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YOHANAN PETROVSKY-SHTERN

AN ALTERNATIVE MODERNITY: ZMITROK BJADULJA AND HIS CREATION OF THE BELARUSIAN JEW

He used to give two different names when introducing himself. Until the early 1920s, he would stretch out his hand to someone he had just met and say, "Samuil Jafimavič Plaŭnik", then add, "Zmitrok Bjadulia, Belarusian writer".

Bjadulja cherished his dual identity and preserved it until his death, but publicly he strongly identified as a Belarusian from the early 1910s. Why did the Russian-speaking, Hebrew-writing, Yiddish-trained Samuil Plavnik from a remote shtetl choose integration into Belarusian culture, which at the beginning of the 20th century hardly seemed significant from any standpoint, promised little visibility in the Russian imperial environment, and as Bjadulja emphasized, was largely despised? Why did the former *yeshivah* (Talmudic academy) student Samuil Plaŭnik, with pronounced populist inclinations, adopt a Belarusian identity, whereas almost every other Jew with similar background and proclivities at that time chose the Russian or Yiddish-centered realm and joined the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party, the Bund, the Socialist-Revolutionaries, or at least become established in the Russian-Jewish literary milieu? To answer these questions, one must examine how Bjadulja conceived of Belarus and how he reconciled his Jewish origins with his new Belarusian endeavors.

The Quest for a Judeo-Slavonic Synthesis

Bjadulja was at the crossroads of Jewish cultural endeavors that most European historians and literary scholars refer to as the Jewish entry into European society and culture through state-based modernization, acculturation, and integration. The model of the "Jewish encounter with modernity" by entering a majority state-based culture has loomed

so large in historiographic discourse that the few significant examples of Jewish integration into colonial and stateless cultures have been routinely ignored. We are to believe that in a multi-ethnic state, the imperial Jew represented the universal norm and that Jews in Prague (such as Franz Kafka) spoke German and sought integration into German culture, Jews from Berdičev and Odessa (such as Vassilij Grossman and Vladimir Žabotinskij) spoke Russian and dreamt of readers in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and Jews from colonial Oran (such as Albert Camus) studied French and aimed at a career in France (see Petrovsky-Shtern 2009: 2-12).

Jewish modernization appears to be a process through which Jews integrated into an empire or into the culture of the majority population. For Jews, to be imperial meant being modern, emancipated, acculturated, enlightened, loyal, and fluent in the state language. State protection was also part of the package deal known as European emancipation. Indeed, the integration of European Jews through the state language became paradigmatic in 19th-century Europe. As a promoter of Enlightenment, Alexander II of Russia saw Russification as a key condition toward further *sbliženie* (rapprochement) between Jews and Russians. Realizing the importance of Russian acculturation, the East European *maskilim*, enlighteners, called for throwing off the rags of Yiddish and adorning the beautiful garments of imperial Russian – or at least German, the *lingua franca* of late 19th-century Europe.

The champions of Jewish equality realized the advantages of the imperial language. For not yet fully emancipated Jews, knowing the state language became a negotiating tool for civil equality and entry into society, if not state service. The few Jewish intercessors who late in the 18th century convinced Catherine the Great and Paul I of Russia not to use the derogatory "yid" (*žid*) in legal documents and use the Russian neutral "Jew" (*evrej*) instead were able to do so because they could read, understand the implications, and argue in good Russian or good German. In 1806, Jewish notables, in what ended up shaping nineteenth-century Jewish integration in France, were able to formulate what today could be called "politically correct" answers to the famous twelve questions Napoleon designed for them. Half of them did not speak either Yiddish or Hebrew but were acculturated

French-speaking and rational-minded “philosophers”. In the same way, Baron de Rothschild spoke the English of an upper-class “Englishman, gentleman, and sportsman”, and thus managed to convince Parliament that he, as well as other Jews of the British Empire, should be allowed to take a non-Christian oath before taking office (Endelman - Kushner 2002: 168).

The imperial language was instrumental in the integration of Jewish elites, and that integration process has been well-researched. Unlike Sholem Aleichem or Chaim Nachman Bialik who wrote in Yiddish and Hebrew, many Jewish writers in the Russian Empire chose the imperial Russian language, sought a Russian readership, and competed with one another to be the next Puškin or Tolstoj. Before he discovered his talents as a Yiddish writer, Sholem Aleichem himself started his career with short stories in Russian, still scattered through the Russian-Jewish press and not collected works. Scholars have largely ignored other Jews who, preferring to be part of the colonial rather than the imperial, chose to integrate into what their educated contemporaries considered a non-historical, predominantly peasant, powerless culture bereft of statehood. Those anti-imperial Jews sympathized with the stateless ethnicity and envisaged a post-colonial future of a stateless nation. Some of them relied on their own Jewish experience, personal or historical and on their humanistic intuition, whereas others formulated their aspirations in terms of colony and empire. Zmitrok Bjadulja belonged to the latter, although he never used the word “post-colonial”.

Scholars have finally revealed that Kafka’s Czech was better than that of other Jewish-German writers in his milieu, yet Kafka’s engagement with Czech remains a mystery (Spector 2000: 217). We know next to nothing about Zmitrok Bjadulja, who wrote in Russian and Hebrew at the turn of the 19th century, but who, *before* attempts at Belarusian independence and the establishment of Soviet Belarus, identified with emerging Belarusian nationalism, switched to the Belarusian language, and together with Janka Kupala (1882-1942) and Jakub Kolas (1882-1956) is considered one of the founding fathers of modern Belarussian language and literature. Ironically, what is now known as modern Belarussian culture was created by three converts: Janka Kupala, whose real name was Ivan Lucevič (Łucewicz), and Ja-

kub Kolas a.k.a. Kanstancin (Konstanty) Mickiewicz, both from Polish background. Zmitrok Bjadulja (1886-1941) was the third, who also chose to identify with a stateless nation known for its non-urban culture, pagan folklore, and alleged absence of a national-minded intelligentsia or ethno-national revivalism.

Bjadulja's Belarusian acculturation was a powerful anti-colonialist project, not just by modern-day standards. Bjadulja himself consciously based his self-portrayal on the dichotomy of empire versus colony. In his brief, in-octavo, thirty-page long brochure *Žydy na Belarusi: bytavyja štrychi* (Jews in Belarus: Features of Everyday Life, Bjadulja 1918: 6-19), Bjadulja outlines what might be considered his manifesto of Jewish-Belarusian synthesis, which came to being, according to Bjadulja, as an anti-imperial phenomenon. The Russian Empire considered Belarus its colony, an alien land, a conquered territory, and eventually a prison for Jews. Bjadulja places the blame squarely on the empire: Russia used intimidation and violence to rule the territory. Bjadulja views *both* Belarusians and Jews in the imperial framework as two oppressed and marginalized peoples. The Black Hundreds, the retributory imperial arm, tried to incite the Belarusian population against the Jews, yet "our people" – Belarusians, that is – did not give in to the xenophobic agitation and antisemitic propaganda and did not participate in the pogroms. Bjadulja writes that due to assimilationist tendencies in the Russian empire, many Jews thought "that the one who is in power is right". He calls for the Jews of Belarus to be more "colony" oriented.

The ordinary Belarusian neighbors of the Jews were more important than the people in power, Bjadulja maintained. He was echoing Vladimir Žabotinskij, one of the most popular Jewish journalists in tsarist Russia and a Zionist leader, who addressed the Jews of Ukraine from the pages of the Russian-Jewish press. Žabotinskij anti-Russification mottos were strikingly similar to Bjadulja's and appeared at the same time, in the early 1910s. Jabotinsky wrote extensively about the importance of Jewish ties with Ukrainian literature and language and scolded Jews in Ukraine for their acculturation only into imperial Russian. Bjadulja almost paraphrased Vladimir Žabotinskij's invectives against Jewish assimilation into Russian culture and replicated his focus on the local stateless ethnicity (Ukrainians for Žabotinskij).

Bjadulja considered Jewish city-dwellers to be agents of Russification who scorned Belarusian language and culture. He insisted that their Belarusian neighbors were more important for them than Russian-speakers beyond the Pale.

Bjadulja downplayed cases of anti-Jewish violence and inter-ethnic clashes between the two ethno-national groups, focusing instead on aspects of highly productive acculturation. His innovative idea of a Belarusian-Jewish symbiosis emerged, he argued, in opposition to the empire's efforts at dividing the two ethnicities residing on Belarusian lands. Some of his points are naively ethnocentric and ignore the broader East European Jewish context. For example, Bjadulja claimed that there were Jewish peasants only in Belarus, that Belarusian villages successfully assimilated Jews into their rural life, and that Belarus broadly conceived (including Vilna) had produced the most important modern Jewish trends, ranging from pietist Hasidim to modernist Hebrew and Yiddish literature. However, Bjadulja's observations on Jewish-Belarusian fusion forms in language, literature, music, customs and folklore are highly insightful and informed. He shows a Belarusian Jewish incantation built on a Hebrew alphabet acrostic and mentions Belarusian songs performed with Hasidic melodies and stanzas with Hebrew endings. He discusses Belarusian melodies used in the Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) liturgy and inserts a Talmudic joke built on a Belarusian pun, something he most likely encountered while a student at *yeshivah*.[1]

Bjadulja's early experiments in prose narrative reflected his quest for a post-colonial Belarus. While Jewish innkeepers and marketplace traders of the quintessential shtetl form the backdrop of his literary imagination, the poverty-stricken Jews and Belarusian peasants, as brothers, if not twins, are at the foreground. Bjadulja underscores that they are more alike than separate. First, he identifies Belarusians with peasants and Belarusian Jews with agricultural settlers. Peasant culture and peasant values were for him two key characteristics uniting Jews and Belarusians on the Belarusian lands. Their life together in the village would eventually help overcome their imposed animosi-

([1]) Bjadulja 2018: 13-14. For an alternative reading of this essay, see Gimpelevich 2018: 39-40.

ty and imperial assimilation. Jews and Belarusians were similarly superstitious rather than religious. They shared the same type of folk culture, and the differences between Christianity and Judaism were less significant than their deeply entrenched beliefs in magic. Bjadulja's Jewish character named Haimikha, modelled after his mother, looks for and finds a *kvetku ščascja*, a flower of happiness, as if Belarusian female Jews shared the same superstitions as Belarusian female Christians with their belief in the magical power of natural objects (Bjadulja 1987, 3: 323). Furthermore, for Bjadulja, Jews and Belarusians both believed in ghosts and spirits. They used amulets, curses and incantations to protect themselves. They consulted local shamans and witches. In a word, they shared a system of folk beliefs and popular taboos.

This quest for Slavic-Judaic cultural fusion in the Belarusian lands permeated all of Bjadulja's work and was the key motif of his ego-narratives.[2] Bjadulja cast his life experiences in a mold which synthesized the Jewish and the Belarusian. He even calls his native shtetl, a Jewish town on formerly Polish land, a *veska*, a village in Belarusian, merging the shtetl and *veska* into one synthetic entity with fused Slavonic and Judaic features. Although he demonstrates a high degree of control over realistic detail, Bjadulja's autobiographical short stories and sketches should be seen through the prism of his ambitious literary quest, not as a realistic depiction of his life circumstances.

Many scholars have written about Bjadulja, including the Lenin Minsk Belarusian University Professor Ivan Navumenka, the Francisk Skaryna Homel' National University Professor Andrej Krotaŭ, both from Belarus, and the Waterloo University Professor Zina Gimpelevich from Canada (Navumenka 1995; Krotau 2013: 151-163; Gimpelevich 2013: 131-159). They differ significantly in their level of historical and literary contextualization, yet they are on the same

([2]) As *any* autobiography has fictitious, rhetorical, and literary layers and is a genre juxtaposing historical evidence and fiction, I am using instead a broader term "ego-narratives" that reflects the literary aspect of writing one's self. I am relying on the usage of this rterm in literary and historical research, see, for example, Tim Whitmarsh, *An I for an I. Reading Fictional Autobiography*, in Whitmarsh 2019: 63-74; Jaume Aurell, *Introduction*, in Aurell 2015: 1-29; Regard 2009.

page as far as their uncritical perception of Bjadulja's ego-narratives. Almost every study of Bjadulja's legacy takes his autobiographical prose narratives at face value, focusing on *what* he tells about himself rather than *how* he tells his story.[3] This is understandable given the nascent state of the field yet misleading, since the manner, in which Bjadulja construes his ego-narratives singles him out among the East European ethnographic writers such as Pavel Mel'nikov-Pečerskij (1818-1883), Sergej Maksimov (1831-1901), Š. An-skij (1863-1920) and Eliza Orzeszkowa (1841-1910), whose western-European colleagues were aptly called the *costumbristas*, from the Spanish *costumbre*, the writers fascinated by popular customs, beliefs, and rituals. These writers focused on the folk customs of a people, Judaic or Slavic; Bjadulja fuses both. He not only tells stories of his childhood in the woods of Belarus: he reinvents himself as a Belarusian Jew, whose life and circumstances are inseparable from his Judeo-Belarusian cultural utopia.

A Reinvented Self

Bjadulja was born Samuil Jafimavič Plaŭnik in the shtetl of Pasadzec, a tiny semi-urban settlement surrounded by forest, which he, later as an urban dweller and populist, referred to in his Belarusian prose as a *veska* (village). The closest towns were Smargon, Ošmjany, Daŭhinaŭ, and Valožyn. His mother, Hana Lejzerovna, was an illiterate seamstress, who raised two outstanding Belarusian literati – Izrail Plaŭnik, poet and translator, and Samuil Plaŭnik, poet, translator, and writer, both of whom "entered the history of Belarusian literature". (Rublevskaja 2006) His father Haim (Yafim) was a jack-of-all-trades: a village violinist, a cabdriver, a lumber-freighter, and an assistant in the firm of a Vilna lumber dealer. Samuil was an inquisitive boy who taught himself to read. When his father brought him the Bible, a *Humash* (Hebrew for Pentateuch), the first words Samuil read from the book were those in the language he knew best: *odobreno cenzuroj*,

([3]) This approach most likely goes back not only to multiple Soviet-style works on Bjadulja but also to the standard and in many ways pioneering monograph in the field: McMillin 1977). See reviews of McMillin's book by Gifford 1977: 53-55 and Sadouski 1978: 275-276.

"approved by the censors," the obligatory Russian-language censorship stamp on all Hebrew books published in the Russian Empire (see Bjadulja 1987, 3: 271) Samuil most loved the books of religious stories available in Yiddish and Hebrew, the hagiographic descriptions of the Jewish holy figures and their miraculous deeds. His favorites were *Shivkhei ha-Besht* (In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov, first edition 1814/1815), a compilation of hagiographic legends about the legendary founder of Hasidism, Israel ben Eliezer (1699-1760), and *Tsene-rene* (Hebrew *tse'enah u-re'enah*, Go forth and look, first edition ca. 1613), a Yiddish compilation of biblical stories intertwined with ethical parables and homilies and a standard collection of *midrashim*, medieval rabbinical propaedeutic narratives (Bjadulja 1987, 3: 278) Impressed by Samuil's intellectual prowess and curiosity, his father sent him to a local *melamed*, a teacher, who was keen on Kabbalah, the Jewish esoteric mystical teachings. The *melamed* was supposed to train Samuil in the key books of Jewish learning: the Pentateuch with Rashi, the 11th century classical commentator, the *Mishnah* (Oral Torah), and various collections of *midrashim*. Instead, the *melamed*, most likely of Hasidic background, taught him the sublime and highly esoteric *sifrei hekhalot*, books on the divine palaces and heavenly chariots of early medieval Kabbalah. This curriculum was not very much to Samuil's father's liking. He sent him instead to a *heder*, an elementary Jewish religious school, and subsequently to a *yeshivah*, Talmudic academy (Bjadulja 1987, 3: 274-276).

Samuil's intellectual proclivities caused him a lot of trouble. He portrayed himself *ex post facto* as a skeptical young proponent of Enlightenment, although according to his other ego-narratives, that reflect a different period of his rewriting his past, he did not try to get himself expelled from the *yeshivah*. Bjadulja depicts his young self as someone who questioned what he was supposed to take at face value. His autobiographical self-image is that of a person familiar with comparative ethnography rather than an inquisitive Jewish child familiar with various aspects of Judaic tradition. Bjadulja narrates how Samuil questioned his teacher about the apple that Eve gave to Adam: he said it was impossible, since from geography books he knew that Mesopotamia had nothing but figs and dates. The teacher slapped him across the face and said that geography was something only cabdriv-

ers needed, and only the interstate ones, who drove from Pasadzec to Vilna.

Bjadulja's fictionized ego-narratives portray the main character as a young, enlightened subversive, who was interested in *bikheles* (in-octavo books with secular short stories, poems and novels) rather than in-folio religious Hebrew tomes. Modern Hebrew and Russian Symbolist poetry captivated his imagination to an even greater degree than geography. During his *yeshiva* years, Samuil penned a series of Hebrew poems, which he copied into a notebook entitled "Miriam". Shmarye, the *mashgiach rukhani*, or spiritual supervisor of the Talmudic academy, grabbed the notebook, read it, and suggested that the other *yeshivah* boys tear their clothes and cover their heads with ashes to atone for the horrible sins of their peer. According to Bjadulja, Shmarye lamented that Samuil Plaŭnik's *bikhele* did not mention the name of God, celebrated temptation, and glorified Lilith, the mother of impurity. In a word, Samuil had extinguished the divine spark in his soul.

The curses of the *yeshivah* supervisor, true or not, are used to show that Samuil was deeply engaged with key turn-of-the-century motifs: the beauty of sin, the secular use of religious themes, and androgynal sexuality. Indeed, Shmarye's "extinguished spark" implied expulsion from the *yeshivah*. In his autobiographical short novel *U drymučich ljasach* (In the Thick of the Woods), Bjadulja pretended to have parted cheerfully with his Judaic past in general and the Talmudic editors of the 3rd-4th century in particular: "Fare thee well, *tanoym* and *amoyroim* – professors and doctors of the Talmud! Your antiquated knights Hillel and Shammai, Papa and Huna, have died in my heart. Like fog, the windy castles of Jerusalem and Babylon have dissipated under the sun of life". (Bursov 2006: 19).

Samuil Plavnik was sixteen when he gave up his rabbinical studies, influenced in part by Rousseau's populism. To be a full-fledged human being, one had to work the land with one's own hands, the author of the *Confessions* maintained. For about ten years after leaving the *yeshivah*, Samuil worked first as a private tutor, then helped his father as a woodcutter and freight lumberjack, and finally became a bookkeeper in his father's small lumber-freight business. It was during this time that he mastered oral Belarusian and befriended Bela-

rusian lumberjacks, freighters, and rafters. Years later, he crafted his own image as "one of the people," a person of humble rural origins, and a Belarussian to boot:

> I was born in the forest. The forest cared about me and cradled me. It sang me songs and told me stories. It fed me honey and mushrooms and gave me birchwood juice to drink. I grew up in the forest – I did not learn to understand life in the *heder*, where I studied as a boy. Instead, it happened while I was living among foresters and freighters, with whom I spent my days and nights. The forest is, for me, even today the palace of wisdom and beauty. (Bjadulja 1987, 3: 229-330)

Bjadulja's perception of nature was carefully shaped by his reading of Russian poetry, from Fëdor Tjutčev to Afanasij Fet, whose work he found over fifteen miles of forest road away at the Daŭhinava (the nearest town) public library. In Daŭhinava, he met someone selling "Naša niva", the only Belarusian newspaper published at the time in the Russian empire (1906-1915, Vilna/Wilno). Bjadulja purchased an issue from him (Plaŭnik 1988: 5).

This discovery of the written Belarussian language was a life-changing moment. Timofej Liokumovič described Bjadulja as follows:

> [He] absorbed the Belarusian language from his birth. He communicated in Belarusian with his peers. The peasants waiting for their order to be completed at his grandfather's shop also used this language. He spoke this language with lumbermen, freighters, carters, whose concerns were the same as his concerns and those of his family. This language of the simple folk, this "boorish" language, as it was then condescendingly called, he knew perfectly well. (Liokumovič 2006)

Bjadulja discovered the enormous literary potential of the Belarusian language as well. He sent the editors of "Naša niva" his first essays, sketches, and short stories for publication, and saw his Belarusian writings welcomed and published. In the early 1910s, he moved to Vilna and settled at 29 Vilenskaja Street, the building of the "Naša niva" editorial office, at which he obtained his first job and his first literary honoraria. A brilliant storyteller, Bjadulja soon befriended members of the Belarusian intelligentsia and became one of the cen-

tral figures of the Belarusian diaspora club in Vilna. He started working at the publishing house and soon became part of the "Naša niva" editorial board (Lucevič 1988: 21-24). Janka Kupala was the editor of the periodical, and Plavnik, the secretary. As a popular legend has it, when Janka Kupala learned that his colleague wrote in at least two other languages, he told him "albo – albo," meaning "either – or". Following that advice, Plaŭnik stopped writing in Russian and Hebrew, and switched exclusively to Belarusian, adopting the penname Bjadulja.

Formed from the Slavic root for trouble (*bjada*) and the diminutive suffix (*-ulja*), Bjadulja was the name of a wandering Belarusian folk hero, an oppressed yet freedom-loving serf, the embodiment of sorrow, troubles, and subtle self-irony (Navumenka 1995: 12). Until the closure of the newspaper during World War I by Russian censors, Zmitrok Bjadulja and Janka Kupala edited "Naša niva", which is seen today as the starting point of Belarusian nation-making, as important for the Belarusian national awakening in the 1910s as the "Iskra" newspaper was for the rise of Russian Bolshevism. When the Bolsheviks did establish themselves in Belarus, turning it into the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic in the early 1920s, Bjadulja emerged as one of the indisputable masters of the new national canon in the making (see Sadoŭski, Cvirka 1988: 2-7; Navumenka 1995: 3-21; Gimpelevich 2013: 132-137).

Within the emerging Belarusian canon, Bjadulja seemed like a folkish populist with mild Marxist proclivities rather than a nationalist. He used the buzzwords of fin-de-siècle ethno-national revivalism, but as broad cultural metaphors rather than political mottoes. In his sketch *Rellja* (Arable Land), he turns to "zemlja matka naša" (the land, our mother) as a patriotic cliché ("Naša niva", 2; January 10, 1912) Yet when the narrator of his short story *Šeptaŭ čarot* (The Murmuring Reed) intercepts the patriotic outcries of the rebellious Belarusians, he does not join the crowd. Instead, he turns to what he considers genuine patriotism: his commitment to Belarusian peasants toiling in the gorgeous rural landscapes, lakes, and forests ("Naša niva", 51-52, December 12, 1912).

Bjadulja seems to have closely followed the Russian-Yiddish writer, folklorist and ethnographer Š. An-skij (Shloyme Zaynvl Rapo-

port, 1863-1920), who was instrumental in establishing the Jewish Ethnographic Society (1908) and subsequently launched the first expedition to the central provinces of the Pale of Jewish Settlement (from 1911 through 1913) to make sketches, photographs, and sound recordings, collect material artifacts, songs (*nigunim*), manuscripts, and folk beliefs of the shtetl Jews. An-skij observed the dissolution of the traditional shtetl world, anticipated its collapse, and designed a redemptive cultural program that he planned to bring to completion with the help of leading professionals like the composer and ethnomusicologist Susman Kiselgof and the artist Solomon Yudovin. Formerly an anti-Hasidic maskil, An-skij discovered the shtetl, especially in the densely Hasidic provinces of Podol and Volhynia. He considered it the genuine locus of Jewish culture, the soul of the Jewish people, while the bulk of the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia saw the shtetl as a ghetto steeped in obscurantism, provincialism, and poverty (on An-skij and his expedition, see Deutsch 2011; Safran, Zipperstein 2006; Lukin 1993: 125-161).

When An-skij was traversing central Ukraine for the second year, Bjadulja published his programmatic essay *Ne adnym chlebam* (Not by Bread Alone) in which he applied An-skij's statements about Jewish ethnography to Belarus. Bjadulja praised beauty (*charastva*) as the "mother of life" and called for "we, Belarusians" to put it "above all else," taking "the mystery of our people and our land and making it visible to everybody". However, his vision of beauty had little to do with art for art's sake. Rather, it was pragmatic. "We need to collect, record, draw, picture, catalog", wrote Bjadulja, "everything related to the soul of our people", whose art is "part of universal human beauty ("Naša niva", 21, May 23, 1913: 3-4) Unlike An-skij, however, who spent years among the Russian populists and socialist-revolutionaries and in the wake of the 1905 Russian Revolution reinvented his return to his "own" people through Yiddish language and Jewish ethnography and folklore, Bjadulja returned instead to the Belarusians, whom he called "our people".

Bjadulja claimed Belarusian culture as his own and transformed himself into a sui generis Belarusian cultural nationalist. His nationalism was soft-core, claiming cultural sovereignty rather than political. One of his dreams was to see as many Belarusian books for sale

as there were Polish books at the Zawadski bookstore in Vilna. In the pages of “Naša niva”, he glorified what he called the soul of the Belarusian nation. Paraphrasing the Book of Exodus, in which the Almighty presents himself as the one who *haia, hove ve-ihiye* (was, is, and will be), Bjadulja writes that Belarusian soul “was, is, and will be”. An admirer of Russian populism, Bjadulja found the soul of the people in folk art, village songs, textile ornaments, wood cuts, and above all, the language of the Belarusian village. Most importantly, he considered himself personally responsible for the fate of the Belarusian language and for the development of its literary genres. Together with his colleagues at “Naša niva”, he strove to adapt rural Belarusian to sophisticated literary usage, genres of urban prose, and societal modernization. Bjadulja translated Taras Ševčenko into Belarusian, and he used Ševčenko’s famous adage, *I čužomu naučates’, j svoho ne curajtes’* (“study the alien [culture] and do not reject your own”) asserting that the revival of the Belarusian language was a prerequisite for national revival.

Slavicizing the Jew, Judaizing the Belarusian

Bjadulja emerged on the Belarusian literary horizon when Belarusians were experiencing what Georgij Gačev once called “the accelerated development of literatures” (Gačev 1964). Of this unusually rapid and productive development, Maksim Bahdanovič observed that “[D]uring the eight-ten years of its present-day existence, our literature and perhaps also poetry traversed all the roads, perhaps byways, that European poetry has traversed for over a hundred years (Bahdanovič 1993, 2: 287) This statement is applicable to Belarusian prose as well as to poetry, and Bjadulja contributed to the newly emerging prose styles, genres, and images like no one else. His contribution, however, was distinctly different from that of his immediate peers like Bahdanovič, as well as Janka Kupala and Jakub Kolas. Bjadulja had an innovative take on narrative structure, characters, and motifs.

To portray Belarusian simple folk, Bjadulja drew heavily on his immense knowledge of Jewish and Russian literature and his immediate experience as a shtetl Jew. His peasant character’s female horse speaks to her master as Bilam’s she-donkey and Lev Tolstoj’s horse

Cholstomer speak to their masters, only here the horse speaks in Belarusian. Bjadulja makes his parallel transparent by entitling his story *Jak u Biblii* (As in the Bible). He uses the main theme of the biblical Songs of Songs, of an anticipated meeting between lovers that never comes to be, in order to tell the bucolic story of Malanka and *Janka*, two young villagers in his poem *Svecic mesjac* (The Moon is shining). The dialogue in the Songs of Songs ends with the door finally open yet the beloved has disappeared, and Bjadulja's village dwellers also have a non-encounter, whose entire dialogue might just be Malanka's dream. In the same manner, Bjadulja takes a story from *Shivchej ha-Besht* about a little boy who screams during the High Holidays prayers, scared by the depressing silence in the synagogue. The Besht rebuked the adults who hissed at the boy, explaining that his screams were a genuine expression of his profound and pristine awe before the Almighty. In *Malitva maloho Habrusika* (The Prayer of Little Habrusik), Bjadulja retells the story as a Belarusian one: little Habrusik whistled in church because he could not stand the depressing silence. Bjadulja repeats the insights of the founder of Hasidism almost word for word: "This was little Habrusik's first true prayer in church" ("Naša niva", 9, March 1-3 1912).

At times, Bjadulja imparts Jewish characteristics to characters who are identified as Belarusian, as if dressing his Belarusian characters in imaginary Jewish garb, thus creating a peculiar fusion, unparalleled in other Slavic-Jewish literatures. His characters inhabit a world where there are Christians and Jews, though they do not seem aware of the difference. He says of his characters that they "become so close that they themselves forget who they are – they do not remember that there is a g*oy* and a y*id*". His villagers recognize this, noticing that the Jewish Meer "da našaha brata padoben!" (resembles our brethren) while the Christian Michalka "da žida padoben!" (resembles a Jew; Bjadulja 1987, 3: 37, 67). In his short story *Vjaliki post* (The Great Fast), Liavon, a beggar, makes up his mind to become a Belarusian pietist. Fasting for him has never been a problem, since he always suffered long periods of hunger and malnutrition. Being tolerant and merciful toward those not able to fast also seemed an easy task: he was a professional in that métier. Once he became a religious pietist, dozens of cripples, beggars, and sick people flocked

to him for comfort, prayer, and blessings. Liavon lived righteously and died a happy man, his life and death resembling that of a *tsaddik*, a Hasidic master and head of a Hasidic court. Tragicomically, Bjadulja presents the Belarusian beggar as a *natural* pietist: poverty has made him merciful, wise, ascetic, and righteous, while a Hasid of Jewish origin must teach himself all those lofty ethical standards ("Naša niva", 42, October 18/31, 1912).

In the Judaic esoteric Kabbalist tradition there is the concept of *gilgul ha-neshamot* (*gilgl ha-neshomes*, in the Ashkenazi-Yiddish pronounciation) the transmigration of souls. Unlike its Buddhist analogue, in *gilgul* the soul grows up in every successive reincarnation. If we believe his ego-narratives, Bjadulja delved into Kabbalah while studying with his first *melamed*, before his angry father moved him to a less mystically-oriented study environment. Bjadulja, however, never forgot his lessons: in becoming a Belarusian writer, he took Jewish concepts and transplanted them in Belarusian soil. For example, in his short story *Ratai* (The Plowman), he portrays a sower whose dreams resemble the *gilgul*. He wants to become a seed, then earth itself, and then turn again into a sower. Bjadulja creates the same fusion in one of his newspaper publications, describing an unknown Kabbalistic manuscript. He is fascinated that the incantations of an anonymous practical Kabbalist are rendered in his esoteric 18th century manuscript in Belarusian, although transcribed in Hebrew letters (Bjadulja 1921: 33-35).

Critics have overlooked the fact that Bjadulja's Belarusian peasant stories are shaped like short Talmudic parables with conclusions reminiscent of *Pirkei Avot*, the Talmudic ethical treatise. In the story *Pjac' lyžak zacirki* (Five Spoonfuls of Bark Soup), Agata, the mother of a large, destitute family with a sick husband, invites her poor neighbor Scëpčycha to eat with them. Everyone at the table counts the spoonfuls of soup that Scëpčycha puts in her mouth, and family breaks into a fight once she has finished and taken her leave ("Naša niva", 30, June 8/26, 1912: 2-3) Bjadulja concludes that poverty is relative and there is no absolute yardstick for affliction or distress. He provides his own ethical glossa on the famous discussion in the Talmudic treatise *Ta'anit* (Fasting) which discusses individual and communal distress and advises the individual to share the affliction

of the entire community.[4] The short story *Zlodzej* (Robber) has a similar structure. Kastus refuses to penalize his neighbor Likanor for stealing from his field, because the robber is an honest person who admits “I did not promise I would not steal”. Kastus arrives at the ethical conclusion that a human being’s honesty can supersede his negative qualities: he is “ne fal’šyvy čalavek” (not a false man; “Naša niva”, 36, September 19/6, 1912). These ethical punchlines merge Belarusian imagery and the situational morality of Talmudic narratives making the integral whole of Bjadulja’s parable look organic.

Bjadulja uses idiosyncratic characters from Jewish folklore such as the dybbuk – the “cleaving soul” of a deceased Jew that refuses to leave this world and begins its independent, vagabond existence by entering the body of a betrothed yet unmarried girl. While firmly embedding his story in the Belarusian environment, Bjadulja changes the gender of the dybbuk, creating something unknown in Judaic folklore: a female dybbuk, the spirit of a dead girl who refuses to share her love with someone she does not like (“Naša niva”, 49, December 5, 2013). The metaphors, themes, and religious motifs of popular Jewish culture permeate the lives and even the dreams of Belarusians, as in the short story *Son Anuprėja* (The Dream of Anuprėj). When God posthumously appoints Anuprėj the first among saints and asks which of his wishes to fulfil, Anuprėj asks God to ask Sorka (diminutive of Sarah), most likely a Jewish bartender at a local tavern, to give him a glass of vodka and a piece of herring (“Naša niva”, 27, June 5/18, 1912). Bjadulja thus fuses the lives and dreams, this world and the world to come, of his Belarusian and Jewish characters and carefully intertwines elements of the two ethnic traditions and beliefs.

Bjadulja recast that which he experienced as Samuil Plaŭnik in a Belarusian mold, not only in his ego-narratives and short stories but also in his short novels with strong social and historical underpinnings. Meer, the main character of Bjadulja’s novel *Salavej* can imitate people, animals, and birds; he plays and can build every musical

([4]) Babylonian Talmud, *Taanit* 27a-b. This treatise appears in the comprehensive curricular of the Talmudic academies among the Ashkenazic Jews in the summer period between the 17 of Tammuz and 9 of Av, the three weeks of mourning on the eve of the commemoration of the destruction of the Second Temple.

instrument. The prisoner of Polish magnate Vašamirski (sic), Meer is modelled after the Biblical Samson who ruined the palace of the Philistines. Meer also ruins his landlord's party by refusing to sing for oppressors and to be "the landlords' nightingale (Bjadulja 1987, 3: 100-101).

Bjadulja went as far as to Slavicize Hebrew and Yiddish writers, transforming them into Belarusians. He refers to Avram Mapu (1808-1867) and Mendele Moykher Sforim (1835-1917) as "our" Belarusian Jews. He turns the shtetl into a village and the Jews into Belarusian peasants. His imaginary Belarussian village of Žebrovščyna (Poverty) resembles Mendele's town of Glupsk (Foolishville). Imitating Mendele's crazy Jews, all of them mentally-challenged, Bjadulja portrays a village of what he presents as funny Belarusians, all of them physically-challenged – cripples. While Glupsk produces fools for the entire Jewish diaspora, Žebrovščyna brings in cripples from the entire region and breeds various brands of cripples for the whole world. Most of them brag of their physical defects. Bjadulja, like Mendele with his fools, underscores the shared grotesque human nature of the cripples. They dance frenetically with joy at the wedding of the noseless, dumb Magdusia to the blind Sidarok. They mourn and cry on learning that this perfectly crippled couple, alas, has produced a healthy child ("Naša niva", 28, July 12, 1913).

Bjadulja's Jewish-Belarusian fusion serves a greater purpose, beyond the cultural and literary. He uses Jews, Jewish references, images, quotations, cultural and literary patterns in order to de-colonize and liberate the Belarusians. His imaginary post-colonial Belarus presupposes a productive symbiosis between Belarusians and Jews. From his perspective, the modernization of Jews in Belarus would take place when Belarusian folk culture was elevated to the level of Belarusian national culture. The freedom of the Slavic nation would warrant the wellbeing of the Jews. To that end, it was folk culture, rooted in the rural and popular, that Russified Jews and Belarusians should strive to adopt and elevate. Bjadulja held that the incorporation of Belarusian folk elements into the literary and cultural canon would benefit both Jews and Belarusians. It would give voice to the people "from the woods," thus undoing the harm of Russian imperial assimilation.

For Bjadulja, Russian was not exclusively imperial. The Russian imperial establishment was one thing, but democratic Russian literature was quite another. Bjadulja's discovery of Belarusian themes and images is mediated not only by Jewish but also by Russian literary influences. Among the many Russian nineteenth-century classics routinely mentioned in connection with Bjadulja, literary critics have omitted Nikolaj Leskov, whose *skaz* (spontaneous and semantically inadequate oral narration in conflict with what is narrated) had a significant impact on Bjadulja's endeavors. In the tragicomic story *Hora ŭdavy Symonichi* (The Sorrow of Widow Symonicha), a paradigmatic village witch curses everyone around her during her lifetime and continues to curse her neighbors and relatives on her deathbed. Bjadulja is a sympathetic yet distant narrator, but he inserts *skaz*-type monologues into the widow's speech, a mixture of incantations, conjurations, spells, and obscenities. "Salt in your eyes, pepper in your nose, as our liars say," the witch curses her listeners ("Naša niva", 33, August 16/29, 1912). Furthermore, Bjadulja juxtaposes Leskov's *skaz* with rhythmical prose in the style of Andrej Belyj, for example in his *Miniatjury* (Minatures). Bjadulja portrays various characters – a woman cutting her hand with a sickle, a shepherd at the fire, an agonized old mother planning to consult a necromantic healer – in rhythmical prose, describing rural scenes where poverty, distress, and folk-based beliefs in magic routinely circulate (Naša niva", 35, August 12/30, 1912).

In his study of Gogol's grotesque, Boris Ejchenbaum writes that the voice of Gogol' the narrator and the way the story is told is more important than the plot itself, usually reduced to a brief and trivial anecdote (Ejchenbaum 1969: 306-309)· Ejchenbaum's observations on Gogol' are applicable to Bjadulja's early prose as well, particularly his sketches and short stories on what he presents as the Belarusian folklore tradition. For example, in *Tuljahi* (Homeless), the death of a young peasant girl is related through curses, incantations, peasant talk, dirges, all of which shape the distinct monological form of *skaz* through which the folk mentality reveals itself ("Naša niva", 21, May 6/24, 1912). For Bjadulja, *skaz* is not just a literary device in Šklovskij's terms, but a highly valued form of expression. He contrasts the genuinely realistic and folkish *skaz* with plain and dull writ-

ten literary language. In his short story *List* (The Letter), the letter of a soldier is read aloud and discussed by a village miller to the soldier's mother, using all the oral richness of *skaz*, with its peasant obscenities, emotional asides, curses, and blasphemies as highly accurate and at the same time deprecating the written text as polite, smooth, cliché-based, hence false ("Naša niva", 18, May 3, 1913). Leskov's forms of *skaz*, while of Russian origin, allow Bjadulja to free the voices of his characters and emphasize the beauty (*charastvo*) of the folk mentality in the same manner as he does with Jewish references.

Conclusion

Zina Gimpelevich, a leading specialist on Jewish themes in Belarusian literature, deftly observes that "Bjadulja's significant and at the same time exceptional role in Belarusian national rebirth at the beginning of the twentieth century is often overlooked, misunderstood, or understated". (Gimpelevich 2013: 136). Similarly, within what Ruth Wisse called "the Modern Jewish canon", Bjadulja is very much underestimated. However, Bjadulja's powerful legacy affected both Belarusian national and Jewish diaspora literatures. He was the first East European Jew fully to embrace Belarusian cultural revival, claim the Belarusian language as one of his own, and invest his literary skills in Belarusian literary endeavors. He can be compared to the leading Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian literati of Jewish descent of the first half of the 20th century. While celebrities such as Polish-Jewish writers Bruno Schulz and Zuzanna Ginczanka, Russian-Jewish Isaak Babel' and Vasilij Grossman, and Ukrainian-Jewish Leonid Pervomais'kyi and Mojsej Fišbejn have entered the national pantheons, none of them is considered a founder of the Russian, Polish, or Ukrainian canon. Unlike them, Bjadulja did not enter the established literary tradition – he was a founding father of it, who built the Belarusian literary canon from scratch and brought it to maturity. His landscapes and love lyrics, ethnographic sketches and ego-narratives, and shtetl-village prose works introduced a new set of genres, tropes, and innovative literary devices to Belarusian literature-in-the-making.

Bjadulja was the first writer to portray Judaism and Jews as speaking the Belarusian language. He wrote on Belarusian subjects with-

out compromising the Jewish themes, images, and narrative patterns with which he grew up as a reader of Hebrew rabbinical and Yiddish modernistic texts. There are, of course, Russian-Jewish writers like Osip Rabinovič (1817-1869) and Semën Juškevič (1868-1927), who created Russian-speaking Jewish characters obsessed with the legacy of Judaic tradition, yet Bjadulja's work in Belarusian is of much higher literary quality and reflects a much broader understanding of Judaism. Bjadulja embraces and reimagines the entire corpus of traditional Jewish texts and beliefs. Judaism for him is not reduced to the voices of people of Jewish descent, depictions of routine Jewish life in godforsaken townlets, discussions of Jewish-Russian social interaction, or the pitfalls of Jewish-Russian assimilation. Any further study of Bjadulja's Slavonic-Judaic symbiosis would require not only knowledge of Belarusian language and culture but also familiarity with Judaic religious and esoteric traditions. For example, Bjadulja spent many years mastering the basic Talmudic treatises, *Musar* (ethical) works, and halakhic (legal) sources in a much more consistent and formal sense than, for example Sh. An-sky, who turned *maskil* (Jewish enlightener) early on and dropped out of his despised *yeshivah*. Bjadulja (like Haim Nachman Bialik) delved into Judaic subjects in a much deeper sense than most of the Russian- and Polish-Jewish writers who had studied Judaism for only a couple years with a hired *melamed* and were never exposed to the consistent, round-the-clock, intensive studies of a Lithuanian-style Talmudic academy.

Bjadulja Slavicized the Jews in the Belarusian *shtetl* but he also Judaized the dwellers of the Belarusian village. His Jews speak pure rural Belarusian, resort to Belarusian proverbs, share the prejudice of the Belarusian rural dwellers and sing Belarusian songs, while Bjadulja's Belarusians use the Talmudic mode of thinking and parable-based Talmudic narrating patterns as well as a sense of self-irony.

Although Bjadulja was a passionate anti-imperial polemicist, his forays into Belarusian language and culture were through the lens of Russian literature. His engagement with Fëdor Tjutčev's poetic *Naturphilosophie*, Nikolaj Gogol's grotesque fantasies, Nikolaj Leskov's *skaz*, and Andrej Belyj's rhythmical prose still needs to be researched, but Bjadulja seems to have been the best educated Belarusian twentieth-century writer. Literary historians were often distracted by Bja-

dulja's attachment to the rural, his focus on the illiterate and destitute, and his use of what was considered a lowly, third-rate language of the Russian Empire. However, his democratic position should not obfuscate the fact that he was a seasoned connoisseur of fin-de-siècle European literary experimentation.

Slavic Studies scholars at European and American universities traditionally prioritize Russian, rarely study Polish and routinely marginalize Czech, Serbian, Ukrainian and other Slavic languages. The Belarusian language and culture have also remained beyond their radar or outside their scope of interest. Researchers focused on Belarusian topics have to deal with largely unknown subject matter. They are routinely obligated to explain elementary things to a broader audience, merely retelling texts of which most Slavic Studies scholars are unaware. Hence the descriptive, basic, non-comparative and non-analytical level of studies on Bjadulja. Bjadulja's engagement with his immediate peers, for example, was obviously rich yet continues to be neglected. Samuil Plaŭnik became Zmitrok Bjadulja and turned to Belarusian themes between 1908 and 1911, joining Janka Kupala and Jakub Kolas. What did he learn from them? What did they learn from him? What kind of intellectual interaction shaped their publications in the Belarusian-language "Naša niva" newspaper? All these questions remain scholarly desiderata.

Considering Bjadulja's carefully crafted dual identity and his fusion Belarusian-Judaic culture, it is upsetting to learn that the Museum of the History of Belarusian Literature and the Maria Magdalena Radziwiłł Foundation organized the reburial of Samuil Plavnik a.k.a. Zmitrok Bjadulja according to Christian tradition, at a Christian cemetery, under a cross. Bjadulja understood *charastvo* (beauty) as a fusion of Slavic and Judaic in which one did not erase the other. The way he was reburied in 2020 erases his entire legacy and the Judeo-Slavic utopia he stood for.

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Un'altra modernità: Zmitrok Bjadulja
e la creazione dell'ebreo bielorusso

Un giovane allievo rabbinico di un remoto *shtetl* bielorusso, Shmuel Plaŭnik, debuttò come poeta ebraico, per passare quindi alla poesia russa, fino ad approdare, con l'adozione dello pseudonimo Zmitrok Bjadulja intorno al 1910, alla prosa e poesia bielorussa e all'integrazione nell'intellighenzia bielorussa. La sua scelta non scontata di un'identità culturale e letteraria bielorussa era in contraddizione con le modalità tradizionali di acculturazione degli ebrei nell'Impero russo, basate sull'ingresso nella lingua e cultura russa maggioritaria. Bjadulja non solo scelse quella che al tempo era una cultura coloniale e priva di una statualità di supporto, ma mantenne anche la sua doppia identità di ebreo bielorusso, che è alla base delle sue narrazioni autobiografiche, dei suoi bozzetti e dei suoi racconti. Nella sua prosa narrativa Bjadulja propose un'innovativa sintesi di elementi slavi e giudaici fondata sulla sua profonda co-

noscenza delle fonti ebraiche e del folklore bielorusso. Questa fusione forgiò profondamente l'immaginario, i motivi, lo stile e il linguaggio delle sue opere. Bjadulja fu in grado di mettere insieme due culture etno-nazionali prive di uno stato, marginalizzate e deprecate per creare una visione utopica di coesistenza e interferenza ebraico-bielorussa che, grazie alla potenza della sua penna, divenne parte fondamentale del canone bielorusso nella sua formazione.

Keywords: Zmitrok Bjadulja, post-colonial, anti-imperial, Belarusians, East European Jews, fusion cultures, Slavic literatures.

INDICE

BELARUS' EUROPEA

Alessandro Achilli, Oxana Pachlovska, Laura Quercioli Mincer
La Belarus' fra presente e passato, *nation building* e molteplicità culturale. Prefazione dei curatori 9-24

Oxana Pachlovska
Perché la bielorussistica oggi? Al posto di un'introduzione 25-60

Mikhail Minakov
The Belarusian Protest Movement of 2020 from An Eastern European Comparative Perspective 61-83

Marco Puleri
Oltre l''anomalia bielorussa'? Nuove concettualizzazioni dell'autonomia politica e culturale nazionale nella Bielorussia d'età post-sovietica 85-104

Manuel Ghilarducci
La riflessione linguistica nella poesia bielorussa tra autoreferenzialità e performatività (1908-2016) 105-126

Gun-Britt Kohler
Insights into the Belarusian Literary Market (1905-1932) 127-152

Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern
An Alternative Modernity: Zmitrok Bjadulja and His Creation of the Belarusian Jew 153-177

Anna Belozorovich
Il professore "elettrico" Jakub Narkevič-Iodko e la tenuta Nadnëman: processi di memoria e ricostruzione, tra scienza e letteratura 179-206

Arnold McMillin
Aspects of Belarusian Verse Parodies 207-231

Giulia De Florio
Dmitrij Strocev e la resistenza della poesia 233-255

Tomasz Kamusella
Al’herd Bacharėvič’s *Sabaki Ėŭropy*: A Belarusian *1Q84*? 257-275

STUDI E RICERCHE

Lidia Federica Mazzitelli
Impersonal Constructions in Belarusian and closely Related Languages: A Typological and Areal Account .. 277-310

Anita Kłos
“Adoratore della scienza” o “raffinato cesellatore”? Stanisław Lem legge Italo Calvino 311-333

IN MEMORIAM

Maria Bidovec
Andrea Trovesi (1971-2021) 335-339

RECENSIONI

Elissa Bemporad, *Eredità di sangue. Ebrei, pogrom e omicidi rituali in Unione Sovietica*. Castelvecchi, Roma 2021 (Simone A. Bellezza) 341-344

Zbornik o Ljubomiru Marakoviću. Zbornik radova sa znanstvenoga skupa, Zagreb-Topusko, 25-26. travnja 2019. Glavni urednik Tihomil Maštrović. Hrvatski studiji Sveučilišta et al., Zagreb et al. 2020 (Andrea Sapunar Knežević) 344-349

Predrag Petrović, *Horizonti modernističkog romana*. Čigoja štampa, Beograd 2021 (Luca Vaglio) 349-355

Alfrun Kliems, *Underground Modernity: Urban Poetics in East-Central Europe, Pre- and Post-1989*. Transl. Jace Schneider. CEU Press, Budapest 2021 (Alessandro Achilli) 355-358

Dmitrij Strocev, *Terra sorella*. Trad. e cura di Giulia De Florio. Valigie Rosse, Livorno 2020; Dmytro Strocev, *Pyl, ščo tan-*

cjuje. Duch i litera, Kyjiv 2020; Dmitrij Strocev / Dzmitrij Strocaŭ, *Belarus' oprokinuta / Belarus' perakulenaja*. Trad. di Andrėj Chadanovič. Novye mechi, s.l. 2021 (Alessandro Achilli) 358-360

Note biografiche sugli autori 361-364

Elenco dei revisori per il volume del 2021 365-366