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Conferences Attended

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“The Image of the Shtetl in Russian Jewish literature after the Holocaust”

The Shtetl, one can say, was the centre of Jewish culture in Eastern Europe since the majority of the Eastern European (Ashkenazic) Jewry lived there. Eastern Europe means in this context more or less the Pale of Settlement which comprised parts of present-day Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, the Baltic Provinces and Poland. These territories belonged to the Russian Empire after the Polish Partitions of 1772-1795. The Shtetl, hereby, kept a rather autonomous status, i.e. it held to its traditions. Although it was influenced and touched by administrative, political intentions of the Czarist Empire, and by the Russian or Ukrainian or any other culture assimilation and integration into the “host culture” did almost not happen. It was the place by which identity was created and manifested. Beyond the literal meaning of its real local existence there are several abstract meanings attached to the toponym “Shtetl” such as a certain way of life, memories, experiences. Therefore, it played a central role in 19th and 20th century Yiddish literature as well as, however to a minor extent, in Russian-Jewish literature. The historical situation of the 20th century did not only change the existence of the Shtetl, but did lead to its destruction.

The general aim of my thesis is to show how the Shtetl is reflected in Russian Jewish literature in the second half of the 20th century. That is, what concepts the different authors follow, and in what way this toponym and the writers’ Jewishness play a role.

For to show how the Shtetl is reflected it is necessary to have a closer, although a concise one here, look at the historical circumstances of Russian Jewish and Yiddish literature. In the middle of the 19th century new writers entered the scene of Russian language literature, viz. Russian Jewish ones. Until those days Jewish authors used to write in Hebrew. They dealt mainly with religious topics. Yiddish was the language of the lower stratum of the Jewish population whereas Russian was the language of the “host culture”. Now the scope of both Yiddish and Russian broadened. They became the medium for discussing secular matters. However, the use of Yiddish and the choice of topic restricted the recipients to Jewish readers. The October Revolution of 1917 caused a change of the situation. The Pale of Settlement was abolished. Jews could move to and live in both capitals – Moscow and St. Petersburg, it is said that Moscow became the “new Berdichev”. On the other hand, the process of assimilation and acculturation was enforced by Soviet ideology and inner tendencies in the Jewish community. Thus, e.g., I. Babel, I. Erenburg, and Ilf & Petrov became part of the Russian literature. To what degree these authors turned Russian and remained Jews at the same time differs widely. Erenburg denies any influence on his work by his ethnic identity, albeit declaring that he will be as long a Jew as antisemitism has to be fought. By contrast, one can name G. Kanovich who is a major representative of 20th century Russian Jewish literature. His main aim is to recreate a Jewish identity. Publishing in Russian he focuses on Jewish themes proper as Shtetl life of the 19th century.

There are certain aspects that characterize the discourse(s) about the shtetl in literature. First, the transformation of the Jewish small town from a living culture into an imaginary space which concerns the fictional level as well as the historical sight. Second, whether and how the Shtetl is perceived as home or native place. This problem is stressed in particular by Kanovich who tries to make out the current intellectual and cultural position of the Eastern European Jewry by reviving the “cultural memory”. As Jan Assmann puts it ‘identification is as strong or weak as it is alive in the conscience of the members of a group and is able to motivate their thinking and acting’. Consequently, my thesis will be about the ideational concepts connected with this toponym as well, i.e. for example in how far one can make out relationships, traditions.

This point becomes especially virulent insofar as at least two stores of knowledge intersect in Russian Jewish writers. This phenomenon finds expression in the ambivalence of Isaac Babel and the reserved attitude of Il’ja Erenburg to his Jewishness, what becomes apparent in his parody “Burnaja zhisn’ Lazika Rojtshvaneca”.

It is essential to consider the political and social circumstances, too, that affected the position of each author. Obviously, one can name the repressive cultural policy of the

USSR, the persecution of people (cf the year 1952 – many leading artists and writers of Jewish descent were murdered).