

BOOK REVIEW

An anthology of Jewish-Russian literature: two centuries of dual identity in prose and poetry, 2 vols, edited by Maxim D. Shrayer, Armonk, NY/London, M.E. Sharpe, 2007, 1376 pp., US\$225.00, ISBN 978-0-7656-0521-4

Maxim D. Shrayer's *Anthology of Jewish-Russian literature* is an amazing work. Not only is it the most complete collection of Jewish Russian writers to this day; it is at the same time a fascinating cultural phenomenon in itself. Written in English, published in the United States, and compiled by a Jewish scholar who was born and raised in Russia, the anthology embodies the very questions it seeks to explore. Is there a "Jewish poetics"? as Shrayer puts it, and how does the quest for identity reflect in the Jewish-Russian context, in Diaspora?

Shrayer, Professor of Russian and English at Boston College and a writer himself, presents a collection of well over 100 writers and poets and their works. He introduces the English-speaking reader to well-known authors such as Osip Mandelstam as well as to less well-known authors such as Evgeny Reyn. Besides rendering full or abridged texts in translation Shrayer supplies the reader with comments and information on the individual writer. Moreover, with a general outline of Jewish-Russian writing through two centuries composed by the editor, a concise historical sketch by the late John Klier, and a clear periodisation of literary tendencies, Shrayer's project becomes more than a mere anthology. It is as much a collection of texts as it is an encyclopaedic compendium. To realise this claim experts of different kinds joined the project: translators, scholars, and not least writers with whom Shrayer conducted interviews.

As national histories go, that of (modern) Russian Jewry is to some extent unusual in that it can be clearly delineated. It starts with the partitions of Poland in the late eighteenth century (1772–95) when Russia acquired the largest Jewish community in Europe. The Haskalah and the Russification policies of the Russian government catalysed the rapprochement with and attraction of Russian as a medium of Jewish expression. But it was not only the language Jews appropriated. This process could also involve a (sometimes radical) turn to the surrounding majority culture; a turn towards secular education that German Jews had experienced roughly eight decades earlier. This complex process of secularisation entailed the transformation of traditional knowledge and life style. It was reflected in the burgeoning Russian-language press and literature of the 1860s in Odessa and later St Petersburg. Whereas there is today a growing body of studies on questions of historiography (Frankel, Gitelman, Bartal, Klier), studies that focus on the literature or culture of Eastern European Jewry (Safran, Krutikov, Katsis) are still rare. Shrayer's anthology, a result of solid basic research, has the potential to inspire further scholarship on Jewish Russian literature, a literature made now accessible to a wide scholarly and non-scholarly audience. The immensely rich material is relatively easy to navigate. An elaborate system of cross-references links the different writers and epochs. Annotations provide useful if sometimes unnecessary information (such as the meaning of "Shma Israel," 306) on Russian, Russian-Jewish, and Jewish realities. The compilation of an anthology or encyclopaedia and the process of selection and exclusion it involves inevitably imply the existence of a canon of texts and help endorse it. Not included due to reasons of space are thus drama as a genre, and writers of the recent migration wave who partly – a most interesting phenomenon in the context of Jewish-Russian or Russian-Jewish literature – switched to other languages such as English or German (e.g. Gary Shteyngart, Wladimir Kaminer).

The necessarily selective nature of the project might have induced a more differentiated view than Shrayer pursues in his theoretical and methodological introduction. His conceptualisation of Jewish-Russian literature evolves around the notions of Diaspora and biculturalism

or cultural duality. “By writing in Russian, a Jew becomes a Russian writer [according to A. Nakhimovsky]. But,” Shroyer asks, “to what degree does he or she also remain a Jewish writer? This anthology investigates the dilemma of cultural duality by attempting a story, a history – and an encyclopedic overview – of Jewish-Russian literature” (xxviii). Shroyer identifies biculturalism as “one of the key concepts of the artistic vision of Jewish-Russian writers (and, for that matter, of any Jewish writer in Diaspora who is conscious of his or her origins)” (xlii). Yet writers who engage, according to the proposed system of separate cultural entities, with at least three of those entities cannot possibly be subsumed under “biculturalism.” The question arises whether it would not be epistemologically more useful to use categories such as cultural encounter and cultural transfer that stress trans-territorial and interactive aspects of cultures and their agents. Through such an approach the transformation (not only) in Eastern Europe of Judaism into various notions of Jewishness, that is reflected in the texts both in content and in style, might be more coherently explained. For the Jews in the nineteenth century did not switch to Russian as the language of the Russian people; rather they switched to Russian as the medium of Russian culture, i.e. the unifying language of a multiethnic and multilingual empire.

Shroyer’s *Anthology of Jewish-Russian literature* is, despite some shortcomings that lie in the nature of such a huge project, a powerful manifestation of erudite scholarship. It provides access to a hitherto barely known and studied literary corpus in well readable translations. And it contributes explicitly and implicitly important facets to the new–old debate on “What is Jewish literature?”

This anthology should be present in every library that takes an interest in Jewish literature(s), culture(s), and history, in Russia and the Soviet Union, and not least in Russian culture.

Olaf Terpitz
*Simon-Dubnow-Institute for Jewish
History and Culture, Leipzig*
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