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In Search of a Soviet Yiddishland: The Poetics of Absence in Shmuel Gordon's Travelogue

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Abstract: Die poststalinistische Epoche in der sowjetisch-jiddischen Literatur (ca. 1960–1986) wird häufig noch in ihrer Bedeutung verkannt: Sie gilt vielfach als eine Zeit der Stagnation, in der rein propagandistische literarische Aktivitäten die tatsächliche Abwesenheit eines »wirklichen« jüdischen Lebens in der Sowjetunion verschleiern sollten. Dabei wird oft übersehen, dass jüdische Autoren unter Beachtung ungeschriebener Regeln in subtiler Weise Themen ansprechen konnten, die für die jüdische Gemeinschaft in der Sowjetunion von zentraler Bedeutung waren, allen voran die Shoah wie auch die stalinistischen anti-jüdischen Repressionen und die »Liquidierung« der sowjetisch-jiddischen Kultur nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg. Jüdische Autoren der poststalinischen Epoche schrieben in ihre Werke einen jiddischen literarischen Subtext voller Anspielungen ein, die für eingeweihte Leser leicht zu entziffern waren. Auf diese Weise schufen sie bei jüdischen Lesern das Bewusstsein eines gemeinsamen sowjetisch-jüdischen historischen Erbes. Der Beitrag zeigt am Beispiel der literarischen Reisebeschreibungen des sowjetisch-jüdischen Schriftstellers Shmuel Gordon (1909–1998), wie vorgeblich dokumentarische Berichte über eine Reise durch die ukrainischen Kleinstädte durch einen »fiktionalisierenden Akt« in eine Wanderung durch das imaginäre Jiddischland verwandelt werden.

Soviet Yiddish Literature After Stalin

In Soviet Yiddish literature, which resumed its legalised existence in the late 1950s and continued into the 1990s, the post-Stalinist period has often been dismissed by critics of the Soviet regime as a kind of propagandist window dressing which covers the absence of »real« Jewish life in the Soviet Union. However, this period

is now being re-examined by scholars of Yiddish and Soviet culture.¹ Compared with other officially recognised ›languages of the peoples of the USSR‹, Yiddish was exceptional in two respects. First, it was not taught in Soviet schools. Second, the central institutions of Yiddish culture, namely, the monthly journal *Sovetish heymland* and the Yiddish section of the central publishing house of contemporary Soviet literature *Sovetskii pisatel* (Soviet Writer), were located in Moscow rather than in Birobidzhan, the capital of the Jewish autonomous region in the Far East. Birobidzhan boasted only of a local newspaper, the *Birobidzhaner shtern*. Until the mid-1980s, no Yiddish dictionaries or textbooks were available other than rare pre-World War II editions. However, in some parts of the Soviet Union, especially in small towns of the former Pale of Settlement, Yiddish remained spoken among families and even in the street and in the marketplace, although increasingly its speakers were not literate in the language. This also made Yiddish unique as a European language with a rich modern literary tradition which has turned into a primarily oral vernacular. Thus, although Yiddish publishing enjoyed the financial and institutional support of the Soviet state, its audience was shrinking due to ageing and, from the 1970s onward, emigration. Yiddish literature operated on a model common to other Soviet minority literatures, with one notable exception, namely, its central institutions. Most of the new literary works produced by a few dozen Soviet Yiddish writers appeared first in *Sovetish heymland*. However, only a few privileged writers had access to the publishing house, which issued five to ten titles annually during the 1960s–1970s, with print runs from one to six thousand copies. Many of those works were later issued in Russian translations in much larger numbers of copies, sometimes as many as 100,000. This system enabled the established authors who were members of the Soviet Writers' Union to earn relatively high honoraria, sometimes for several editions of the same work. Other than Arn Vergelis, the editor-in-chief of *Sovetish heymland*, who acted as the officially appointed head of Yiddish literature, none of the Yiddish writers belonged to the upper echelon of the Soviet literary *nomenklatura*. However, many of them enjoyed the level of comfort and stability of the privileged professional class.

The price for this comfortable life was their loyalty to the Communist Party and the Soviet state in general, as well as the recognition of the practically dictatorial rule of Arn Vergelis in the domain of Yiddish, in particular.² In the absence of sociological studies of Soviet Yiddish readership, one can hypothesise that it

¹ In particular, see GENNADY ESTRAIKH: *Yiddish in the Cold War*. Oxford 2008, and HARRIET MURAV: *Music from a Speeding Train*. Jewish Literature in Post-Revolution Russia. Stanford 2011.

² On the reestablishment of Soviet Yiddish cultural institutions at the turn of the 1960s and on the role of Vergelis, see ESTRAIKH, *Yiddish in the Cold War* (see note 1), pp. 64–74.

was comprised of three groups: a) those who received at least part of their education in Soviet Yiddish schools before most of those schools were closed down in 1938; b) those who received some Jewish education in Poland, Romania, Lithuania, or Latvia before 1939–1940, survived the war in the eastern regions of the Soviet Union, and stayed in the USSR; and c) a small number of younger people who were taught by their family to read Yiddish or learned it by themselves. Most of the writers belonged to the first group (i. e. Shmuel and Eli Gordon, Eli Shekhtman, Rokhl Boymvol, Yosef Kerler, Arn Vergelis, Khayim Beider, Yosef Rabin, Khayim Melamud, Mishe Lev, Rivke Rubin, and Shira Gorshman). However, the so-called Westerners, who were mostly from the formerly Romanian regions of Bessarabia and Bukovina (i. e. Moyshe Altman, Yankev Shternberg, Yekhiel Shraybman, Motl Saksier, and Eliezer Podriadchik), played a prominent role in Soviet Yiddish literature during the 1960s and 1970s. The writers of the younger generation made their debut in the late 1970s to early 1980s; some of them remain active today (i. e. Boris Sandler, Mikhail Felzenbaum, Aleksandr Belousov, Velvl Chernin, Lev Berinski, Moshe Lemster, and Gennady Estraiikh).³

One of the privileges accorded to members of the Soviet Writers' Union was the chance to travel in an official capacity across the Soviet Union in search of new themes and heroes. They could also visit their fellow Yiddish writers in the provinces or in Moscow, which helped them maintain an informal Yiddish-speaking network, not unlike the *maskilim* (promoters of the Jewish Enlightenment) during the first half of the 19th century. However, unlike the *maskilim*, Soviet Yiddish writers did not promote radical ideas or critical thinking. Like all Soviet writers, Yiddish authors were encouraged to choose their themes and characters from contemporary Soviet reality and to portray Soviet men and women in the process of building the socialist system. If they wanted to turn to history, they were expected to glorify the heroism of the Soviet people and to highlight the leading role of the Communist Party during the Great Patriotic War, the October Revolution, and the Russian civil war.

Although some Yiddish authors drew on their personal experiences, the autobiographical genre was less popular among Jewish writers in Yiddish than in Russian after World War II. The only notable exception is the Bessarabian Yiddish writer Yekhiel Shraybman; however, all his autobiographical prose is set in the pre-Soviet period in Romania. Given the hardships experienced by practically all

³ On the issue of continuity in Soviet Yiddish literature, see GENNADY ESTRAIKH: Has the 'Golden Chain' Ended? Problems of Continuity in Yiddish Writing. In: *Yiddish in the Contemporary World*. Ed. by GENNADY ESTRAIKH and MIKHAIL KRUTIKOV. Oxford 2000, pp. 119–132; on Soviet Yiddish readership after the war, see ESTRAIKH, *Yiddish in the Cold War* (see note 1), pp. 124–144.

Soviet Yiddish writers – various wars, the Holocaust, and the persecutions that took place between 1948 and 1953 – this group was probably the most traumatised among the Soviet literary community. In the 1960s, when the members of the community were again allowed to write and publish their work in the Soviet Union, most of them readily complied with the stylistic conventions of socialist realism and the rules of the Soviet regime. The theme of Stalinist terror, or in the Soviet parlance, the cult of personality, was not taboo, particularly during the 1960s. However, as Gennady Estraiikh explains, it was »not allowed to remind the regime about its specifically anti-Jewish repressions«. ⁴ Similarly, the theme of the Holocaust was to be treated in the context of the wartime sufferings of the Soviet people as a whole. Most of the Soviet Yiddish writing of that time is infused with the melancholy of mourning, which can be discerned in the choice of metaphors, asides, turns of phrase, and sometimes even in moments of silence or avoidance of certain themes, according to the old Hebrew hermeneutic principle *day le-meyvin* (sufficient for those who understand). The veteran Yiddish writer Shira Gorshman expressed this feeling succinctly: »Whatever was there has disappeared forever, and we are children of a murdered people« (»dos, vos iz geven, iz farshvundn af eybik, un mir zaynen kinder fun a gekoylet folk«). ⁵

Yiddishland: Between Reality and Imagination

My way of reading of Soviet Yiddish literature in this paper follows the anthropological approach to literature put forth by Wolfgang Iser; this approach diverts our critical attention from trying to understand the actual intentions and focuses it instead on the »intentionality of the text«. Iser proposes to replace the common dichotomy of reality versus fiction with the triad of the real, the imaginary, and the fictive. In his scheme, the real and the imaginary exist independently of each other outside the text. The former represents external objective reality, whereas the lattermost refers to the sphere of subjective impressions. These elements are brought together in a literary text by the force of the »fictionalizing act«, which converts reality into »signs for something else,« and simultaneously lures the imaginary into form by endowing it with an »articulate gestalt«. ⁶

⁴ ESTRAIKH, Yiddish in the Cold War (see note 1), p. 70.

⁵ SHIRE GORSHMAN: *Ikh hob lib arumform*. Moscow 1981 (Biblyotek fun »Sovetish heymland«; 12), p. 10.

⁶ WOLFGANG ISER: *The Fictive and the Imaginary. Charting Literary Anthropology*. Baltimore 1993, p. 3.

As a result of this act of fictionalisation, which in the theory by Iser is being performed jointly by the author and the reader, »every literary text inevitably contains a selection from a variety of social, historical, cultural, and literary systems that exist as referential fields outside the text.«⁷ However, elements of reality inside the literary text operate differently from the outside, »real« world: »[w]hile the chosen elements initially spotlight a field of reference, opening it up for perception, they also permit the perception of all those elements that the selection has excluded. These, then, form a background against which the observation is to take place. It is as if what is present in the text must be judged in the light of what is absent.«⁸ In other words, inclusion of certain elements of reality into the literary text or their exclusion from it is part of the act of fictionalising. Therefore, the absence of some elements can be as significant as the presence of others (provided, of course, that the reader is able to understand these signals).

Soviet Yiddish literature has always existed within two frames of reference. The first and the most obvious frame is Russian Soviet literature, which largely determined not only its ideological direction but also its genre system and stylistic features. The other, less obvious frame is provided by Yiddish literature, Jewish tradition, folklore, and the collective memory of the shared experience. Whereas many of these references were subtle and untranslatable, such as a certain turn of phrase, the choice of a synonym, or even an oral intonation captured in an exclamation, others were more obvious, pointing directly to a certain Yiddish author or literary text. Depending on the knowledge of Yiddish literature among individual readers and their reading skills, these references could be detected or missed, which would affect the overall perception of the text.⁹ The result of this fictionalising act performed jointly by the writer and the reader is a new, imaginary, Yiddishised reality. The selection by the author of what to include and what to leave out reveals, as Iser puts it, »the attitude adopted by the author to the given word,«¹⁰ which shapes the »intentionality of the text« – in this case, the intentional Yiddishisation of Soviet reality. This device was not an invention of Soviet literature; the Yiddishisation of nature, for example, was an important element of the writing style of Mendele Moykher-Sforim.

7 Ibid., p. 4.

8 Ibid., p. 5.

9 On the relationship between the »Soviet« and the »Jewish« discourses and their dynamics, see MIKHAIL KRUTIKOV: *Soviet Yiddish Literature of the 1960s–80s and its Russian Translations*. In: *Yiddish in the Contemporary World*. Ed. by GENNADY ESTRAIKH and MIKHAIL KRUTIKOV. Oxford 1999, pp. 73–91.

10 Ibid. The original has a misprint: »world« instead of »word«.

The Yiddish Writer as a Transit Passenger

The travel motif has been central to modern Yiddish literature from its beginnings in the early 19th century.¹¹ Its prominence reflects not only the high degree of mobility of Eastern European Jews in the age of modernisation but also the specific position of Yiddish writers vis-à-vis their audience. Beginning with the first Yiddish novelist Yisroel Aksenfeld (1787–1866), practically all Yiddish writers resided in big cities. However, their characters and, to an increasingly smaller degree, their readers were located in the *shtetlekh* (plural of *shtetl*), which also constituted the imaginary Yiddishland of Yiddish literature. The invention of that imaginary space was the main achievement of the founding fathers of modern Yiddish literature, namely, Mendele Moykher Sforim, Sholem Aleichem, and I. L. Peretz. This shtetl myth became the foundation of the transnational »imagined community« of Yiddish literature and reached worldwide audiences through various translations and adaptations, such as the musical and film *Fiddler on the Roof* and the works of Isaac Bashevis Singer, as well as the popular anthropological book *Life Is With People*¹² by Mark Zborowski and Elisabeth Herzog.

Although the shtetl myth became a staple feature of popular Jewish culture in the United States after World War II, it had very little power of attraction in the Soviet Union during that period. As exemplified by the critique by Hersh Remenik, the shtetl was viewed, in the official discourse and by the urban Jewish intelligentsia, as backward, parochial, and primitive – an area and culture that is best left behind. During the interwar period, the Soviet authorities undertook a sustained attempt to modernise and Sovietise the shtetl by suppressing and outlawing the institutions and practices that formed the foundation of the Jewish life, primarily Jewish religious and business networks. This process was an important theme in pre-war Soviet Yiddish literature and attracted a great deal of attention abroad. Yiddish writers from America and Poland travelled across the Soviet Union and visited new Jewish settlements in the Crimea and Birobidzhan. These writers described those places in their travelogues, reportage, and fiction; many also described the transformation of shtetl *luftmentsshn* into productive Soviet collective farmers and factory workers. They also visited big cities and new industrial centres outside the former Yiddishland and observed the integra-

¹¹ See, for example, LEAH GARRETT: *Journeys beyond the Pale. Yiddish Travel Writing in the Modern World*. Madison 2003.

¹² MARK ZBOROWSKI/ELISABETH HERZOG: *Life is with people. The Jewish little-town of Eastern Europe*. New York 1952.

tion of Jews into the new Soviet society. Most of these portrayals were optimistic, albeit with a degree of nostalgic melancholy and ideological scepticism. An interesting contrast to the largely optimistic mood of the Yiddish literature of that time is *The Travels of Benjamin the Fourth*, a series of travel impressions by Zvi Preigerzon (1900–1969), one of the few Hebrew authors who stayed in the Soviet Union. Written at the turn of the 1930s, the sketches by Preigerzon present a gloomy picture of the decline of Judaism and the moral and economic decay of the shtetl at the end of the 1920s. The title, with its obvious reference to Mendele's classic Yiddish and Hebrew travel novel *Travels of Benjamin the Third*, situated this text within the Yiddish-Hebrew literary tradition, tacitly rejecting the separation enforced by the Soviet authorities between the so-called good proletarian and progressive Yiddish language/tradition and the so-called bad nationalist and religious Hebrew language/tradition. The travel motif again became popular in Soviet Yiddish literature during the brief period of Yiddish cultural revival immediately after World War II. Representative examples include the impressions of Der Nister (pseudonym of Pinkhes Kahanovich) of his travel to Birobidzhan with a train of new settlers in 1947, as well as such stories as »Vent« (Walls, 1946) by Yekhiel Shraybman and »A rayze aheym« (Homecoming, 1945) by Yosef Rabin, which depict the return of Jewish refugees and survivors to their native towns after World War II.

In the following interpretation of the travelogue *Shtetlekh – Rayze-bilder* by Shmuel Gordon (1909–1998), which was written in the 1960s and has been reprinted several times in Yiddish and in translation into Russian, I will demonstrate how the act of fictionalisation turns the presumably documentary account of the author's travels through small Ukrainian towns into a journey through an imaginary Yiddishland.¹³ The Soviet Yiddish critic Hersh Remenik praised the travelogue for its craftsmanship, power of generalisation, attention to detail, and subtle psychological characterisations. However, he expressed scepticism regarding what he perceived as an optimistic view by Gordon of the future of the Jewish life in the shtetl in the Soviet Union. Remenik ironically quoted a phrase used by Gordon which refers to a ritual of the synagogue: »dos shtetl vet men nokh ufrufn tsu der aliye« (the shtetl will be called up to read the Torah).¹⁴ This

13 On Gordon's life and literary career, see GENNADY ESTRAIKH: Shmuel Gordon. A Yiddish Writer in »the Ocean of Russian Literature«. In: *The Yiddish Presence in European Literature. Inspiration and Interaction*. Ed. by JOSEPH SHERMAN and RITCHIE ROBERTSON. Oxford 2005, pp. 134–151. On the image of the shtetl in the Soviet Yiddish literature after 1960, see GENNADY ESTRAIKH: *The Shtetl theme in Sovietish heymland*. In: *The Shtetl. Image and Reality*. Ed. by GENNADY ESTRAIKH and MIKHAIL KRUTIKOV. Oxford 2000, pp. 152–168.

14 HERSH REMENIK: *Shtaplen. Portretn fun yidishe shrayber*. Moscow 1982, pp. 283–284.

evocation of this presumably obsolete religious custom by the pre-eminent Soviet Yiddish critic in 1982 serves as an illustration of the »intentionality of the text«, which Iser describes as »the way it breaks down and distances itself from those systems to which it has linked itself«;¹⁵ in this case, the system in question is communist ideology, with its obligatory atheism. The allusion to the synagogue ritual is aimed at the implied Yiddish reader familiar with the Jewish tradition, and is predictably absent in the Russian version of the book by Remenik. I further argue that Gordon, in his travelogue, does not merely rely on the ability of his readers to understand the »selected extratextual conventions, values, allusions, quotations, and the like within the text«¹⁶ but actually guides them through the text by providing keys to those features.

Narrated in the first person and based on the author's personal experience, the travelogue nevertheless presumes a selective attitude toward representations of reality and does not pretend to present an objective factual report. Gordon revisited the region located along the Kiev-Odessa line of the South-Western Railway, which is immortalised in the works of Mendele and Sholem Aleichem. The goal of his expedition was to learn about the life of the Soviet shtetl two decades after the end of World War II, to tour *shtetlekh*, and to meet with shtetl inhabitants. Being a native of the shtetl Pogrebishche, which he had left as a child after a pogrom during the Russian civil war, he had a strong personal and emotional attachment to the area. The travelogue by Gordon provides a wealth of factual information and anthropological observations; these can be corroborated with the findings of the expeditions to the same area which were carried out by the anthropologists from the European University at St. Petersburg in the early 21st century.¹⁷ Yet, despite its documentary appearance, the travelogue by Gordon belongs to the category of fiction. The author carefully selected and arranged his observations to produce a text that conforms to the rules of the Soviet travelogue but also fits into the Yiddish literary tradition.

Waiting for a bus to the town of Medzhibozh, at the bus station in the city of Khmel'nitsky (formerly Proskurov, as he informs his readers) in the Ukraine, the narrator of Gordon's travelogue contemplates reading the list of destinations, mentioning their »Slavic names, which since my childhood I have perceived as genuinely Jewish [...]: Pogrebishche, Tetiev, Polonnoe, Bratslav, Ostropolye, Liubar, Shpole...«. The writer's imagination connects each place with a Yiddish

¹⁵ ISER, *The Fictive and Imaginary* (see note 6), p. 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁷ *Shtetl XXI vek: Polevye issledovaniia*. Ed. by VALERII DYMSHITS, ALEKSANDR LVOV and ALIA SOKOLOVA. St. Petersburg 2008.

writer: Mendele directs him to »hilly Kamenets-Podolsk«, and Abraham Goldfaden tells him, »Alt-Konstantin is closer!« In fact, he mentions, »Reb Nakhmen's Bratslav and Hershele's Ostropolye« are even closer. Then David Bergelson, Der Nister, and Dovid Hofshiteyn join the chorus – »and I am ready to set off to Okh-rimov, Berdichev, Korostyshev«. Finally, Peretz Markish's »romantic verses about Polonnoe« and Itsik Fefer's »playful lines about Shpole« »come up in memory« (*shvimen uf in zikorn*).¹⁸

Gordon invites his readers to perform an act of fictionalisation by connecting the contemporary landscape of Soviet Ukraine, metonymically represented by the timetable at the Khmel'nitsky bus station, with the Yiddish literary legacy, producing an imaginary Yiddish literary landscape of the Ukraine. His list of names is carefully chosen: Gordon adds to the Soviet high literary canon of Mendele, Goldfaden, Bergelson, Der Nister, Hofshiteyn, Markish, and Fefer the legendary folkloric trickster Hershele and the Hasidic master Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, who was clearly not an appropriate figure for the pre-war Soviet culture. The narrator of the tale by Gordon is a post-war Soviet reincarnation of the archetypal Yiddish Traveller Disguised, the literary persona of Mendele the Bookpeddler that was invented by the grandfather of modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature, Sholem Yankev Abramovitch. The other literary prototypes Gordon uses in his stories are exemplified by the narrators of *Railroad Stories* by Sholem Aleichem and *Impressions of a Journey through the Tomaszów Region in 1890* by I. L. Peretz. Like his predecessors, Gordon's narrator shuttles between smaller and bigger stations, sometimes venturing away from the main railway line by bus or local train. Not keen on disclosing his identity as a privileged Moscow writer, he introduces himself to people he encounters on his journey as a local, less significant »transit passenger« (p. 445), a social worker, or an engineer traveling from a nearby city on business. When someone believes he is a travelling buyer of raw materials (*zagotovitel*, in Russian), he responds: »you've nearly got it. But I am collecting a different sort of raw materials« (p. 447). These disguises enable him to pass for a common Jew on the street and to engage random people, most of whom also happen to be Jewish, in conversations (presumably in Yiddish), soliciting their life stories and opinions and getting a glimpse into their everyday lives. Like the narrators in stories by Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz, the narrator in Gordon's travelogue visits mostly small towns and villages but does not venture

18 SHMUEL GORDON: Shtetlekh. Rayze-bilder. In: Friling. Moscow 1970, p. 390. Further page references to this text follow this edition unless indicated otherwise. A partial English translation of this work can be found in *The Way We Think: A Collection of Essays from the Yiddish*. Compiled and translated by JOSEPH LEFTWICH. South Brunswick 1969, pp. 813–818.

into bigger cities, such as the provincial centres Vinnitsa, Khmel'nitskii, and Zhitomir, let alone Kiev or Odessa.

Conversations with shtetl Jews in the travelogue by Gordon deal mostly with their everyday concerns, such as jobs, housing, and children. As Harriet Murav notes, »Gordon's travelogue both idealizes the shtetl and affirms Soviet Jewish life in the postwar period. His travelogues provide an itinerary of Jewish heritage in Russia by enfolding cataclysmic history into a framework of continuity and by emphasizing the qualities of faithfulness, sincerity, and sweetness.«¹⁹ People of the shtetl report being generally happy with their present lives; however, some are not quite satisfied with their salaries and pensions. Gordon presents a positive picture of the revival of the shtetl economy, in which small semi-private enterprises continue to play a clear role. The increasing prosperity of the peasant population (a positive result of the liberalisation enacted by Nikita Khrushchev, as any reader of that time would understand) generates a greater demand for goods and services that have been traditionally provided by the shtetl Jews. This puts elderly cobblers, tailors, barbers, blacksmiths, and barrel makers back to work. Their income complements their meagre state pensions, although this kind of activity conflicts with the restrictive Soviet regulations on private entrepreneurship. The younger generation is predominantly engaged in productive labour at factories, collective farms, and railways, which provides them with a stable income and a sense of proletarian pride.

In the town of Kazatin, the location of the main locomotive depot on the Odessa-Kiev line, the narrator is invited to participate in the festivities on the occasion of the new Soviet professional holiday, the Day of the Railway Worker, which is celebrated in grand style in the magnificent pre-revolutionary station restaurant with a local band of Jewish musicians playing various Jewish songs. The narrator lists the opening lines of those songs, which are presumably familiar to the reader, admitting with regret, »my memory preserved only the opening lines« of those songs (p. 459). This is another instance of Gordon's skilful use of the »poetics of absence« to build new bonds with his readers. Each encounter, however casual, inevitably involves mention of the Holocaust. In every shtetl the narrator finds »gray old men« who had lost their children and grandchildren during the Holocaust but have started new families after the war. He admires them as miraculous: »a withered tree that suddenly begins to blossom« (p. 468); the same image of an old tree with new branches and young leaves is repeatedly used in the illustrations to the book (pp. 387–388). Nevertheless, the prosperity and stability of the 1960s cannot fully heal the deep traumas of wartime.

¹⁹ MURAV, *Music from a Speeding Train* (see note 1), p. 268.

Some individuals never come to terms with their losses; one example is the man who keeps looking for the traces of his extended family in the registry offices in various *shtetlekh*. This man enacts a peculiar ritual by reading out all Jewish names from the registry books and reciting »*olev hasholem*« (a traditional Hebrew phrase meaning »may he rest in peace«) to those who have died naturally and »*vechnaia pamiat'*« (»memory eternal« in Russian) to those whose lives have been cut short (p. 422). Every year this man visits five places where members of his family members were murdered and says the memorial prayer on the anniversary of their executions.

The towns located at the railway, such as Kazatin, Derazhnia, and Zhmerinka, seem to have better future prospects than the more remote *shtetlekh*, such as the ancient town of Medzhibozh, the historic cradle of Hasidism. Gordon calls such towns *dorfishe* (rural) *shtetlekh* and believes that they will eventually turn into villages; they have little to offer to the younger generation, so Jews will leave them for bigger cities, Gordon believes. For them, the shtetl will serve as a kind of *dacha*, to which they send their children to spend summers with their grandparents. As an elderly man in Krasnoe explains, »our grandchildren will still know what a Jewish shtetl is. But their children and grandchildren will know nothing about it.«²⁰

The transformation of a shtetl into a village had already been completed in certain places, such as Voronkovo, which was immortalised by Sholem Aleichem in his autobiographical novel *From the Fair*. When the narrator visits Voronkovo to pay homage to Sholem Aleichem, he thinks that he must be at the wrong place because he cannot find any familiar signs of the shtetl. A local man explains, »The shtetl of Voronkovo is no more; there is [instead] the village [*selo*] Voronkovo.«²¹ The only faint memory of the shtetl can be seen in the dust, which is denser and stickier than »transparent« dust of the village. Otherwise, there is no trace of the shtetl: »I wish I could find even the slightest sign of what was here once. Maybe the disappeared marketplace has left some trace? Or is this thick grey dust that looks like ash the only sign of the past?«²²

As a highly sensitive and alert reader of the landscape of the former *shtetlekh*, Gordon notices and interprets every minute detail. As he walks along a narrow street leading from the bus stop to the shtetl of Medzhibozh, the former »capital of pious Jews«, he asks himself, »had I not known that this is Medzhibozh, would

²⁰ Quoted according to my translation from the Russian version, SAMUIL GORDON: *Domoi. Povesti i rasskazy*. Moscow 1973, pp. 398–399.

²¹ SAMUIL GORDON: *Izbrannoe*. Moscow 1990, p. 569.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 568.

I be able to say that this was once a Jewish shtetl? – Hard to tell. The street is almost like in a village, the noise is certainly like in a village...the air is also saturated with village odours – a mixture of fresh hay, ripe cherries, and gasoline. Even the dust behind a car is rural, transparent.« (pp. 392–393) The first sign of the shtetl is the look of a typical house: »although it is painted in a light blue rural [*dorfish*] colour and the roof is covered with slates, the house has preserved something that one would still recognise, even if it were moved to the far north. Its origin would be betrayed by a high foundation, narrow windows with shutters, a lopsided porch, a narrow front side, and many more other signs.« (p. 393) These minute details of landscape and architecture, trivial as they might seem to the eye of a stranger, are important signifiers in the travelogue by Gordon which build a multi-layered narrative through intricate interplay between the visible and the invisible, the revealed and the concealed. In this system of the shtetl semiotics, the absences are no less significant than the elements that are present. Empty spaces in the town centre that are overgrown with trees and bushes – *grine matseyves* (green tombstones), to use the metaphoric title of a novella by the Soviet Yiddish writer Alexander Lizen – cover the traces of once-busy marketplaces. Also, spacious gardens around houses and wide alleyways between houses tell of the destruction of the once densely built urban environment. The broken and unused porches [*ganiklekh*] at the front doors and the rural-associated light-blue colour signify the transformation of the shtetl into a village. Unkempt grasses grow over the unmarked mass graves of murdered Jews. Harriet Murav perceptively interprets the elements of traditional Jewish discourse in the narrative style of Gordon as follows: »[t]he retro-shtetl is the product of the interaction between the tourist and the place. It is organized around questions and answers; it resembles a traditional Jewish text like the Passover Haggadah....«²³

The Jewish past which has been largely erased from the landscape is still alive in the memory of some local residents. Immediately on his arrival in Medzhibozh, the narrator of the travelogue by Gordon is taken by a local woman to see the graves of two local celebrities, namely, Israel ben Eliezer Baal Shem Tov (the founder of Hasidism) and Hershele Ostropolyer. As with other shtetl signifiers, the inscriptions on these men's graves are completely erased. The narrator asks, how could anyone be sure that these are the correct graves? In reply, his guide, Tania, points to the numerous folded pieces of paper around the grave of the »the Besht«. These pieces of papers are *kvitlekh* – notes with request and wishes that are customarily left at the grave of a *tzaddik* (righteous man). These notes indicate, as Murav believes, the »unbroken continuity« of the Jewish tradi-

23 MURAV, Music from a Speeding Train (see note 1), p. 270.

tion.²⁴ Tania, the sole remaining custodian of the great local folklore tradition of Medzhibozh, impresses the visitor with her repertoire of anecdotes from the life of Hershele and her vivid depictions of the old Hasidic ways, which she could not have seen personally but must have heard about from older people.

The narrator concludes his visit to Medzhibozh by attending the regular weekly drill by the local fire brigade, which is apparently the main form of entertainment for humans and goats alike. The exercise takes place in the once-glorious old castle on a Friday afternoon; its description has softly ironic Jewish undertones. Two fire-fighters exchange jokes in Yiddish which evoke Biblical characters: »Hey you, Og the King of Basan, what do you see there – you're up there in outer space [*kosmos*] like our forefather Yaakov on the ladder.« (pp. 403–404) The fire brigade drill on the eve of the Sabbath is not merely an excuse to make jokes using Biblical names, however. Such drills carry dark overtones of the historical defencelessness of the Jewish people when faced with fire of a different sort. As Dan Miron demonstrates in his analysis of the *shtetl* metaphor, the motif of fire has a special symbolic significance in Yiddish fiction as an allusion to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the ensuing exile of the Jewish people.²⁵ The evocation of this motif by Gordon might be unintentional; in any case, it fits well into his poetics of absence. The jolly Jewish fire-fighters who try to reach outer space from their ladder may be able to put out the occasional fire in the village of Medzhibozh, but they would have been unable to save the *shtetl* of Medzhibozh, which had been destroyed by the fire of the Holocaust.

According to Iser, the »factualness« of the text is created by the relational process through the determinacy of the elements it combines, and through the reciprocal interaction of those elements in combination.«²⁶ Gordon fills his travelogue with factual details, from the names of places to acute ethnographical observations. However, he also carefully filters out anything that could be problematic from an ideological point of view or that could be interpreted as criticism of the Soviet system. In this sense his work is closer to the aesthetic of socialist realism than some of the Russian travelogues produced during what was colloquially known as the »thaw«. Gordon carefully avoids politically charged issues such as anti-Semitism, Stalinist persecution, and the collaboration of the local population with their German and Romanian occupiers. This lattermost topic is mentioned in the travelogue only in passing but becomes more prominent in the

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

²⁵ DAN MIRON: *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination*. Syracuse 2000, pp. 17–18.

²⁶ ISER, *The Fictive and the Imaginary* (see note 6), p. 8.

story »Dem Balsheems gesl« (The Baal Shem Tov Street) by Gordon, based on his impressions during his visit to Medzhibozh.

The primary intention of the author in the travelogue is not to address the issues of the day but to establish, or perhaps to restore, a »reciprocal interaction« between observed reality and the Yiddish literary tradition and Jewish collective memory. The absences and exclusions of certain elements of reality have their own function in this narrative. Iser explains this mechanism as follows: »Whenever a relationship within the text is realized, the elements connected with one another are bound to change, as certain aspects of them are privileged at the expense of others. Consequently, while each relation achieves stability through what it excludes, it creates its own background of unchosen qualities. These are, as it were, the shadow cast by the realized combination, and they help to give it its shape. Thus what is absent is made present.«²⁷ Gordon's travelogue appeals to the assumed familiarity of his readers with the travel tradition in Yiddish literature, their memory of the pre-World War II shtetl, and their experiences in the Soviet Union. By pointing out the gaps and absences in the familiar landscape, he offers his readers clues for understanding his text. As Murav summarises: »Gordon's nostalgic shtetl narratives do not disrupt the present by means of their view of the past but rather serve to confirm the rightness of Jewish participation in Soviet life. His nostalgia, however, does not deny history or disavow loss; reading the signs of shtetl life in the Sovietized towns and villages of Podolia restores Jewish history to places that would otherwise make their Jewish past invisible.«²⁸

Unlike the Russian writers during the thaw, whose purpose was to engage a wider audience in the post-Stalinist public debates, Gordon addressed a small, diminishing circle of readers. This does not mean that he avoids the issue of Stalinist terror; his references to this situation are almost casual, such as the apparently irrelevant mention of the »Far North« in the above description of an old Jewish house in Medzhibozh. In the middle of the Kazatin episode, Gordon makes an unexpected detour to the far northern provinces of the Soviet Union. He does this with ironic elegance: he interrupts a friendly chat with a local resident with the question, »Listen, [...] Isn't your name Vaynshteyn? – Why would it be Vaynshteyn? – And you have no one in Pechora? – Why in Pechora? – Because exactly the same thing happened to me in Pechora, and the Vayshteyn from Pechora was the spitting image of you.« (p. 447) The entertaining story about a man named Vayshteyn in the northern town of Pechora, which is recounted after this

27 Ibid.

28 MURAV, *Music from a Speeding Train* (see note 1), p. 274.

exchange, mentions neither that this town was the site of one of the largest prison camps in the Soviet Gulag system nor the fact that Gordon was imprisoned there between 1949 and 1956. However, attentive readers familiar with the writing style of Gordon will get the message. In the imaginary Soviet geography, the remote Gulag locations were always very close, and any »Vaynshteyn« from Kazatin or another shtetl could have easily ended up beyond the Arctic Circle, as had happened to Gordon and many of his colleagues.

Despite this, Gordon's primary purpose was to reaffirm the broken Yiddish cultural continuity rather than to reveal the truth about the Stalinist period of terror. He had learned the rules of the game the hard way and wanted neither to jeopardise the fragile status of newly »rehabilitated« Yiddish literature nor to risk his own newly restored status as an established Soviet writer. In other words, as he stated in the opening lines of his story »Dem Balsheems gesl« with subtle irony, »nobody can tell authors where to place their characters – in the far north or in the hot south. Authors only have to remember that cypresses don't grow in the far north and that one does not celebrate May Day in a fur coat and felt boots [*valenki*] in the south.«²⁹ Gordon waited patiently with his own tale of the Stalinist persecution of Yiddish literature until perestroika was brought about by Mikhail Gorbachev. At that time, he was able to publish his final novel, *Yizker* (Memorial Prayer).

²⁹ GORDON, Domoï (see note 20), p. 400.

