Jewish-Russian literature appeared within three to four years of one another in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Danilo Cavaion's Italian-language *Memoria e poesia: Storia e letteratura degli ebrei russi nell'età moderna* (1988) has not received the attention it solidly deserves for its analysis of the early Soviet decades. Alice Stone Nakhimovsky's *Russian-Jewish Literature and Identity: Jabotinsky, Babel, Grossman, Galich, Roziner, Markish* (1992) was the first book in the English language devoted entirely to the subject, providing a systematic introduction to as well as in-depth investigations of the careers of six literary figures from the 1900s to the 1980s.<sup>21</sup> Efraim Sicher's *Jews in Russian Literature after the October Revolution: Writers and Artists between Hope and Apostasy* (1995) focused on the post-1917 period in the history of Jewish-Russian literature and explored the radical transformations of Jewish-Russian writers under the impact of revolutionary ideology. Sicher also delved into the cultural aspects of Jewish writers' religious conversion. Additionally, no survey of the modern debates about the Jewish contributions to Russian literary culture should ignore the extensive work of Viktoria Levitina on the Jewish-Russian theater.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, capitalizing on the advances in the study of Jewish-Russian literature, a number of scholars based in the West, in Israel, and in the Soviet successor states have probed some of the more specialized or nuanced aspects of Jewish-Russian literature. Arien V. Blium's study of the Jewish question and Soviet censorship (1996) provided a wealth of information about the Jewish writers' mounting publishing difficulties in the USSR. Carole B. Balin's *To Reveal Our Hearts: Jewish Women Writers in Tsarist Russia* (2000) analyzed, for the first time within one study, the careers of five Jewish women writers from Russia, two working in Hebrew and three in Russian (Rakhel Khin, Sofia Dubnova-Erlikh, and Feiga Kogan). In *Russian Poet/Soviet Jew* (2000), I explored the architectonics of Jewish-Russian literary identity and the limits of cultural assimilation during the first two Soviet decades. Gabriella Safran, in *Rewriting the Jew* (2000), examined "assimilation narratives" of the last third of the nineteenth century, comparing the treatment of the Jewish question in works by three prominent Russian and Polish authors to the self-presentation of the Jew in the work of Grigory Bogrov (1825-1885), one of the first Jews to reach a Russian mainstream audience. The year 2000 also marked the publication, in Budapest, of Zsuzsa Hetényi's two-volume *Örvényben (In the Whirlpool)*, a concise Hungarian-language history of Jewish-Russian prose from 1860 to 1940

<sup>21</sup> Alice Nakhimovsky has recently revisited the history of Jewish-Russian literature in an encyclopedic overview forthcoming in 2008, which I had the privilege of reading in manuscript form.

and a companion anthology of prose by seventeen authors in Hungarian translation.<sup>22</sup>

Taking its title from a line in a well-known poem by the émigré Dovid Knut, Vladimir Khazan's *That Peculiarly Jewish-Russian Air* [...] (2001) investigated the cultural ties and thematic transpositions between Jewish-Russian and Russian writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Additionally, a small but growing number of monographs dealing with individual authors and the problematics of Jewish writing and identity have appeared in the 1990s and 2000s, giving hope that the study of Jewish-Russian literature has indeed entered the stage of systematic academic inquiry.<sup>23</sup> What we still need today is a detailed history of Jewish-Russian letters from its beginnings to the present. We are also in great need of more in-depth studies of individual authors. Finally, we need to make the heritage of Jewish-Russian literature available in translation to non-Russian readers.

### The Riddle of Literary Quality: A Brief Digression

Given the history of the bicultural canon of Jewish-Russian literature with its modest beginnings and subsequent aesthetic explosions, the expectation of quality is neither simple nor safe. Prior to the 1900s-1910s, when a number of writers firmly entered Russian culture, an assessment of their literary quality warrants a double reckoning. On the one hand, these works are to be regarded vis-à-vis writing that was mainly confined to the Jewish-Russian press, that served Jewish-Russian readers, and that was not known to a wider non-Jewish audience. On the other hand, they are to be construed in terms of the Russian na-

<sup>22</sup> I am grateful to Zsuzsa Hetényi for having furnished me with an English translation of her book's table of contents, and I only regret being unable to read the book. Hetényi's Hungarian anthology includes works by Osip Rabinovich, Lev Levanda, Grigory Bogrov, Yakov Rombro (pseud. Philip Krantz), Ben-Ami, N. Naumov (Kogan), Sergey Yaroshevsky, S. Ansky, Aleksandr Kipen, David Aizman, Semyon Yushkevich, Isaac Babel, Andrey Sobol, Lev Lunts, Semyon Gekht, Mikhail Kozakov, and Vladimir Jabotinsky.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Ruth Solomon Rischin, *Semen Iushkevich (1868-1927): The Man and His Art*, Ph.D. Dissertation (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley, May 1993); Laura Salmon, *Una voce dal deserto: Ben-Ami, uno scrittore dimenticato* (Bologna: Pàtron, 1995); Vladimir Khazan, *Dovid Knut: Sud'ba i tvorchestvo* (Lyon: Centre d'études slaves André Li-rondelle, Université Jean-Moulin, 2000); Matvei Geizer, *Russko-evreiskaia literatura XX veka. Avtoreferat na soiskanie uchenoi stepeni doktora filologicheskikh nauk* (Moscow: Moskovskii pedagogicheskii universitet, 2001); Diana Gantseva, *Andrei Sobol': Tvorcheskaia biografiia*, Candidate's [Kandidatskaia] Dissertation (Ekaterinburg: Ural'skii gosudarstvennyi universitet im. A.M. Gor'kogo, 2002); Leonid Katsis, *Osip Mandel'shtam: Muskus iudeistva* (Moscow-Jerusalem: Mosty kul'tury-Gesharim, 2002); Harriet Murav, *Identity Theft: The Jew in Imperial Russia and the Case of Avraam Uri Kovner* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004). Due to limited space, I am unable to acknowledge all the scholarship, especially some of the recent works published in the former USSR.

tional literary mainstream. The poetry of Simon Frug (1860-1916) serves as a telling example of such a teetering double judgment. Widely published in the Jewish-Russian press of his day, Frug, whom Shimon Markish has called the "national poet" of Russia's Jews on several occasions, was immensely popular among Russia's Jewish population. As a Russian-language poet (he also wrote Russian prose and Yiddish poetry and prose), Frug met a social need of the growing ranks of Russia's integrating Jews by bringing them accessible Russian-language lyrics at a time when the mainstream Russian poetry did not exactly converge with the Jews' dual sensibilities. If judged by the formal standards of Russian poetry of Frug's day, his unoriginal verse is of average quality, but it certainly accomplished enough to have gained recognition among readers in Russia's cultural mainstream – had this, and not writing in Russian for Russia's Jews, indeed been Frug's ambition. What distinguishes Frug's Russian-language verses is the way they exhibit an awareness of their Jewish-Russian reader. Judging by the accounts of Frug's Jewish contemporaries, including such great artists as Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Frug's Russian poems must have touched chords that would have left most non-Jewish readers indifferent. When the critic Arkady Gornfeld stated that Frug's contribution to "Jewish thought" was great and to Russian poetry "modest,"<sup>24</sup> he pinpointed the discrepancy between Frug's recognition by Jewish-Russian readers of his day and the place Frug, the Russian-language poet, has earned for posterity. At the same time, as a result of Frug's almost exclusive focus on the Jewish-Russian audience, to this day he remains practically unknown to historians of Russian poetry. Frug's poetry has not been featured even in the largest and most representative anthologies of Russian poetry, where it undoubtedly belongs, with the exception of a few specialized anthologies devoted to Jewish and Biblical themes or motifs. Even more modest was the aesthetic place of Frug's contemporary, the Russian-language poet Mikhail Abramovich (1859-1940), the son of the Yiddish classic S.Y. Abramovich (Mendele Mokher Sefarim, 1835-1917). Frug, Abramovich, and the other poets populating the pages of Jewish-Russian publications in the 1890s-1900s have not been recognized in the Russian literary canon.

I would maintain that for Jewish-Russian writers the issue of quality as we judge it today and as the Russian literary mainstream judged it at the time only became relevant around the turn of the nineteenth century, during the Russian Silver Age. The bicultural imbalance caused by almost a century of virtual isolation and both legal and cultural fencing was finally righted in the first two decades of the Soviet period. From that point, the judgment of literary quality becomes truly relevant in the assessment of the place of a Jewish-Russian writer in both canons. In the 1920s, Jewish-Russian literature finally had a prose genius of the first magnitude, Isaac Babel, as well as the peerless poetry of Osip Man-

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<sup>24</sup> Gornfel'd, 189.

delstam, Boris Pasternak, and Eduard Bagritsky. Centered as they were in the Russian-language literary mainstream, these writers set the highest imaginable formal standards, which enabled Jewish-Russian writers to measure themselves not only against the non-Jewish Russian classics or contemporaries, but also against these and other resplendent authors of Jewish origin. Not having had its Tolstoy or Dostoevsky in the nineteenth century, Jewish-Russian literature gained its uneclipsable stars in the twentieth. When Korney Chukovsky, in his polemical essay of 1908 considered earlier, lamented the dearth of genius among the Jewish contributions to Russian letters, he probably had no idea that in his own lifetime a score of major writers would become a looming cultural reality during the early Soviet years and would enrich Jewish culture outside Russia.

### The Criteria of Jewish-Russian Literature

My recently published work, *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature: Two Centuries of Dual Identity in Prose and Poetry, 1801-2001* (2007), outlines the canon of Russian-language writings by over 130 Jewish authors and introduces to the western reader a major branch of Jewish creativity. In researching the anthology, I have had to peruse hundreds of texts by almost three hundred authors. In selecting materials from a large pool of texts, I found useful the position of the St. Petersburg scholar Aleksandr Kobrinsky, who stated in 1994: "A writer's unequivocal self-identification as a Jewish writer appears to be necessary, although not sufficient, to qualify a Russian-language writer as a Jewish one."<sup>25</sup> The selection process, which was aimed at defining the nature and delineating the canon of Jewish-Russian literature, involved negotiating between two main criteria, a sufficient one and a necessary one. I thus arrived at a two-fold solution to constructing this bicultural literary canon. First, in regard to the author's origin or identity, it suffices that a given author be Jewish either in Halakhic terms (in terms of Judaic law) or in any other terms (ethnic, national, etc.) in which Jewishness was legally defined or commonly understood in the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and its successor states, or any other country of the writer's residence either during the author's life or in subsequent periods. The fact of a Jewish-Russian author's conversion to another religion does not automatically disqualify him or her from being considered a Jewish-Russian writer. At the same time, the fact of having been born Jewish does not automatically qualify an author, however important his or her place may be in the Russian literary tradition, for inclusion in the canon of Jewish-Russian literature. Here the necessary criterion must be applied: engagement of Jewish subjects, themes, agendas, or questions in the writing.

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<sup>25</sup> Kobrinskii, 101.

Let us pause and consider a scenario, in which, a writer of the Soviet period shunned Jewish subjects throughout his successful public career and yet could not help reflecting, in the secrecy and privacy of his diaries and notebooks, on his own shedding of Jewishness in the Stalinist 1930s and later, in the 1970s, during the rise of Judeophobia among the Russian cultural right? This was the case of the poet and translator David Samoylov (born Kaufman, 1920-1998), especially lionized by some circles of the post-Thaw Jewish-Russian intelligentsia. Following Samoylov's death, the publications of his previously unprinted verse have confirmed that, even in what Samoylov wrote for his "desk drawer," one finds only two or three faint and tired Jewish motifs, such as a Jewish fiddler playing in the fringes of one of the poems. Yet in Samoylov's reflections, which his widow published in the late 1990s-2000s, one finds seminal passages about the trauma of the poet's failed assimilation and Russianization. Samoylov's notebooks and diaries might have helped me understand the place of Jewish poems in his oeuvre – had Samoylov indeed written such poems. But he did not; he *chose* not to write them. I am certainly aware that a meaningful silence of a Jewish-born author about a particular topic or subject may be regarded as a "minus-device,"<sup>26</sup> as Aleksandr Kobrinsky has suggested, applying Yury Lotman's term to the study of Jewish-Russian literature. However, when set against the background of some discussions of Jewish questions in his diaries and notebooks, Samoylov's virtual silence about Jewishness in verse amounts not to a minus-device but rather to a "plus-device."

This example is hardly an exception, especially for the Jewish-born writers of the Soviet period. It challenges us either to broaden, perhaps beyond commonly measurable critical judgment, our criteria of Jewish-Russian literature, or to seek the Jewish figurations of literary texts at the deeper levels, beneath thematic and narrative expression.

### **In Place of a Conclusion: The Texture of Jewishness?**

From the earliest debates to the present, critics both Jewish and non-Jewish have mainly crossed swords over the definition of Jewish-Russian literature and the inclusiveness of the criteria one employs in constructing its canon. A terminological diversity reflects some of the fundamental problems a student of Jewish-Russian literature still faces today. As I mentioned earlier, my own term of choice has been "Jewish-Russian literature." In the critical literature, one commonly encounters the expression "Russian-Jewish literature." The English-language term "Russian-Jewish literature" is a literal, and at that imperfect, rendition of the Russian hyphenated term *russko-evreiskaia literatura*, which, in

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<sup>26</sup> Kobrinskii, 103.



turn, corresponds to the expression *russkii evrei* (“a Russian Jew”), in which “Russian” is an adjective and “Jew” a noun. To the same family of terms belong such contortedly descriptive expressions as “Jewish Russian-language literature” (Mikhail Vainshtein), “Jewish literature in the Russian language” (Dmitri A. Elyashevich), or even “*la littérature juive d’expression russe*” (Shimon Markish 1985). In opposition to the terms that put stock in the complex cultural standing of Jewish-Russian literature, one also comes across variations on the term “Jews in Russian literature,” such as “writers who are Jews [*pisateli-evrei*] in Soviet Literature” (Marc Slonim), and so forth. It is both difficult and awkward to render in English such Russian expressions as *evrei-pisatel’* (literally “a Jew who is a writer”) or *pisatel’-evrei* (literally “a writer who is a Jew”), both of which stand for a writer who is Jewish or of Jewish origin and are sometimes used in contrast to *evreiskii pisatel’* (literally “Jewish writer”), commonly understood in Russian to mean a writer in a Jewish language and only to a lesser degree a writer with a manifest “Jewish” agenda. The two opposing sets of critical terms thus reflect either their user’s conviction that Jewish-Russian writers constitute a bicultural canon or their user’s dismissive view of Jewish-Russian literature as a cultural and critical category.

In my research, I have been guided by Shimon Markish’s understanding of Jewish-Russian literature as bicultural and binational: “A dual, in this case Russian and Jewish, and equally necessary in both its halves, belonging to a civilization [...] A double belonging of a writer means that, among all else, his creativity belongs to two nations equally.”<sup>27</sup> Biculturalism is one of the key aspects of the artistic vision of Jewish-Russian writers (and, for that matter, of any Jewish writer in Diaspora who is conscious of his or her origins). In 1994 Aleksandr Kobrinsky illustrated this point splendidly with examples from Isaac Babel’s *Red Cavalry* stories.<sup>28</sup> For instance, in Babel’s story “The Rabbi’s Son,” much of the Judaic religious background is lost on non-Jewish readers, but the story still works well with both audiences:

Здесь все было свалено вместе – мандаты агитатора и памятники еврейского поэта. Портреты Ленина и Маймонида лежали рядом. Узловатое железо ленинского черепа и тусклый шелк портретов Маймонида. Прядь женских волос была заложена в книжку постановлений шестого съезда партии, и на полях коммунистических листовок теснились кривые строки древнееврейских стихов. Печальным и ску-

<sup>27</sup> Markish 1995, 220.

<sup>28</sup> Several Western scholars, including Maurice Friedberg and Ephraim Sicher, have made similar points about the place of the Judaic texts and traditions in Babel’s bicultural fiction. Remarkably, the author of a postrehabilitation Soviet book about Babel’s life and works, Fyodor Levin, had been able to signal this point; see F. Levin, *I Babel’. Ocherk tvorchestva*, (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1972), 7-9.

пым дождем падали они на меня – страницы “Песни песней” и револьверные патроны.

Here everything was dumped together – the warrants of the agitator and the commemorative booklets of the Jewish poet. Portraits of Lenin and Maimonides lay side by side. [The nodulous iron of Lenin’s] skull and the tarnished silk of the portraits of Maimonides. A strand of female hair had been placed in a book of the resolutions of the Sixth Party Congress, and in the margins of communist leaflets swarmed crooked lines of Ancient Hebrew verse. In a sad and meager rain they fell on me – pages of the Song of Songs and revolver cartridges. [Trans. David McDuff]<sup>29</sup>

One of the central implications of the inherent biculturalism of Jewish-Russian writers is that their works should not be defined oppositionally, whether to Yiddish and Hebrew or to Russian letters. Furthermore, through the experience of perusing thousands of pages written by Jewish-Russian writers in search of both balance and representativeness, I have come to believe that only the most inclusive definitions of Jewish Diasporic literature are fundamentally indisputable.

In the preceding pages, I have aimed to show how, in the cannonade of the critical debates of the 1880s through the 1920s, critics have deemed an author’s language (Russian) and identity (Jewish) and the works’ thematic orientation (related to Jewish spirituality, history, culture, or mores) as cornerstone criteria determining an author’s assignation to Jewish-Russian literature. Two more criteria have been proposed and have met both acceptance and opposition. Some critics, going back to Jabotinsky, insist on the criterion of the text’s Jewish addressee, either implied or real. Other critics have argued that a work of Jewish-Russian literature constructs a unique insider’s perspective on both Jews and non-Jews: “No matter what the attitude of the writer toward his material,” Shimon Markish remarked in 1995, “his outlook is always an outlook from within, which represents the principal difference between a Jewish writer and a non-Jewish one who has turned to a Jewish subject (regardless of how they treat the subject).”<sup>30</sup>

Those who believe in Jewish-Russian literature ask that, in addition to the author’s identity, Jewish or Judaic aspects and attributes, such as themes, topics, points of view, reflections on spirituality and history, references to culture and daily living, and the like, be present in the writer’s texts. And yet, one is frequently left with the impression that not everything has been accounted for, that a Jewish something is slipping through one’s fingers. Which brings me to the

<sup>29</sup> Isaak Babel’, “Syn rabbi,” *Krasnaia nov’*, 1 (1924): 71; in Isaak Babel’ *Sochineniia*, ed. A.N. Pirozhkova, 2 vols. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1991-1992), vol. 2, 129; Isaac Babel, *Collected Stories*, tr. David McDuff (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), 227.

<sup>30</sup> Markish 1995, 220.

possibility of parsing a Jewish poetics and developing more precise criteria for measuring the Jewishness of a literary text. Aleksandr Kobrinsky has advanced the notion of a Jewish text's "mentality," although he readily admits that "calculating" it would be a grueling task. Consider Kobrinsky's argument:

When we place side by side and compare two works in the Russian language, written on a Jewish theme by a Jew and a Russian, respectively, then the main criterion would be the system of values calculated on the basis of the author's angle of vision: fluctuations of style and stylistic play, the level of the narrative subject or a poem's lyrical hero, varieties of narration, background of the action and its shifts, lyrical and philosophical digressions, and so forth. In Jewish literature, a Jewish system of values either is accepted as a given [...], or one (traditional) Jewish system is juxtaposed with another Jewish system [of values].<sup>31</sup>

The principal implication is a need for "calculable," measurable formal criteria of judging the Jewishness of a text in Russian or another language that Jews have adopted as their own. If there is a Jewish poetics, it certainly encompasses much more than theme, subject matter, or system of textual references. Born at the intersection of the author's identity and aesthetics, a Jewish poetics is often buried in plain view. Its real actualization is "not text, but texture," to borrow Vladimir Nabokov's enigmatic phrase from *Pale Fire*. By this I mean not only that the Jewishness of the text may not be reduced to its author's Jewish self-awareness and the awareness of his readers or to the text's thematic and topical parameters. For example, in a text such as the poetic cycle "Kol Nidre" (1923) by Matvey Rozman (1896-1973), the Judaic topos (and its Hebraic substratum) overwhelms the reader, facilitating the recognition of the texture of Jewishness:

Это ланями дрожат  
Колокольчики на Торе,  
Как под лезвием ножа  
Прихожане хору вторят.

Это щит Давида встал  
Новою луной сегодня,  
И поет в конце поста  
Рог о радости свободней.

On the Torah these bells  
Tremble like a fallow deer.  
Held as by a knife-point spell,  
Congregants chant pure and clear.  
This is David's rising shield

<sup>31</sup> Kobrinskii, 107-108.

Like the true new moon tonight,  
 And of all the fast has healed,  
 Freed, the shofar sings delight  
 [trans. Maxim D. Shrayer and J. B. Sisson].<sup>32</sup>

Another common device of signaling to the reader the texture of Jewishness is the emulation of Yiddish speech or the introduction of Yiddish lexical items, as in the colorful short story "Sarah and Rooster" (1988) by the Philadelphia-based third wave émigré writer Philip Isaac Berman (b. 1936):

А я уже думаю: Господи, что суждено мне, то пусть так и будет, но помоги мне, Господи! Помоги мне, господи, помоги мне, Господи, помоги мне. Пугай меня, Господи, но только не наказывай! Шрек мир, готыню, но только не наказывай! За всю свою жизнь я никого пальцем не тронула, Господи.

Что же нужно сделать мне, чтобы я схватила чугунок и ударила эту бандитку? Что нужно было сделать мне, чтобы я могла ее убить, я уже не знаю, что нужно было, чтобы меня довести до этого. Какой нужно быть бандиткой, чтобы я схватила чугунок. Какой должна быть жизнь, чтобы еврей мог убить человека?

I thought: God whatever there's in store for me, let it be, but don't abandon me. Help me, God. Help me. Scare me, God; only don't punish me. *Shrek mir, Gotenu*, but don't punish me. In my whole life, I never hurt anyone.

Can you imagine what state I was in, to pick up a heavy pot and bang this tramp over the head? I don't know what had to happen to make me want to kill her! What a *banditka* she must be to make me pick up a pot and bang her over the head! What kind of a life it has to be for a Jew to be able to kill another human being! [Trans. Yelena Libedinsky and the author; the text was slightly modified by the author in the translation]<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, readers frequently respond to a work by a Jewish author in a non-Jewish language, lacking apparent Jewish clues, with comments such as "I hear a Jewish intonation in this text" or "There is something Jewish between the lines." Many works of Jewish-Russian literature, especially in the years following World War 2 and the Shoah, elicit such responses, not only in their Russian originals but also in translation. Those comments are but a reader's way of trying to put his or her finger onto something quite real. The main challenge that students of Jewish-Russian literature face, both theoretically and practically, is

<sup>32</sup> In E.M. Shneiderman, ed., *Poety-imaginisty* (St. Petersburg: Peterburgskii pisatel', 1997; Moscow: Agraf, 1997), 379; Shrayer, *An Anthology*, 305.

<sup>33</sup> Filip Berman, "Sarra i Petushok", *Poberezh'e*, 4 (1995), 27; Shrayer, *An Anthology*, vol. 2, 1032.

to develop an approach that investigates and measures, in precise and transparent terms, the texture of a Russian-language work's Jewishness.

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