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Jewish Identity in the Russian Cinema of early 1990s

Interest in all topics previously forbidden in the Soviet Union soared in the decade between 1988 and 1999. New films about Stalinism, purges, ethnic conflicts, youth subcultures, crime and corruption, often filled with sex and violence, flooded movie theaters. Soviet filmmakers rushed to use freedom of expression. Among films produced at this time, many were dedicated to Jewish subjects. Public interest surged, and enthusiasts started working on the revival of Jewish culture forming a wide range of public organizations. Filmmakers turned to Jewish classics, began addressing the topic of Jewry in Soviet society, and engaged in a discussion about themes, such as the Holocaust, and the Stalinist anti-Semitic campaign of 1948-1953 (Gershenson 206). Together with feature films, a number of documentaries and animated films were produced. Some gained popularity and have been well researched, others remained relatively obscure due to the collapse of the Soviet film industry. While several Russian and American scholars, like Miron Chernenko and Olga Gershenson wrote about select films, the Jewish presence in the Russian cinema of 1990s-2000s has not been discussed extensively. This paper addresses revisiting the Jewish past and envisioning the place of Jews in Soviet life in two award-winning films produced in the early 1990s, *Get Thee Out!* (Awards: the Nika award, the main national Russian cinema award, and the main prize of Open Sochi Russian Film Festival 1991) and *To See Paris and Die* (The Nika award, 1992), and works towards answering the question: How did

Soviet/Russian cinema present these topics and depict Jewish identity in that turbulent time?

After years of oblivion, Soviet directors attempted to reconstruct the life of both small Jewish towns, shtetls, and major centers, like Odessa in their films. They turned to Russian-Jewish literature, primarily to works by Isaac Babel and Sholem Aleichem. Sholem Aleichem was one of the most popular Yiddish writers for Soviet filmmakers, both in the 1920s and again during *perestroika*. While *Wondering Stars* (1991) and teleplay *Tevye the Milkman* (1993) are relatively straightforward adaptations of Sholem Aleichem, *Get Thee Out!* (1991), the first film I would like to discuss, is an unusual work of art that conveyed both the fears and the hopes of Soviet Jews during *perestroika*.

Get Thee Out! (*Izydi!* 1991) by Dmotriy Astrakhanis is loosely based on Sholem-Aleichem's *Tevye the Milkman*, and was influenced by works of Babel and Alexander Kuprin. The film depicts 48 hours from the life a Jewish family and takes place somewhere around the revolution of 1905. Made in 1991, the year when the Soviet Union collapsed after an attempted coup d'état, the movie reflects the apocalyptic sense of the imminent catastrophe.

The protagonist, Motl Rabinovich, is a successful Jewish entrepreneur who just received a license to expand his dairy business. He lives in the Pale of Settlement somewhere "close to Anatevka" (where Tevye is based), in a gentile village where he, his wife Golda, and members of their family are the sole Jews. Motl is hardly the pious Milkman from seen in *Tevye*, a Polish motion picture from 1939, or the Tevye who sticks to "tradition" from *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971). Motl is a strong, jovial, and smart man who not only manages his business well, but also helps local peasants, drinks on par

with them, and earns the friendship and respect of gentiles. He is a ladies man who does not mind spending a night with a woman of easy virtue, but he is a loving husband and authoritative head of a big household. Motl is not the only cinematic strong Jewish man of this period. Babel's noble gangster Benya Krik from the *Odessa Stories* became a character of three (!) films produced between 1989-1990. Motl lacks the gloss of the stylish Benya and his romantic criminal aura. He is an honest, hard-working man and does not lose his courage even after receiving threats like "Tonight there will be the end to all kikes" from Russian nationalists.

In the movie, Motl is not just a part of the ethnically mixed community, but also one of its pillars. He is respected, and after a local police officer receives an order to initiate a pogrom, he lets Motl know about it, and Motl's friends stage a pogrom in a hilarious sequence by ripping old pillows and throwing away junk that Motl gives to them. The playful reenactment of violence ends with Motl burning a toilet. After that, neighbors help him clean the house. This parody is done to fulfill the demands of the Tsarist government that promoted grassroots nationalist organizations and to save Motl by creating the illusion that a pogrom had just taken place. Physically, Motl cuts a striking image, he is a handsome, dark haired, bearded man who dresses in black. However, he is never shown praying or speaking Yiddish, two common methods of showing Jewish otherness in the films of that same period. For example, in *Exile* produced in the same year, a family of Jewish refugees who moves to Ukraine on the eve of the World War II is shown talking exclusively in Yiddish among themselves and in Ukrainian with their neighbors. Other films, like *The Art of Living in Odessa* (1989) or *Sunset* (1990), both based on works of Babel, are saturated with shot of rabbis,

congregations in praying shawls, Jewish weddings and funerals. In *Get Thee Out!*, Motl lacks any such distinguishing traits like a shtetl accent or outward signs of religious practice that would mark him as Jewish in his life. His hospitable home is open for all, and a Russian village headman is his best friend. Motl is so rooted in the village Astrakhan makes an effort to depict Jews as an integral part of this community that represents the idealized vision of Russian society.

To a degree, Motl is closer not to a shtetl Russian Jew, but to a Soviet Jew who despite complete emersion in Russian language and culture (and sometimes even baptized) was still singled out on the basis of his or her origins. This vision dramatically differs from alienated and even segregated relations between Tevye and his gentile surrounding in the eponymous Polish Yiddish film and even from the relatively friendly, but cautious attitude of Tevye to his Russian acquaintances in *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Motl, a symbol of masculinity, refutes the commonplace depiction of Jews as victims, typical for many films (Bartov). Throughout the film, Motl is haunted by visions of pogroms, shown in misty, dark colors: he envisions dozens of dead, orphans, raped women, and destroyed houses. In his nightmares, the pogrom-makers are hidden in the mist creating visual reference to *Night and Fog* (1955), an acclaimed French documentary featuring black and white images from German concentration camps. Astrakhan employs ahistorical symbolism and contemporization. The pogrom-makers come through fog on a truck with headlights on that looks like a demon of the upcoming revolutionary turmoil. A truck full of soldiers and sailors became a standard symbol of the Revolution in Soviet visual art. In a different scene, Motl sees a gang of pogrom-makers near a local tavern and notices that they are compiling lists with names and

addresses of local Jewish families. This is a clear reference to the major anti-Semitic organization of the late 1980s – early 1990s, *Pamyat'* (Memory). This ultra-nationalist party aggressively condemned a “Ziono-masonic plot”, and was one of many fascist groups sponsored by the declining Communist party. The rise of nationalist organizations became the main fear for Russian Jews and intelligentsia. There were consistent rumors that such groups were gathering information about Jews to be used for future ethnic cleansing (Chernenko 332). Despite this dark menace, film ends with a hint of hope. When the inhabitants of the village realize that the real, not staged pogrom is coming, they decide to hide Motl and his family. However, Motl refuses to run. As his family leaves, he grabs an axe and faces the pogrom-makers emerging from the mist. His friends and drinking companions, including the local policeman, join him in his last stand. This scene is the apogee of the movie revealing the main belief of Astrakhan and other members of intelligentsia: Russian people will oppose the emerging fascist movement and will not remain passive if violence begins. In many ways, this movie carries old ideals of the international solidarity of peoples that was promoted by Soviet propaganda machine (but was never realized in the Soviet Union, as shown in another film I'd like to discuss).

The film is hardly a historically correct portrayal of Jewish life and should be viewed as a parable. It reflects a fear of violence that could flood the quickly deteriorating Soviet Union and expresses a hope for tolerance and faith in the good nature of its citizens who could prevent tragedies similar to the ones that would happen after break up Yugoslavia, another multiethnic Socialist country. Mixed Soviet (ideas of internationalism) and Biblical symbolism (Motl as Samson who stands again invaders)

emphasize the spiritual confusion of the late Soviet society as Soviet ideology collapsed and future was filled with aspiration and dread.

To See Paris and Die (Uvidet' Parizh I umeret', 1992) by Alexander Proshkin deconstructs this vision of international solidarity. The film takes place around the 1960s. Elena, a strong woman, who poses as a widow of a war hero, lives in a communal apartment shared with several neighbors and works hard to ensure her only son, Yuri, a talented piano player, will achieve success. Mother and son are very close and Elena, an overprotective, defensive mother, skillfully manipulates Yuri by making him feel guilty. Her main goal is to help Yuri to play a concert in Paris, and she admits that visiting Paris was her lifelong dream, completely unachievable for the majority of the Soviets. Elena wants to provide her son this opportunity. Proshkin shows an anti-Semitic environment where both officials and common people despise Jews. Officials label them "Frenchmen" and Elena's neighbor call them yids. Elena is no different from others and loathes Jews like almost every character in the film. When she realizes that her son wants to marry Katya, a Jewish girl, she states that she can't stand an idea that her grandsons could be Jews, that Yuri will ruin his career by connecting with a people that have such a longstanding history of persecution. She uses all her influence to make Yuri marry a Russian girl, who later appears to work for the KGB as an escort girl for foreign revolutionaries visiting the USSR. Despite his mother's efforts, Yuri ends up marrying Katya, and Elena commits suicide.

However, Elena is not just an anti-Semite. As the film progresses, Elena's true history is discovered. She hides from everybody the fact that her father, a prominent doctor, was executed during the purges. Elena was arrested and spent years in the

GULAG. Yuri's father was not an army doctor, but a criminal who helped Elena to survive in labor camps. Finally, her neighbor who unsuccessfully courts Elena discovers that Elena comes from a Jewish family and her grandfather was a rabbi. Her anti-Semitism is a defensive device in a society where not only preserving a Jewish identity but simply being born to a family of which even one of the parents is a Jew means ruining the chances for a career and always being considered a second-class citizen. Elena learns that her son's rival is disqualified because his mother real name is Sarah and he is a "hidden Frenchman." Researchers like Olga Gershenson have noted that in Soviet society Jewish identity was a matter of "biology" and was associated with ethnicity or *natzional'nost'*. Information about a person's ethnicity was displayed in passports as well as a wide variety of documents necessary for all parts of life¹. This notion of identity had nothing in common with religion and self-perception, and mostly secular Soviet Jews were seen from the point of view of blood, like in the Third Reich.

The film has many references to Elena's Jewishness before it is revealed. Her overprotective motherhood reminds of the Jewish mother stereotype. Elena poses for an old dissident artist who paints victims of the Nazi concentration camps. An anti-Semitic neighbor of Elena kills a sparrow by asphyxiating it with gas in a communal oven (in many parts of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus sparrows are named yids). At the end of the film, Elena after being blackmailed and forced to have sex with the neighbor who threatens to reveal her Jewish origin asphyxiates herself in the very same oven.

¹ Compare with a bitter joke describing Jews as having "article five disability". Fifth article was a field of ethnicity in Soviet documents. Apart from Jews, minorities like Volga Germans or Crimean Tartars, were also victims of discrimination.

To See Paris and Die is a multidimensional movie that deals not only with issues of anti-Semitism, but also creates an honest representation of Soviet life showing gender relations, corruption, the ubiquity of the all-powerful KGB, and the squalor of everyday existence. In this pessimistic take on Russian-Jewish relations and identity in the Soviet Union, Jewishness is presented like an incurable infectious disease. It reflects a Soviet reality in which many people tried to reject and mask their ethnicity by changing their names, alter ethnicity in documents, to Russify themselves: intellectuals did so by embracing Russian culture and religion and common people hid their origins in order to protect their children from discrimination. This was true not only for Jews, but also for Crimean Tartars and Volga Germans. *To See Paris and Die* portrays the tragedy of grandchildren of Motl and Tevye. Their fathers' and mothers' generation embraced revolution and its ideals that promoted the construction of an equal and just society. After the reinstatement of unofficial anti-Semitism in the 1940s, Soviet Jews again became victimized and this produced a generation of self-hating and self-rejecting Jews. No wonder that original script of the film was named *Antisemika (A (Female) Jew Hater)*.

There is still a hope in the end of the film. The last sequence shows the Red Square, the revived Russian tricolor flag, and posters advertising the upcoming performance of Yuri. The tone of this sequence is one full of hope. Instead of usual military parades, workers are erecting a stage for the Jewish musician who will play in the heart of the new Russia. While high hopes of building a free society were never realized, that period of liberty and aspirations allowed for the revival previously

forbidden topics and creation of compelling works of art that dealt with Jewish Russian experience.

Despite the massive Jewish emigration after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1990s, Jewish cultural life experienced a revival, particularly in Russia and Ukraine. After decades of anti-Semitic policy, Jewish characters, traditions, and themes reappeared in films during the Perestroika – for the first time since a relatively brief period in the 1920s, when showing the life of minorities emphasized the equality of nations and tolerance that was being promoted by the Bolshevik regime (Goldman 30). Some film directors like Dmitry Astrakhan turned to Jewish classics and used to works of Babel and Sholem-Aleichem to bring a new perspective to the current issues of nationalism and the place of Jews in the Soviet and post-Soviet society. Others, like Alexander Proshkin, shed a light on purges and their victims and portray everyday anti-Semitism that caused Jewish mass immigration of the 1980s.

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