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Polish Shtetl Through The Soviet Eyes: Mikhail Dubson' *Border (Old Dudino)*

In the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution, Jewish culture in Soviet Russia experienced a surge. Jews achieved emancipation, and the Pale of Settlement ceased to exist. For over a decade, the Soviet government promoted a policy of cultural autonomy to win loyalty of Ukrainians, Belarusians, Jews, Tartars, and other minorities. Known as nativization (*korennizatsiia*) this policy allowed creation of art that was considered national in form and socialist in content. This allowed creating dozens of films aimed at millions of Soviet Jews. Soviet Jewish cinema consisted of films about the Jewish experience under the Tsarist oppression; films about Jewish revolutionaries; films that dealt with contemporary topics, such as anti-Semitism; and films that showed Jewish life abroad, in Poland and, with rise of Nazism, in Germany. Jewish culture in the Soviet Russia was secular and Yiddish-centered. It rejected religion, Hebrew, and resisted Zionism while promoting socialist ideology.

Soviet Jewish cinema included several films that dealing with Jewish life and identity in the Soviet Union. Such films helped to preserve character types and scenes that were disappearing from Jewish life – *klezmer* musicians, matchmakers (*shadkhn*), schools (*kheyder*), teachers (*melamed*), and wedding rituals. Some films, like *Jewish Luck* (1925) or *Laughter through Tears* (1928) based on Sholem-Aleichem stories were exported abroad and are rather well known. One of more obscure films, *Border* (1935), became the last one to show the life in the shtetl and was one of the handful Jewish-themed sound films. Filmed after Stalin obtained total control over

Soviet Russia when nativization policy was being cancelled, it depicted the-life of a small Jewish town in Poland. How does this film show portray Jewish life and how did the Soviet ideology affect this portrayal?

I History of the Film and its Reception

Border (Granitsa), also known as *Old Dudino (Staroe Dudino)* and was produced in 1933-1935 by Mikhail Dubson. There are few other films created in Soviet Russia which presented the shtetl with such rich depiction of Jewish life and rites, including religious scenes that take place in a synagogue. It shows common people, clergy, a klezmer band, and even a sympathetic young Zionist girl. The film has a powerful musical score based on traditional Jewish music and Hasidic religious songs. *Border* contains scenes with cantor singing and has detailed shots of synagogue interior, and a scene of a Black Wedding (*shvarze kasene*), a mysterious ritual performed on a cemetery. A few Jewish films, with the possible sole exception of the world-acclaimed *Jewish Luck* by Alexander Granovsky, had such an impressive cast. Among actors were: Vasiliy Toporkov (actor and later professor in MKhAT), Nikolay Cherkasov (*Alexander Nevsky, Ivan Grozny, Don Quixote*), Sergey Gerasimov (*The Overcoat, Deserter, New Babylon*; later a prominent film director), and Benjamin Zuskin (*Man from the Shtetl, The Seekers of Happiness Unvanquished*). Many actors and crewmembers had Jewish background, including camera operator Wolf (Vladimir) Rapoport and composer Leib (Lev) Pulver. The latter wrote a score for *Jewish Luck* and major plays of the Moscow State Yiddish Theater, including an acclaimed version of *King Lear*. Some actors, like Zuskin and Val'iano played prominent parts in the last Jewish-themed motion picture of the Stalin era, *The Seekers of Happiness (Iskateli schast'ia 1936)*. Information about *Border* and its director is

very limited. *Border* is mentioned in several works about Jewish cinema and culture; it is briefly discussed in such important book as *The Bridge of Light* by J. Huberman. In Russia, the only major work that deals with *Border*, is *Red Star, Yellow Star* by Miron Chernenko (Chernenko, Krasnaia zvezda, zheltaia zvezda), a valuable overview of Jewish films and characters in Soviet cinema from 1918 to 1991. Recently surfaced copy of *Border* sparked an interest in this semi-forgotten film that serves as an important historical and cultural artifact of Jewish cinema and life in the Soviet Union.

Mikhail Dubson was born in a Jewish family in Smolensk. In 1916 – 1920, he studied law at the Moscow University (Shul'man 87). He was a secretary of Maxim Gorky (Zharov 112) . In 1925-1930, he worked in Germany in a Soviet trade mission where he discovered German cinema and concurrently became an assistant at two German studios. In 1933, after his return to the Soviet Union, he became a producer at Lenfilm (Leningrad). After *Border* he filmed *Big Wings (Bolshie kryl'ia 1937)* which was harshly criticized by Soviet cinema officials. He was arrested in 1938 but was lucky to be released in 1939 and worked as a legist. He filmed his last effort, *The Storm (1957)* only during the Thaw. Dubson died in Leningrad on March 10, 1961.

Border, together with *Shadows of Belvedere (Teni Belvedera 1926)* and *Dream (Mechta 1941)* is one of several films portraying life of Polish Jewry from the Soviet perspective. *Shadows of Belvedere* emphasized hypocrisy and anti-Semitism of the Polish elite, and *Dream* showed Jewish and Ukrainian dwellers of Lwów (Lviv) under Polish rule. *Border* is the only one that included detailed scenes of shtetl life. Shimon Chertok in his article praises the film as “perhaps the finest Jewish sound film of the Soviet period” (Chertok). Chernenko wrote that it was the most outstanding “Jewish” sound film in the Soviet Union (Chernenko, Krasnaia zvezda, zheltaia zvezda). The film stirred significant controversy and was initially prohibited. Among its supporters was then-

powerful chief of the Soviet movie industry Boris Shumyatsky who praised it to Lazar' Kaganovich and Stalin. Most importantly for the survival of the film, Maxim Gorky highly praised *Border*: "It is a great work... Everybody plays remarkably well. The types are like Chinese figures carved out of bones... Excellent ending: the guards are being beaten while someone plays an accordion... It has lots of humor, and it is poignant, touching humor. I consider this piece as good as *Chapayev*. Maybe its social meaning even higher..." (Mezdu molotom i nakoval'nei 410) Gorky was particularly happy with the Black Wedding scene; he emphasized the excellent portrayal of the main antagonist, a rich entrepreneur Novik, and the main tagline of the movie "Why do Jews live like normal people just 4 kilometers from here?!"

II Plot analysis

The movie takes place in a small town, Old Dudino, located 4 kilometers (4 *versty*) from the Soviet border. Its inhabitants suffer from disease, hunger, poverty, and unemployment. A rich Jewish capitalist, Novik (Poslavsky), runs the place: he owns a factory and hires only gentile workers, telling Jews that all gentiles are anti-Semites while Jews suffer from poverty and unemployment. Boris (Val'iano), a Jewish revolutionary, narrowly escapes death in the hands of Polish soldiers. He finds a refuge in a house of his father, a deaf cobbler Tuwim (Toporkov). Boris' sister Anya, a young Zionist, tries to gather money to pay a Jewish smuggler to lead Boris into safety of the Soviet Union where Jewish kolkhoz prospers across the border. Novik's bookkeeper, Arye (Zuskin), a fiancé of Anya, helps to connect Boris and poor Jewish artisans with revolutionary factory workers and their leader, charismatic Eugeny Karlovich Gaidul' (Cherkasov). Both sides are able to overcome old prejudices spread by oppressors, although initially Arye thinks that "<Workers> are strong people who drink vodka and curse Jews. The master said many times: they

all are anti-Semites.” After Novik finds out about Boris’s whereabouts, the police arrest Boris, Anya, and their father. Meanwhile, due to the epidemic the shtetl Jews have become restless. To avoid the unrest Novik and rabbi organize a Black Wedding of Tuwim (who is temporarily released from prison together with Anya and Boris for the ceremony) and Machla, a crippled old woman. During the ceremony, gentile and Jewish workers assault police officers guarding Boris. Wounded Boris manages to escape, but Anya is killed while trying to help him. Finding that his daughter is dead, Tuwim kills a police officer. Arye leads Tuwim to safety across the border, but returns to rejoin revolutionaries in Old Dudino.

Soviet cinema began as a tool of propaganda. The very first Soviet film aimed at Jewish population, *Comrade Abram* (1918) served as a tool to promote the Bolshevik ideas of internationalism and ethnic equality. Brilliant early Soviet film achievements, like Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) or Vsevolod Pudovkin’s *The End of Saint Petersburg* (1928), in addition to their artistic merits and innovations, also carry a strong political message. Like most films of this period, *Border* is a piece of propaganda and should be viewed as such. It is not a documentary account about Jewish life in the shtetl, but a fictional film shot mostly in Leningrad-based Lenfilm, unlike *Laughter through Tears*, or *The Return of Nathan Bekker*, films that included some actual footage from shtetls. As times were changing, images of run-down towns became acceptable only for depicting life abroad, but not in the Soviet Union. It has a typical set of stock characters: an evil capitalist, a clergyman (rabbi) who spreads the opium of the people, a brutal chief of police (in this case a captain of the Polish counterintelligence) with his henchmen, brave and clever revolutionaries, oppressed workers, etc. Both versions¹ of the title, *Old Dudino* and

¹ A relatively typical practice for the early Soviet cinema; for example, a Ukrainian film about a Jewish tailor had four different titles: *Glaza, kotorye videli; Motele-idealist; Motele Shpindler; and Naivnyi portnoi.*

Border, point to the main issues of the film. Old Dudino signifies the old ways things are run in this shtetl. For the Soviet leadership that saw Poland as an “ugly product of Versailles”² it was important to provide a highly critical vision of this country. Like Tsarist Russia, Poland oppresses its peoples: the shtetl suffers from poverty, disease, and unemployment. An unnamed plague is an important motif of the film. People are dying because of some disease, as different characters state on multiple occasions. Novik complains that he loses profits by giving horses to haul coffins to a cemetery. The rabbi mentions that inhabitants are starving and dying, and “there are no old people left” in the shtetl to perform the Black Wedding. This ritual was believed to ease such events as epidemics by arranging a wedding in the cemetery for two people who were poor, or disabled, as this was considered a *mitzva* (good deed). Of course, this unnamed disease has an additional meaning: it symbolizes capitalism that plagues all countries, except the Soviet Union. Both Jews and non-Jews are unhappy and unrest is in the air. According to the Communist agenda of that period, only united efforts of workers and peasants regardless their ethnicity could create a momentum to overthrow corrupted national governments and join the socialist family of peoples. The film promotes the international ideas of Lenin and Stalin. As hopes for the world revolution faded, in the second half of the 1930s Stalin proclaimed his theory of Socialism in one country. In 1924, however, Stalin in *Foundations of Leninism* wrote: “For the final victory of Socialism, *for the organization of socialist production, the efforts of one country, particularly of such a peasant country as Russia, are insufficient.* For this the efforts of the proletarians of several advanced countries are necessary.” (Stalin) According to the Bolshevik ideology, Old Dudino will

² The statement of Molotov Statement after the fall of Poland, as quoted in *Legitimacy and Force* (1988) by Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, p. 49

become New when Jewish and non-Jewish proletariat abandon centuries-old bigotry and unite to fight their class enemies.

In this context, *Border* stands not only for the Soviet-Polish border, but also signifies a deep divide between Jews and non-Jews artificially enforced by oppressing forces, like the Polish government and Jewish capitalists. This shattered world is divided between ethnic groups and classes. Interestingly, Dubson does not give an image of the Soviet Union. Characters talk about the world across the border, some like the rabbi and Novik with annoyance, some with longing, but even Arye who actually travelled across the border to save the old cobbler Tuwim from police fails to describe this land. He admits he is at a loss for words and only mentions that “Life is livable there...” and just hums a song he heard on the other side. This creates an otherworldly impression, like life after death in this Soviet paradise.

Films showing foreign workers or activists frustrated with social issues during the Great Depression and finding a safe haven were not uncommon. *Deserter* (1931), *Gorizont* (1933), and the only Soviet Yiddish talkie, *The Return of Nathan Bekker* (1933) told stories of American, German, and Jewish workers who emigrated to the USSR. Ironically, the Soviet Union was a sort of underworld for the border crosser. While not all Soviet frontiers were guarded efficiently, crossing the border was punishable by death (or 10 years in prison) starting 1934³. Most likely, the fate of Tuwim in real life was unenviable.

³ “ПОСТАНОВЛЕНИЕ от 20 июля 1934 года О ДОПОЛНЕНИИ УГОЛОВНОГО КОДЕКСА РСФСР СТ. СТ. 58-1А, 58-1Б, 58-1В, 58-1Г .”

The film opens with a scene in the synagogue. This sequence is like a window in the Jewish past of the Pale. Dubson tries to show hypocrisy of religion that was typical for the Soviet art during that period. Not surprisingly, the film has its share of antireligious propaganda: the rabbi is an obedient supporter of the rich who is busy with empty scholasticism (“All you can do is explain with what hand you need to blow one’s nose according to Talmud”). A cantor who chants prayers with tears in his voice at the same time winks and nods to a gentile woman in the window. In the synagogue, people gossip, men stare at women, although everyone tries to show religious zeal. Novik’s wife, Feyga, admits that prayer books are in Hebrew, which she and other Jewish women don’t understand. Her daughter asks when they should start crying to prove their devotion, and Feyga explains that the cantor will give them a sign. In the next shot, Dubson shows close-ups of faces wet with tears implying the congregation’s insincerity and falseness. At the same time, several scenes take place at the synagogue admitting its central role for Jewish life. The film depicts cantor chanting a central prayer of the service, *kedusha* (Murav), men are shown studying sacred texts and wearing traditional religious clothing elements (yarmulkes, prayer shawls, *tallit*, and *tefilin*, little boxes with hand-written quotes from Torah). Religion may be the opium for the people, but unlike other Soviet Jewish films, in *Border* it exists as a component of everyday life – albeit life across the border.

Major characters of the film bear meaningful names. The nouveau riche capitalist is named Novik, a Slavic root for “new”, and a common East European last name. His name, Tsalal, stands for “dark” in Hebrew and is supposed to reflect his dark exploitative nature. The Jewish revolutionary Boris sounds strikingly similar to a Russian word meaning “struggle.” Jewish artisans are named after Hebrew patriarchs, kings, and prophets from the Old Testament: Moses, Jacob, David, and Samuel. An old crippled woman, a bride chosen by Novik and rabbi for the Black Wedding is called

Machla, a name that means “disease” in Yiddish. The bookkeeper’s name Arye is a diminutive of Ariel, a name of a sprite, or a spirit of air in European literary tradition (i.e., *Tempest* by Shakespeare and *Faust* by Goethe). To a degree, this represents Arye in the beginning of the film, a man of air, *luftmensch*, who works with immaterial numbers, unlike artisans and workers who are shown working in their shops and at the Novik’s factory. At the same time, Ariel in Hebrew mean “lion,” and Arye becomes a strong and dedicated Bolshevik as he joins revolutionaries, helps to smuggle Tuwim to the safety behind the Soviet border, and returns saying that there’s a lot left to be accomplished in Old Dudino.

Maya Turovskaya distinguished several essential myths in cinema of totalitarian regimes, including the myth of a strong leader, myth of a hero, myth of collective unity, myth of a traitor, and myth of an enemy (Turovskaya 29). *Border*, as a piece of propaganda, includes some of these myths, i.e, it shows heroic revolutionaries; unity of workers; and class enemies. Every small episode is used to strengthen the ideological message. In the sequence showing Jewish artisans, a watch repairer keeps assembling and disassembling his watches, because he likes to work, but there are no jobs neither for him, nor for other Jews: time has stopped in Old Dudino. One of the stressed points of the film is a refrain “Why Jews live like normal people just 4 kilometers from here?” repeated multiple occasions. In a short episode in the synagogue, dramatically lit worn-out poor Jew in despair yet again asks this question hitting himself in a chest like a passionately praying *tzadik*, coughing and sobbing. However, such episodic characters are portrayed even more vividly than the protagonists, and are more interesting for contemporary viewers who could see skillfully reconstructed pieces of everyday life in shtetls all around the ex-Pale of Settlement.

The important asset of the film is the mellow Sholem-Aleichem style of humor that makes the film stand out from a long list of revolutionary propaganda films. Apart from the brutal Polish counter intelligence officer, all Jewish characters are evocatively presented and often portrayed with a sense of humor. *Border* features a gallery of individualized portraits unlike many films of that era, for example, *His Excellency* (1927). This silent movie was dedicated to Hirsh Lekker, a Jewish worker who tried to kill a Vil'no governor after the latter ordered flogging of political inmates. *His Excellency* featured strict Bolshevik leaders, a Jewish martyr, a fanatical rabbi and a ruthless anti-Semitic governor, all of whom were presented in a symbolic, single dimensional manner. In *Border*, even antagonists live on the screen. For example, the main villain Novik feels he has to brag about his success in front of the shtetl Jews so he has to endure a cold draft from the window to make sure everybody sees his abundant table. He gives lusty looks to his wife and even tries to touch her in a sexual manner, something hardly imaginable in the puritan Soviet cinema. He complains about a nightmare he had: "I dreamt that Old Dudiono is now called Voroshilovo and my factory is no longer mine, it's called after [a revolutionary from the shtetl] Boris Bernshtein." Novik tries to hide the fact that he is illiterate and he has to call his lazy daughter to read documents. His wife is sarcastic: "As usual, you forgot your spectacles in your office and text is too small for you." Dubson makes Novik not an ordinary capitalist bogeyman, but ridicules him. Novik and Feyge look like a film version of Tevye the Dairyman's ideas of rich life⁴. Other characters are memorable as well. The rabbi communicates mostly with gestures, humming, and interjections. Arye sings numbers as he fixes Novik's accounting books. Jewish artisans awkwardly fight with each other while a tailor sprinkles them with water from his mouth to try to pacify his comrades. Later,

⁴ Compare with Tevye's description of rich man's life: "... living in the middle of town, in a huge house with a real tin roof, and lots of wings, and all kinds of rooms and alcoves and pantries filled with good things, and my wife Golde, a regular lady now, walking from room to room with a key ring in her hand... high and mighty, with her pearls and double-chin..." (Aleichem 29)

viewers learn that they rehearsed a struggle with police officers since none of them had any fighting experience. A tailor concludes the fight saying “I’m a tailor? I’m a gladiator now!” All these elements help to envision real people and create comic relief.

Conclusion

Like Zionists, Bolsheviks envisioned the transformation of discriminated shtetl Jews into physically strong workers and farmers. This conversion is portrayed in *The Seekers of Happiness* that was filmed a year later and showed a Jewish family from some unnamed foreign country moves to the Jewish Autonomous Region; they become experienced hunters, shepherds, and farmers in the rich land given to Jews by comrade Stalin in the Far Eastern region of the Soviet Russia. Jews from Old Dudino could easily be envisioned as characters from *The Seekers of Happiness*. The ideological goal of *Border* was to show how under party guidance, diaspora Jews could organize and become fighters and revolutionaries. This denial of the *Old Dudino* is shown through the awakening of the Jewish proletariat that reaches its peak during the Black Wedding in the fight with the police. Everyday shtetl life was supposed to serve as a grotesque background of the inevitable liberation of labor.

Border is an ideologically correct movie, which followed contemporary trends. It is far from being a major revolutionary blockbuster. What makes it special are events and characters that Dubson and other cast members who spent their youth in the Pale of Settlement smartly noted and conveyed as remnants of a passing epoch. Preservation of the shtetl environment and images of its people became much more important than Dubson may have imagined. Still, his attention to

detail preserved the semi-ironical, semi-nostalgic image of Yiddishkeit that would cease to exist in less than five years after the film was made.

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