PROPOSITIONS OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION OF

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**Tradition and Modernity
in Yiddish Literature and Culture in the Soviet Union:**

**The activity of the GOSET, as well as the works
of Dovid Bergelson and Perets Markish**

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1. Topic of the dissertation and subject of the research

The goal of this thesis is to review certain aspects of the major achievements of the modernist culture and literature that was created in Yiddish, geographically in the Soviet Union, in the 1910's and 1920's.

Scholarly interest for this poorly researched topic has been increasing since the 1990's. A major deficiency of prior research had been that scholars did not recognize the real place of this piece of culture: often the achievements of modernist Yiddish culture had been viewed as belonging exclusively to the *Jewish* literature, poetry and prose, and thus, connected to a millennia-old cultural chain. So these achievements had been interpreted from the viewpoint of the Jewish tradition only. The issue of the search for an identity, if raised at all, was raised in connection to the writer, the "biological" author, so scholars were focusing on the relationship of a real person to his own Jewish identity. However, this thesis follows the trend of the last decade, namely, it interprets Yiddish culture not as a special case of the Jewish tradition, rather as **a peculiar modern European cultural phenomenon**. We focus on works and achievements of modernist Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union that see art not as a medium transmitting ideology, but as a *form of self-expression, as a par excellence creative activity.*

Given that this form of culture was created in one of the languages of Judaism, namely in Yiddish, but at the same time this art was imbued with modern European developments, one of our first goals was to look into the **simultaneous appearance of tradition and modernity**, as well as into the artistic reactions to the clash of the two, apparently contradictory, systems of values.

Following that Jewry had committed itself to more national languages at the conference of Czernowitz in 1908, the choice among them – the choice of Yiddish in our case – was the consequence of a **conscious process**. Therefore, a central issue in our discussion was the **language question**. Furthermore, we examine the relation of the writers to the natural language, qua to the material of their oeuvre. We also describe the way through which the Yiddish language became a **modernist, that is, an avant-garde literary-artistic language** in the works being dealt with in the present dissertation.

In the everyday life and religious tradition of the Jewish people, under traditional circumstances, religious texts always appear in their original language, even if followed by an explanation in a different tongue. The tradition of Judaism, hence, results in a constant, multilingual, intertextual background. Consequently, the present dissertation also has to examine the **intertextuality aspects of tradition**: how, in what ways and what forms, as well as in which language does the text representing tradition – qua source of intertextuality – appear in the modern literary works?

The fact that the new generation of writers in the traditionally polyglossic society committed themselves to the language of **secular** life, that is, to Yiddish, made it clear that their search for an identity is not restricted to religious identity; this search is put more into terms of **seeking a general way,** attributable to the cultural rootlessness and homelessness experienced despite the millennia-long inherited traditions. The modernism of the modern Yiddish culture manifests itself mainly as a confrontation with the religious tradition, even if in various forms and degrees. We also aimed at answering the frequently posed question whether this modern culture – with its radical reinterpretation of the tradition, the clash between the "sacred" and the "profane", and the individual interpretations of the borders between the two – can be seen as belonging to the continuum of Jewish culture.

2. Methodology of the research

The research is purposefully interdisciplinary. In order to draw a general cultural picture, we have analysed several fields of arts, including pieces originating from the theatre, prose, poetry, and the fine arts.

Moreover, we also consider it necessary to include factors external to the arts when interpreting modernist Yiddish culture. Hence, a separate chapter is devoted to the overview of linguistic, historical and literary preliminaries.

As the basis of our research on the **theatre,** we used the activities of the GOSET, the State Yiddish Theatre, after it moved to Moscow; we primarily studied the esthetical program of their performances in the 1920's. Movies recording the shows of the theatre are not known to exist, so we had to rely on available photos, sound recordings, as well as prior studies. Within the aesthetics of the theatre, a major role was played by the sceneries, costumes, masks, and

pieces of art on the walls of the auditorium, all created by **Marc Chagall**, which also offered to us the opportunity to touch upon the fine arts.

Regarding literary works, we analysed a prosaic and a poetic composition more in detail, both primarily from the point of view of the interaction between tradition and modernity.

The novel ***Opgang*** by **Dovid Bergelson** is an outstanding, but hardly analysed, piece of modernist Yiddish prose. Its structure is not linear, and due to its narrative technique it cannot be interpreted by seeking cause-and-effect links. Therefore, we analysed meticulously the interpretive possibilities offered by connections between the semiotics of space, on the one hand, and the characters, on the other.

Perets Markish was an exceptional personality in modern Yiddish poetry, a key figure in Yiddish expressionism. A handful of scholarly works have already been written on his cycle of poems ***Di Kupe***, but these have dealt mainly with its relation to Jewish tradition. Although our interpretation also covers the role of the tradition, we have examined the cycle not only from a Jewish, but also from a Christian perspective, since the motif of Pesach seems to represent the meeting point of these two sources. Markish' work was published twice, in 1921 and in 1922. The two editions diverge not only textually, but two different covers were also designed by important contemporaneous Jewish artists. A separate section is devoted to the visual language, to the artistic rendering, that is, to the comparison of the two covers.

3. Results

Summarising the results of our research, we can group them in three main topics.

3.1 Language

Concerning the problem of language, our research yielded several conclusions. First, we have showed that the artistic language of the modernist Yiddish literature in the Soviet Union is at least as much a fusion language, as Yiddish itself is. It reflects the influence of numerous traditions, cultures and artistic movements. At the same time, the language of the modernist Yiddish literature is identical to the language spoken by the masses only in a purely linguistic sense. Markish' creative visuality, his system of symbols, but also his grammar (syntax) is

primarily avant-garde and considerably expressionist. Bergelson's language is so much "sterile" and lacking everyday expressions that it becomes estranged from the living, spoken Yiddish. Finally, in the artistic language of the theatre, the extended pronunciation of the vowels and the excessively melodious intonation serve the ridiculing of the Yiddish speaking social classes.

Linguistic signs, the word and the letter, also get an important function in the visual arts. The ornamental role assigned to the Hebrew letters and the interpretation of the Hebrew text as a decorative texture have both their roots in Jewish folklore. The Yiddish language and folklore also influences significantly Chagall's work, and not only in the form of Yiddish texts or text fragments appearing on his paintings. Chagall's visual language is based on the visuality of the language: he paints idioms, popular proverbs by focusing on the primary meaning of the words. His technique revitalises the original, "frozen" meaning, while discarding the idiomatic one. Thereby he reverses the structure of the idiom: what has been mere linguistic form becomes the object of Chagall's representation, and the idiomatic meaning is reduced to one potential context. Chagall's technique interrupts the automatism of the process of reception.

3.2 Tradition and modernity

Analysing the encounter of tradition and modernity, we demonstrated that not only the Jewish tradition but also different other cultural traditions are present in various ways, in specific interpretations in these works.

Regarding the **Jewish tradition**, we first have to emphasise its multi-layered nature. The sources inspiring modern Yiddish art are not only the roots going back to the Jewish religion and rituals, but Eastern-European Jewish folklore also has a similar importance.

It is obvious that the Jewish **religious tradition** is not considered to be a sacred and untouchable inheritance. We can observe just the opposite: a typical desacralisation, as a result of which the "sacred" tradition becomes primarily a cultural system of symbols. The latter is not interpreted anymore as the manifestation of the relation of the nation to their god, but as a source of inspiration that can be read together with other traditions; it can be freely interpreted and transformed. This phenomenon has been observed in Bergelson's novel, who

arbitrarily omits the divine voice from the motto borrowed from the book of Ezekiel, thereby not only rendering the text fragmented, but also desacralising it. In a similar vein, Markish employs single sentences from the liturgy without their context, phrases that originated in Biblical texts but put now in a profane environment.

It follows from the above-mentioned that Judaism, Jewish identity and Jewish tradition appears in a non-canonised manner in the works dealt with in this dissertation. One of the most extreme ways of depicting the religious tradition is found in Bergelson's novel: we encounter a de-Judaised inner world in the *Opgang*, in which the characteristic signs pointing to Judaism (such as Hebrew names, or the presence of the traditional Talmud-Torah school) are only **empty schemes**. The other way of presenting religious tradition is the artistic program chosen by Aleksandr Granovsky, who draws thematically on the world of the shtetl so typical of Eastern-European Jewry, but he portrays this latter **satirically, with the eye of the critical outsider**. Among the works being discussed, the cycle of Markish is the most complex. Markish' work contains elements of the Jewish tradition both in the form of **direct Biblical quotations**, and by employing symbols. The traditional genders summoned up – dirges, prayers and lamentations – establish the base of the **narrative structure** of the poem, while its animal motifs recall the **symbolic interpretation of animals** in religion and folklore.

As we have just seen in the case of Markish, the second set of traditional Jewish sources is **folklore**. The discovery of Jewish folklore was a fresh and formative experience in the first decades of the twentieth century. A number of detailed ethnographic fieldworks had taken place in Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the aim of which was to find the "pure well" and to unearth the national roots. Among the main results of these expeditions were the charting of the wooden synagogues, their architectural principles and ornaments, as well as the discovery of the Jewish *lubok*. Both had a deep influence on Chagall's paintings, whereas the Jewish folk songs and the world of the Klezmer music became a decisive component in the music used in the theatre.

Beside the Jewish one, the knowledge, presence and influence of **other traditions** is also clearly traceable in modernist Yiddish culture. An outstanding feature is the appearance of **allusions to the New Testament and Christian symbols**, which had been remote from earlier Jewish artists, because it embodied the "alien". Similarly to the way Jewish tradition is used, these latter ones also become symbols, universal cultural motifs; their religious content

disappears and so they are reinterpreted as cultural sources. Tradition is not sacred, nor taboo: the authors handle the different traditions free of any conventions, and they put them next to each other in an unprecedented way.

Among the themes borrowed from Christianity, a prominent place is given to the **motif of the Christ and of the crucifixion** – in Yiddish literature and fine arts, but also in further contemporaneous Jewish literatures written in different languages. The appearance of Christian themes has been an unexpected turn difficult to interpret for many scholars.

Following the anti-Semitic waves and pogroms in the 1880's, and similarly in the 1920`s, the sufferance of the people became a primary experience and an artistic theme. The never-ceasing pogroms destroyed the idea of social emancipation and of general acceptance, a hope going back to the Haskalah, the Jewish enlightenment originating in the eighteenth century German lands. This hopelessness and the seemingly pointless distress, surprisingly, caused unconsciously that the Jewish literature borrowed Christian motifs. The interest in Christianity can, however, be explained not only by this intuitive reaction. The changes taking place in the Jewish society by the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the appearance and increasing importance of the secular Jewish intelligentsia, resulted in a more open interaction among European languages and cultures, among Jews and Christians. The symbols of the cross, of the church or of the crucifixion had become integral parts of the Jewish literature in Yiddish and Hebrew by the first decades of the twentieth century, even if devoid of their traditional religious content. Their widespread use, we believe, also shows that the authors interpreted the new, modernist Yiddish art as having European roots, as a branch of European art, and that they viewed themselves as belonging to the main flow of European modernism.

Bergelson's protagonists, Meylekh and Khayim-Moyshe are not simply each other's spitting images. The relation of Meylekh, characterized by a constant smile typical of the depictions found on icons, and of Khayim-Moyshe also evokes the relation of a master and his student. Meylekh is the one answering several questions posed by Khayim-Moyshe. Thus, to the question "what is eternal" he answers: I am eternal, the dead Meylekh. Consequently, he turns into an exceptional, Christ-like character, who becomes a real icon among his peers by means of his death.

The lyrical ego of Markish' poem repeatedly calls for a crucifixion in its lunatic apocalyptic visions. The deadly heap, after having been crowned sacred mount among all mounts by the lyrical ego with a starry crown reminding Mary's crown of stars, leaves for the Golgotha, where we shall witness an unusual crucifixion. The two central themes of the cycle is the sacrifice and the redemption, both uniting the Jewish and the Christian traditions. Pesach and the Pesach *sacrifice* recall not only the Jewish rituals, but also the figure of Christ. The *Khad gadya*, the "one kid" known from the folklore of Pesach, which symbolises the Jewish people in the song, becomes in Markish' poem the food, sacrificed without any reason, of bloodthirsty gods guzzling at a profane banquet. Through the festival of Pesach the theme of the *redemption* also surfaces in the cycle of poems, but it remains unfulfilled. Whereas the Pesach song has God kill the Angel of Death, thereby testifying to His dominion over Life and Death and His power as a judge, *Di Kupe* reverses this cosmic order: now the Angel of Death seems to become the master of the world and of the events, since the cycle revolves around brutal death and mass murder. In this reading, the divinities consuming the blood of the sacrificed kid turn into cruel Angels of Death, without a God of blessed name – controlling the world and providing hope – above them. At this point we have to refer to the double attachment of Markish' cycle: even though it is significantly determined by the tradition and the sacred texts, it approaches them in a blasphemous way. The series of oppositions featuring all along the poem, the dance of death and the carnival, the unusual semiotics of space, or the peculiar hyperbolic cosmology create an extremely profane context.

We have already alluded to that one of the most frequent appearances of modern Yiddish literature is the confronting and clashing of **the sacred and the profane**. This confrontation leads to the rejection of the traditional interpretations, which results in reinterpreting the sacred and the profane. Perhaps the most typical example of this phenomenon is the **change in the semiotics of space**: Contrary to the established mythological interpretations (summarised by Eliade and Lotman, among others), the village and the village house in Bergelson's narrative is the space of the bad and of the death, whereas it is the wood that possesses the principles of the "own" and of the sacredness. The deadly heap reminding of the cosmic mount in Markish's poem also carries the attributes of both the sacred and of the profane. It stands in a profane space, in the marketplace, opposite to the Catholic church. The lyrical ego builds it up, and by calling it a tabernacle, it turns it into a sacred construction. Its holiness is reinforced by animal motifs, such as by the motif of the raven, which is the symbol

of demonic forces in the folklore, but at the same time the raven is also related to the Temple in the Biblical context. The lyrical ego identifies the *Kupe*, this deadly heap, with the Biblical sacred mounts, and it crowns it the queen of all hills. Yet, the *Kupe* is afraid of jumping over the threshold, which means that there is a threshold phenomenon, a border between sacred and profane, between death and life. Hence, one can also observe the reinterpretation of the sacred and profane spaces, and the double connotation of each single space.

A manifestation of this novel semiotics of space, which encompasses all branches of art, is the uniform portrayal of the *shtetl*. In these years this form of Jewish settlement was actually being marginalized due to industrialisation and urbanisation. Interestingly, the *shtetl* – nowadays often the symbol of Eastern European Jewry and Diaspora – did not receive a romantic, nostalgic function in the artistic depiction of the modern Yiddish artists. In fact, they employ the concept of the shtetl, moribund in reality, as the space of the death.

3.3 Forms of identity and the sense of belonging somewhere

As the result of our investigations, we exposed numerous similarities between the Jewish literature in Yiddish and that written in Russian in the same time and at the same geographical area regarding the forms of **identity and the sense of belonging**. Yet, whereas the Jewish literature written in Russian is a border phenomenon belonging to both the Russian literary corpus and to the Jewish one (even if it was omitted from both for a significant period of time), the definition of Yiddish literature is complicated by its linguistic and other peculiarities. The Yiddish language is unquestionably the language of the Eastern European Jewry, and therefore this body of literature cannot be seen as part of some European national culture, despite all the neighbouring literary and cultural influences it displays. The modernist Yiddish art itself contains a number of ambivalences: Its authors chose the language that was considered "jargon", a language without literary roots, despised from both within and outside the Jewish society, and yet, this language yielded worthy oeuvres comparable to those of the Russian and European avant-garde. The authors broke away from their religious roots, while their Yiddish language kept them within the limits of Jewish art. Thus, the modernist Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union is **a special cultural phenomenon**, whose roots are to be found in the **Haskalah** originating from the German-speaking lands, and which can be seen as a **peculiar fulfilment** of the Haskalah. It is peculiar, because it contradicts some principles of

the Haskalah: it was created neither in the prestigious Hebrew, nor in the languages of the host nations, but in the rejected Yiddish. A reason for this development was that the linguistic assimilation of the Western European Jewry went smoothly, because Western Yiddish lacked Slavic elements and was more similar to literary German, whereas the Eastern European Jewry should have assimilated to a Slavic-speaking majority. Additional obstacles to the linguistic assimilation were the economic and social tensions in the surrounding Russian state and society, the geographic isolation of the Jewry, as well as the anti-Semitism, which became especially violent in the 1880's and the 1920's.

The enlightenment and secularisation of the Russian Jewry, ensuing from the Haskalah, as well as the emerging national consciousness, a result of the pogroms, coincided with significant historical events that otherwise left their marks on the way of thinking, the self reflection and the artistic answers of all European nations. The horizon also became broader for the Jewish minority, and not only in the sense of social mobility towards a secular, bourgeois society, but also in a geographical sense. The United States became a new centre of the Jewish, and specifically of the Yiddish culture. The Zionist movement put their goals in practice, and consequently the new literature in Hebrew also flourished in Palestine. There it became permeated with local issues – social and political ones, questions of identity, etc. – but it also maintained the influence of the modernist European trends. Having said all of these, we can define the modernist Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union as the fruit of a revolutionary change affecting all fields of arts, **resulting from the national self-interpretation of the Jewry**. Artists and writers with Jewish roots reacted to historical events within and beyond the Jewish society. To the latter their reaction was simultaneous and similar in intensity and form to the reaction of their European and Russian peers. In other words, the literature and theatre in Yiddish was one possible reaction to the contemporary phenomena. Besides the cultures created in the languages of the host nations and the culture emerging in the revived Hebrew language, a **Jewish national culture** whose naissance the Soviet ideology contributed significantly to was also born. The fact that the authors drew on various traditions – none of which they considered exclusively theirs, because linguistically and artistically they hoped to belong to several communities – caused that they practically became rootless. The indefinable identity, the living-on-the-border, the homelessness, the feeling of not belonging anywhere substantially shaped the worldview of the authors.