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“In the Identity Library”

From its very first pages, Marat Grinberg’s new book is focused on revealing and restoring what has been blurred, hidden and lost. Already in the preface, the author emphasizes that the aim of his monograph, the publication of which was preceded by nine years of research, is to prove that the culture and identity of Soviet Jews are not an ephemeral, diffuse phenomenon, or even something that was dissolved in the depths of the expansive and broadly understood Russian culture of the Soviet Union. Contrary to the theory of Elie Wiesel who called Soviet Jews the “Jews of silence,” thus pointing out that it was a nation completely assimilated and cut off from its identity roots due to persecution and violence, Grinberg looks for fragments of their dispersed culture and proves that not only did it exist, but that it constantly found paths of development and was successively and deliberately preserved, stored and passed on -- from generation to generation. The author of the book, therefore, undertakes the task of decolonizing the memory of Soviet Jews, and thus cleansing it of erroneous discourses that suppress it and hence eliminate its distinctiveness. This work is exemplarily performed by the scholar who engages in the fate of this memory with full emotional investment and the belief that giving a voice to those who were forced to remain silent contributes to the reconstruction of a significant part of the lost (as it turns out not entirely) reality. Moreover, for Grinberg himself -- a Jewish immigrant from Ukraine -- this search is a very personal experience.

For the author, Soviet Jews’ home libraries became the key to the identity of Soviet Jews, which had been blurred for decades. Inspired by Osip Mandelstam's notion that a bookshelf was a guarantor and, as it were, a script of one’s own as well as national Jewish memory of the poet, Grinberg argues that the Jewishness of Soviet Jews is to be found in “what” and “how” they

read, and in “what” and “how” they wrote. In achieving this goal, he is also helped by the method of Leo Strauss who developed a definition of literature based on the so-called reading and writing between the lines. According to Strauss, the task of a literary text is not to convey a literal meaning, but smuggle in hidden meanings under the cloak of its ostensible content, aimed at clever, inquisitive recipients. Thus, a specific model of reading emerges which is no longer about absorbing or even interpreting the text, but about deciphering information encoded in the text and hidden “between the lines.” A similar reading pattern can be found in the works of many Jewish artists and thinkers, including Edmond Jabès, Jacques Derrida, as well as in the works of the Polish Jewish writer Bruno Schulz. In his story “Spring,” the narrator quotes the following ambiguous metaphor: “it is only beyond our words, where the power of our magic no longer reaches, that dark, incomprehensible element roars. The word breaks down into elements and dissolves, returns to its etymology, goes back into its depths, into its dark root.”

Then, ancient stories emerge from the roots of words. For a skillful reader, this process of delving into the text due to the commitment and effort put into it becomes a personal experience in return for which he receives access to universal stories about ancient times -- he reaches back to the legacy of his ancestors. For both Schulz and Strauss -- both Jews -- this path was extremely important, and they understood reading as a way to discover and consolidate a dispersed identity by relating oneself into the textualized past. Interestingly, this model requires focusing on the text itself and, in a sense, communicating through it, which is one of the archetypal features of Jewish art and, consequently, cultural identity. Therefore, the thinking and manipulation of text that Grinberg proposes in his book takes on a completely new meaning because the connections between text and identity -- identity -text -- are particularly rooted in

Jewish culture, an important element of which is the constant updating of the old topoi the reader reaches.

Grinberg's research therefore concerns what Hans Robert Jauss called the "horizon of reading expectations," i.e. an approach to literature that takes into account the role of the reader in the space of literary communication. This concept assumes that while creating the author forms an imagined, presumed recipient to whom he dedicates his work. For this purpose, the writer must acquire knowledge about the horizon of expectations of this reader, understood as "an objectified system of references allowing the works to be absorbed and produce impact." In this way, there is a constant communication between the author and the reader -- participants of the creative process who influence each other. These are the relationships and influences.

Grinberg analyzes the communication between Jewish writers and readers in the USSR and how this exchange of experiences between them shaped the readers' identity. He proves that Soviet Jewish writers (Ilya Ilf, Boris Slutsky, Vasily Grossman, Aron Vergelis, Anatoly Rybakov, Friedrich Gorenstein, Yuri Trifonov, the brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky and others) were perfectly aware of the horizon of expectations of their presumed -- Jewish -- readers and touched in their texts upon the topics hidden between the lines that were understandable to them, close to their hearts and prompting them to reflect on their own Jewish selves. For this purpose, the writers used various -- often in the form of allusions or barely noticeable hints -- cultural contexts, e.g. references to Chagall in the works of Aron Vergelis or the use of Spinoza's Jewish name -- Baruch - in *The House on the Embankment* by Yuri Trifonov, which could only be understandable to the readers rooted in Jewish culture and looking for its manifestations in the world around them. The presence of works of these writers in the home libraries of most Soviet Jews throughout the USSR proves that among them there was a desire for a community of

experiences, cultural integration, and identity searches. This fact is also highlighted by the letters received by these writers from their Jewish admirers, e.g. the letters from young readers sent to Anatoly Rybakov after the publication of *Heavy Sand* (a work that smuggles in descriptions of the Holocaust experience), who confessed that after reading this novel for the first time they felt and they discovered their Jewishness.

Although Grinberg's method is not innovative per se, the way it is used in research on the cultural identity of Soviet Jews opens up a completely new and very promising field for research in the field of alternative histories, that is -- according to Ewa Domańska -- reconstructing the historical experience from the perspective of ordinary people, including from the perspective of minorities. In communities forced into silence and living under the yoke of totalitarian systems, acquiring and reading subversive books, placing them on the shelves, hiding them between the covers of propaganda literature -- these are sometimes the only steps that can be taken to express, preserve and consolidate one's individuality, distinctiveness and national consciousness. It is also, as Grinberg shows, a communication strategy and transfer of information not only between the reader and the author, but also between the readers themselves. After all, this is how knowledge about Jewish culture was passed on from generation to generation. As a result, through books, a community is created that is not only synchronic, but also diachronic -- an understanding between descendants and ancestors. Grinberg mentions this in one of his personal reflections on his childhood.

The author devotes subsequent chapters of his volume to tracing Jewish threads in the works read by the Soviet Jewish intelligentsia. He starts with a significant writer -- Lion Feuchtwanger, whose works, especially the trilogy about the fate of Josephus Flavius, occupied a place of honor on the bookshelf of almost every Jewish family in the USSR. Although popular,

Feuchtwanger did not hold such importance, for the American Jewish community; Russian Jewish writer Dawid Shroyer-Petrov included him among the five most important creators of the 20th century Jewish literature. While considering the history of Feuchtwanger's publications, Grinberg comes to the conclusion that the reason for his popularity was the subject matter and a specific way of narrating that spoke to the expectations of Soviet Jews. Feuchtwanger's novels, such as the already mentioned trilogy or *The Jewess of Toledo*, were a source of knowledge about Jewish history for their readers. The writer presented his people's important historical events while at the same time using them to reflect on the present. The novel *The Brothers Opermann* allowed the readers to locate their identity in a historical chain, where the stories about the lives of ancestors -- their dilemmas, persecutions and exclusion -- are both a point of reference for understanding the "here and now" of the readers as well as the core of their lost, forgotten historical consciousness and connection with the traditions and experiences of the past generations. This identity direction, which involves perceiving oneself as a chronological being that begins somewhere in the distant past and constantly continues, shaping thus also the future generations, was -- as Grinberg argues -- extremely important in Soviet Jews' thinking about themselves. The need for connection with the chain of generations was expressed in the works of many other Soviet Jewish authors, such as Lev Ginzburg, Yuri Trifonov, and others.

Moreover, this motif, or even topos, unites global Jewish culture. Another issue that is extremely important for understanding the essence of Jewishness in the world of that time (also today) is the eternal dilemma of the Wandering Jew, or the gap between being faithful to one's cultural roots and being a world citizen. For Jews living in the diaspora, especially for those forced to hide and store their identity, smuggling it "between the lines," as did Josephus who tried to connect his Jewish "I" with the "I" devoted to the ancient Roman Empire Roman,

became such a universal example that identifying with him allowed readers to understand the tragedy of internal dissonance that they had to face on a daily basis, and perhaps -- thanks to this -- achieve a kind of catharsis in this matter. Unfortunately, Feuchtwanger shows that this dilemma cannot be resolved, and combining the roles of a Jew and a cosmopolitan will always end in an identity catastrophe.

Grinberg analyzes other works, based on the authors' narrative strategies, and the reading models that resulted from them. A unique place in this list is occupied by works dealing with the topic of the Holocaust in the history of Soviet Jews, in particular the struggle with the silence prevailing in the public space on this issue. Writing against the silence of the USSR authorities on the Holocaust were such authors as Mariya Rolnikaitė, Boris Slucky, Aleksandr Galich, Vasily Grossman, who, of course, use Aesopian speech. They create too clever parallels between descriptions of the Nazi system that were not censored and images of the gulags, pogroms and totalitarianism of the Stalinist times. The clusters of hidden references appearing in these texts, careful hints about historical, cultural and social contexts, and modified quotations from famous Jewish authors -- all this was addressed to a strictly Jewish reader who was able to extract from this depth of information the fragments of real, important meanings that build national awareness.

This was also the kind of game between the author and the reader in the propaganda literature, where the authors incorporated important information about Jewish religion and traditions in their texts while masking them and giving them the appearance of a panegyric for the socialist system. Often -- as in the case of research projects on Judaism by Mikhail Shakhnovich (Russian: Михаила Шахновича) -- the seemingly anti-religious and anti-Jewish works played the role of compendiums of knowledge about their cultural identity for those

readers who were able to cleanse these texts of propaganda accretions. The other type of texts were works that were strongly allusive or reached a high level of unreality, such as the texts of the Strugatsky brothers, where the world-building characteristic of the science fiction genre allowed for comments on anti-Semitism, the Holocaust and the place of Jews in the USSR, as well as Jewish philosophy of this nation, all hidden under the cloak of convention.

Also noteworthy is the intertextuality of works of Soviet Jewish literature, which, significantly, operates under the principle of an affective archive. Jewish artists refer – intentionally and consistently – to the works of their predecessors not only as a source of inspiration, but also to build and develop a lasting textual community. This can be seen in the example cited by Grinberg of Rybakov's references in *Heavy Sand* to Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry*. The narrator of Rybakov's novel visits the Jewish cemetery in his hometown and looks at the monument to those murdered during the Holocaust. On it, there is a Hebrew inscription stating that those who shed innocent blood should never be forgiven. A similar scene appears in one of Babel's stories. The allusiveness here lies not only in the fact that the younger author used Babel's text as a source of artistic inspiration. Mentioning him was also intended to perpetuate the memory of this writer and his place in Jewish culture, as well as to express Rybakov's tender, emotional attitude towards the literary tradition and the archetypes built by his predecessor. *Heavy Sand* preserves the fragments of Babel's works and thus ensures their continuity, ensuring their place in Jewish culture and consciousness. The emotional nature of such a procedure proves the affectivity in creating this literary archive, which then turns into affective archiving of the works of both authors by readers in their home libraries. This emotional tone, present in this collection and commemoration of the knowledge and experiences of specific authors, indicates the vitality of the cultural identity of Soviet Jews.

All these examples prove that the struggle to maintain identity among Jews in the USSR continued uninterrupted, and the effort put into carefully tracking down manifestations of Jewishness in literature proves the determination and desire to achieve an internal identity cohesion. Undoubtedly -- as Marat Grinberg states -- we can and should talk about the existence of Soviet Jewish culture which, although very heterogeneous, was nevertheless capable of struggling to organize, recreate and preserve its own Jewish self. The author of the book has therefore achieved his goal -- to break the silence around Wiesel's silent Jews.