“To what might the yard have been compared?”

by Madeleine Cohen

In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies (October 2015)

For the online version of this article:

http://ingeveb.org/articles/to-what-might-the-yard-have-been-compared

"TO WHAT MIGHT THE YARD HAVE BEEN COMPARED?"

Madeleine Cohen

Moyshe Kulbak, The Zelmenyaners: A Family Saga. *Translated by Hillel Halkin and introduction and notes by Sasha Senderovich. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013, 304 pp.*

A carful of Soviet officials pulls into a large, rundown courtyard on the outskirts of Minsk. The officials, accompanied by a young woman whose family lives in the houses that form this *heyf* (courtyard), start tapping around the structures, examining. The young woman's elderly aunts and uncles look at her, confused. "It looks like they'll knock down the yard," she matter-of-factly tells them. The family is understandably distraught at the news that their homes, where they have all grown up, will be demolished to make way for a new factory. The women grab brooms and start sweeping, as if cleaning up a bit will dissuade the officials from planning their demolition. One uncle becomes enraged, crying for his older brother and swearing to take the matter personally to Mikhail Kalinin.[1] His son attempts to put things in perspective: "Papa, calm down. Capitalism has been abolished" (222-23).[2]

[1] Mikhail Kalinin (1875–1946), a Bolshevik revolutionary and the nominal head of state in the Soviet Union between 1919 and 1946.

[2] Page numbers refer to Moyshe Kulbak, *The Zelmenyaners: A Family Saga*, translated by Hillel Halkin and introduction and notes by Sasha Senderovich (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). The two parts of the original Yiddish version of the novel, *Zelmenyaner*, were published in installments in the Yiddish press in 1929-30 and 1933-1935 and then as books in 1931 and 1935.

The plot of Moyshe Kulbak's sole novel, *The Zelmenyaners*, is in many ways encapsulated by the above scene. Four generations of a Jewish family known as the Zelmenyaners (after their patriarch, Reb Zelmele) have lived in this courtyard, the quintessential residential unit of so many Central European cities. The novel begins with a description of the courtyard, where most of the novel takes place:

> אַ פֿאַרצײַטיקער מויער מיט אַ צעקרישלטן טינק און צוויי שורות הײַזער פֿול מיט זעלמעלעך. פֿאַראַנען נאָך שטאַלן, קעלערן, בוידעמער. דאָס אַלץ זעט אויס ווי אַ שמאָל געסל. זומער, בײַם שאַריען אויף טאָג, פֿלעגט דער קליינער ר׳ זעלמעלע אַרויסגיין אָט אַהער אין הוילע גאַטקעס. דאָ פֿלעגט ער איבערטראָגן אַ ציגל, דאָ פֿלעגט ער מיט גאָר די כּוחות טראָגן מיסט אויף אַ רידל. (באַנד 1, 5)

> An ancient, two-story brick building with peeling plaster and two rows of low houses filled with little Zelmenyaners. Plus stables, attics, and cellars. It looks more like a narrow street. On summer days, Reb Zelmele is the first to appear at the crack of dawn in his long underwear. Sometimes he carries a brick or furiously shovels manure. (3)

The satirical and episodic novel takes place—and was written—between 1929 and 1935, and it chronicles the ups and downs of this family as it faces the changing realities of Soviet life. The older generation, the aunts and uncles above, is often resistant to change, enacting small rebellions against things like electric light. But they also find themselves occasionally delighted by innovations: a tramline to the city center, for example, or their first trip to a movie. Some even find themselves coming around to industrialization. One uncle, a tailor, first rails against the horrors of constructing a jacket on an assembly line, but later finds himself appreciating the efficiency of the factory:

> דער פֿעטער עטעמט אָפּ טיף, ווי ער וואָלט דערמיט אַרײַנגענומען אין זיך די געדאַנקען. „אײַ, צו וואָס ס׳מיאוסע שנײַדערל האָט דערלעבט!.. הײַנט וואָלסטו עס געזען, ווי סע קלעפּן זיך די שטיקער מאַנטל... טאַקע אַן אַנדער וועלט... און דאָ – ביסטו זיך געזעסן בײַ דער טערעבענדע טראַסק־טראַסק פֿון באַגינען ביז שפּעט אין דער נאַכט...“ (באַנד 2, 119)

> Uncle Itshe took a deep breath, as if trying to collect his thoughts. "Ach, the things a poor tailor has lived to see! We live in times when the coats go around making themselves. It's a whole new world...To think of the years I spent sitting at that old piece of junk, rattling away from morning till night..." (199)

The younger generation is, for the most part, better suited to the changing world. One son is a Soviet police officer; a young woman has attended university and writes reports on economic development; another son returns from the far edges of Russia, tattooed and supporting a child that isn't his own (and likely has a non-Jewish father); another daughter marries a Belorussian. Kulbak dubs the enthusiastic revolutionaries among this younger generation the *shilyue*, translated as whippersnaps:

> די יוגנט (שיליועס) האָט ליב אויסגענייטע העמדלעך און קוטשמעט האָר. די יוגנט (שיליועס) האָט ליב טראָגן אַ רעוואָלווער לפֿי־שעה אין דער הינטערשטער קעשענע. זי האָט ליב נעמען אַ שטיק קאָלבאַס מיט ברויט און, שטייענדיק אַרום טיש, שטאָפּן שטאַרק אין די באַקן און טרייַבן דערבייַ חוזק. (באַנד 1, 105)

> The (young) whippersnaps like to go around with peasant blouses and tousled hair. They like to carry revolvers in their back pockets. They like to stuff their mouths with bread and sausage and sit around the table poking fun (80).

The brilliance of Kulbak's novel, however, is that it is not a simple or propagandistic satire of the older, counterrevolutionary, backwards Jews, corrected by their Bolshevik children. In fact, these children are the butt of Kulbak's satire as often as their parents are. And much of the novel's empathy is focused on what might be lost in this period of rapid change. The novel mourns old shadows dispelled by electricity at least as much as it celebrates an uncle's late-in-life friendship with a non-Jewish potter he meets on a *kolkhoz* (collective farm):

> פֿעטער יודע און דער טעפּער זייַנען ווי צוויי ווינטערדיקע רעטעכער אונטערן שניי. זיי האָבן זיך מוראדיק ליב. עס טרעפֿט, אַז דער טעפּער גיט אויף פֿעטער יודען אַ וויזיט אויף צוריק, זעצן זיי זיך אַוועק אין הינטערשטוב און טאַפּן די עופֿות. דאָס איז אַ גוטער אָפּרו. בכלל איז פֿעטער יודען אַוועק גוט און ער האָט אפילו אַנוסטן, בעת דער טעפּער איז צו אים געקומען, געגעבן אַ ברייטן שמייכל... לויט דעם דאָזיקן שמייכל איז צו זען, אַז פֿעטער יודע האָט, ענדלעך, געפֿינען זייַן באַרויִקונג. (באַנד 1, 146)

> Uncle Yuda and the potter are like two radishes wintering under the snow. They're frightfully fond of each other. Sometimes the potter visits Uncle Yuda. They sit in the henhouse, petting the hens. It's a good way to relax. In general, Uncle Yuda is feeling chipper these days. He gives the potter a big smile when he comes to visit. . . . You can tell by his smile that Uncle Yuda is finally at peace. (115)

The happiness this uncle finds at the *kolkhoz* might be the only happy ending in the novel; one old Jew is able to adapt enough to find his place in the new world, minding chickens on a collective farm. But not even this will prove to be a lasting peace. While reading *The Zelmenyaners*, one must marvel at the fine line between Kulbak's love for Jewish folkways and his engagement in a revolutionary project, whose promises were already starting to break. Just two years after Kulbak finished the novel, he was murdered in Stalin's first wave of purges of minority cultural figures.

Moyshe Kulbak (1896–1937) is best known for his poetry, and it was poems like *Shterndl* ("Little Star") and *Di shtot* ("The City") that made him pop star famous in his day.[3] But considering the fame he once had, he is generally not remembered or read enough today, which makes this new translation of his only novel all the more exciting.

---

[3] For biographical information on Kulbak see Sasha Senderovich's introduction to the translation as well as Peckerar and Rubinstein, "Moishe Kulbak," in *Writers in Yiddis*h, edited by Joseph Sherman, in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *vol. 333* (Detroit: Gale, 2007).

Kulbak was born in Smorgon, today in Belarus, a city that was once well-known for a circus bear training academy (remembered in his poem *Asore dibraye* ["Ten Commandments"]). He lived in Smorgon and nearby Minsk until the string of chaos that was World War I, the Russian Revolution, the Civil War, and the Polish-Soviet War forced him away. (Minsk was on or near the front line of all of these conflicts.) During those years he taught in Kovno (Kaunas, Lithuania). In the early 1920s he moved to Berlin, where he spent a penniless few years learning at lectures, in museums, and especially in the cafes. He immortalized his time in Berlin in the mock epic poem, *Dizner Tshald Harold* (Childe Harold of Disna), which satirizes the decadence of Berlin from Kulbak's vantage point in the late 1920s.[4] When he could no longer stand his poverty, he moved to Wilno (Vilnius, Lithuania), where he became a popular teacher in the city's esteemed Yiddish schools and his reputation as a poet truly took off. Yet despite steady work and popularity, in late 1928 Kulbak decided to return to Minsk, which by that time had become the capital of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. In Minsk he held various positions at the Institute of Belarusian Culture (which had a Yiddish department) and continued to write. The first chapters of *The Zelmenyaners* were published in December 1929 in the Minsk monthly *Shtern* (*Star*), barely a year after Kulbak's return to the city.[5]

The new translation of *The Zelmenyaners*—the first complete translation of the novel into English—by Hillel Halkin and with a critical introduction and notes by Sasha Senderovich is both thoroughly enjoyable to read and invaluable on many levels. This translation is the first complete volume of Kulbak's work to appear in English. His poetry, novellas, and plays, can be found only in anthologies or have yet to be translated. The novel offers a rare view of Jewish life in the early Soviet period in Belarus, a place that briefly offered exciting opportunities for Yiddish culture.[6] Yiddish was an official language of the BSSR and people like Kulbak worked for a state-supported institute for the study of all aspects of Yiddish culture, paralleling and rivaling the work of YIVO across the border in independent Poland. The introduction by Senderovich frames the novel historically, culturally, and in the context of Kulbak's career. Senderovich's notes offer explanation of the intricacies of Soviet culture of the time, and illuminate the novel's linguistic diversity (Soviet Yiddish acronyms, Belorussian folksongs, and the code-switching between Russian and heavily Hebraized Yiddish that members of the family strategically employ). For lovers of Kulbak's poetry, the novel features many moments of his unique descriptions of nature, often poignantly contrasted with encroaching industrialization. The scene of a young couple in love (well, having an affair, at least), demonstrates the constant tension of Kulbak's writing:

> ער פֿאָרט מיט איר אויף אַ שיפֿל איבערן סוויסלאָטש און פֿון אַ פּאַפּירל עסן זיי
> פּיראָזשנעס. זיי שווימען אַראָפּ טײַך אונטן אַהינטער זאַוואָד „קאָמונאַר“, קושן זיי זיך און

[4] For a discussion and complete translation of *Dizner Tshald Harold*, see Peckerar *The Allure of Germanness in Modern Ashkenazi Literature 1833-1933* (dissertation), University of California, Berkeley, 2009.

[5] Senderovich, vii.

[6] On Soviet Minsk see Elissa Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013) and Barbara Epstein, *The Minsk Ghetto 1941-1943: Jewish Resistance and Soviet Internationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

> שווערן זיך טרײַהייט... דאָס סוויסלאָטש עטעמט קוים מיט די איבערגעפֿוילטע אַלטע קעץ פון זײַנע גרונטן. דאָס וואַסער איז אָנגעטאָן אין אַ דין הייטל, קאָלירט זיך מיט די שײַנען פֿון אַ רעגנבויגן. פֿון דער צווייטן זײַט, אויף די זאַמדיקע בערגלעך שטייען שטיבעלעך אַרומגערינגלט מיט קליינע סעדעלעך. אין די סעדעלעך בליט רויטער מאָן. אַ באַן יאָגט דורך קעגניבער אויפֿן בריק. לינקס סטאַרטשען די הויכע זאַוואָדישע קוימענס, וואָס שפּאַרן אַ שוואַרצן קנויליקן רויך. (באַנד 2, 163-64)
>
> He took her rowing on the Svisloch River. They ate pastries from a paper wrapper and floated with the current. Behind the Communard Factory, they kissed and promised to be true…The Svisloch breathed heavily with the rotted bodies of dead cats on its bottom. The rainbow-colored water had a thin crust. On the sandy hills on the far bank were cottages surrounded by gardens. Red poppies bloomed there. A train flew by on a bridge. Off to the left rose the high chimneys of the factory, belching spirals of black smoke." (226)

The river cannot be separated from the factory, nor the poppy-covered hills from the train tracks, not even for the sake of a love scene. In fact these contrasts are at the heart of Kulbak's satire. Every sentiment seems to include its opposite in this novel that has been criticized as both kowtowing to Soviet policy and as dangerously opposing it. Luckily for the reader of this translation, Halkin conveys much of the biting humor, as well as the moving poetry of Kulbak's pen.

In recent years, the world of Soviet Yiddish that was so long ignored by American academics and laypeople alike has been opening up, both through new scholarly work and translation. This translation joins scholarship by David Shneer, Anna Shternshis, Senderovich, Mikhail Krutikov, and Gennady Estraikh, among others. Collectively, these scholars are returning attention to accomplished and important writers like Peretz Markish, Dovid Bergelson, Izi Kharik, and Moyshe Kulbak.[7] Through this work, we can expand our understanding of the great blossoming of interwar Yiddish culture beyond what was happening in Warsaw and New York. Minsk and Moscow were the places where so many writers and cultural and political figures continued their work despite the growing restrictions and dangers of Stalinism. With the availability of *The Zelmenyaners* in English, we can only hope that interest in translations of Kulbak and his Soviet peers will increase, and that more of their work will become available soon.

At the close of the novel, no intervention from Kalinin arrives to save the courtyard from being demolished. The family instead attempts to salvage everything it can from the rubble. In the mock-ethnographic tone that the novel often takes, we are given a list of what the yard, and by extension the family, are reduced to:

> און אָט וואָס מען האָט אַרויסגעראַטעוועט אין לעצטן מאָמענט פֿון אומגעקומענעם רעבזעהויף: צוועלף קופּערנע פּענדלעך, אַכט טעפּ גרויסע, קופּערנע, זעכצן טשוהונעס,

[7] See for example: David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture*; Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union 1923-1939*; Sasha Senderovich, *Seekers of Happiness: Mobility, Culture, and the Creation of the Soviet Jew, 1917-1939* (forthcoming); Mikhail Krutikov and Gennady Estraikh, *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Work of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)* and *David Bergelson: From Modernism to Socialist Realism*.

> דריַי קופּערנע ליאַקן... דער פֿעטער פֿאָליע האָט פֿון וואַנט אַראָפּגעריסן אַ פּאָרטצעלייַנע טעפּעלע פון עלעקטרע און די מומע גיטע – אַ מזוזה פֿון טיר, אפֿשר וועט זיך נאָך אייַנגעבן אין די נייַע דירות אַרויפּשלאָגן ערגעץ אַ מזוזה. (באַנד 2, 224-25)

> This is what was salvaged at the last moment from Reb Zelmele's demolished yard: Twelve copper pans, eight large copper pots, sixteen cast-iron pots, three copper jugs. . . . Uncle Folye ripped from a wall a porcelain electric fixture, and Aunt Gita, a mezuzah from a door. Perhaps, in the new apartments that awaited them, there would be a place for it. (266)

In his introduction, Senderovich interprets these items, removed from their context and placed into a new transitory state, as "displaced markers of a family that is becoming both Soviet and Jewish. . . . the remnants of the Zelmenyaners' courtyard await their reinterpretation and recontextualization in the family members' new apartments, persisting beyond the old home's physical disappearance but with their final meaning deferred."[8]

We might also see these two items, the mezuzah and the electric fixture—electricity symbolizing Soviet innovation throughout the novel—as being changed by the comparison that is set up between the two. The electric fixture becomes a kind of symbol of a Soviet home, the way the mezuzah, *lehavdl*, symbolizes a Jewish home. It's a juxtaposition the novel has made in other places. Early on in the novel, when electricity had just arrived in the yard, a comparison is made between the way the family strings up the new electric wiring, "as if they were building—pardon the comparison [*lehavdl*]—a holiday sukkah" (41). The novel comically points out the sacrilegious crossover as the Zelmenyaners' Jewish traditions find ways to change and incorporate the new Soviet modernity. While the Zelmenyaners are certainly changed—sometimes with great difficulty and hardship—they also manage to inscribe their own meaning on the new world around them.

The mezuzah and the electric fixture, highlighted in the final scene of the novel, parallel the contest that exists between traditional Jewish life and Soviet power throughout *The Zelmenyaners*. But here at the end the electric fixture is taken, *lehavdl*, in the same spirit as the mezuzah. We know there is room for electricity in the Zelmenyaners' new apartments, but Aunt Gita hopes there will be room for what the mezuzah represents as well. The comparison suggests that there might even be room for breaking down the divisions between what had been seen as irreconcilable systems. Throughout the novel, the care and attention Kulbak takes in presenting both the idiosyncrasies of the Zelmenyaners and the innovations surrounding them might be read as expressing a hope that the newly created spaces of the Soviet Union will have room both for the transformative and liberatory power of revolution and for cultural heritage. The two need not be opposed. Unfortunately, Kulbak's vision of a revolution with room for culture and history, critique and ambivalence, did not fit his time and place. The new translation of *The Zelmenyaners* offers an important opportunity to encounter the work Kulbak and other Yiddish writers in the Soviet Union did to offer

[8] Senderovich, xxviii-xxix.

critique and synthesis, and question the direction of their culture and society from within.