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“One’s Entire Life among Books”: Soviet Jewry on the Path from Tanakh to Library

Translation by Stephen Scala

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The bibliocentrism of traditional Jewish culture is well known, and its various manifestations—the foundational role of the Tanakh for all Jewish literature, the place of Tanakh studies in religious education, the significance of education and bibliophilism in society, and the image and functions of the Torah scroll in ritual practice, among others—are well studied. This article seeks to consider the place of the Tanakh, religious books, and books in general in the culture of Soviet and post-Soviet Jewry from the end of the 1910s to the start of the 2000s. This was the culture of a declining, nearly moribund and then re-emergent Judaism; simultaneously, it was a culture that, even if only in part, formed and established the Soviet intelligentsia; finally, it was the culture of a doleful and proud national minority that, though keeping a low profile, forgot nothing. The sources used here are of personal provenance and include memoirs, and, above all, oral histories: several hundred interviews with Soviet Jews born between 1910 and 1940 (principally Ukrainian, but also Russian, Belarusian, Moldavian, and Baltic), which were recorded in the 1990s and the 2000s. The interviews are drawn from the archive of the Kyiv Ju-

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daica Institute, specifically the collections “Witnesses of the Jewish Century” and “Jewish Fates in Ukraine,” as well as portions of other collections. For context, Zelenina has incorporated ethnographic interviews conducted at the end of the 2000s and the start of the 2010s housed in the archive of the Center for Biblical and Judaic Studies of the Russian State University for the Humanities.

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“The Remnants of *Yiddishkeit* Are Lost Approximately in the Fourth Generation”

Before addressing the decline of Jewish bibliophilism, we must sketch out the backdrop for this process by depicting the dynamics of religiosity among Soviet Jews in the prewar and postwar years.¹ The level of adaptation to the new Soviet reality and the degree to which tradition was preserved varied considerably in relation to several factors, above all one’s place of residence and generation. The regions annexed to the Soviet Union just before or immediately after the war (Northern Bukovina, Transcarpathia, the Baltics) are a case apart—on the eve of the war, traditions were observed in these areas as they had been 20 years prior in Soviet territories. Jews typically distanced themselves more swiftly from religion and tradition in cities, especially large ones, while a traditional way of life was preserved longer in small towns. The older generation (the grandmothers and grandfathers of the interviewees) was religiously observant, nearly without exception: they went to synagogue, celebrated religious holidays, kept the Sabbath, observed kashrut, and wore traditional clothing. The generation of the parents of the interviewees exhibited a certain amount of diversity in this regard: their adherence to Judaism depended upon their place of residence, as well as on their professional life and their gender—many of the interviews reference the phenomenon, so characteristic for crypto-religious groups, of preponderant female participation in the preservation of ritual practices. Many respondents note that their mother was

1. On the cultural-religious profile of early Soviet Jews, the convergence of “speaking Bolshevik” and “acting Jewish,” the variable relationship between “new” and “old” as well as “active” and “passive” identities, and the formation of a synthetic Soviet-Jewish identity, see Rothenberg 1972; Gitelman 1991; Altshuler 1998, especially 89–102; and Shternshis 2006; as well as numerous local case studies, including Beizer 2007; Zeltser 2006; Zeltser 2007; and Bemporad 2008.

“more pious than father,” that she was the one in charge of holiday celebrations, and it was from her (and/or grandma) that they learned of traditions (Interview with Mikhail Anatol’evich Rossinskii 1997; Interview with Mikhail [Rakhmil’] Iur’evich Shmushkevich; Interview with Naum Markovich Balan 2003).² This phenomenon can be explained by the gradual annulling of the Jewish public sphere, for example, through the closing of synagogues.³ As a result of this, tradition retreated into the private, domestic sphere (the kitchen, holiday meals, etc.), where women were in control. This phenomenon can also be explained by the fact that women were more loyal to older family members, their parents above all, and thus preserved traditions. In addition, many mothers did not work outside the home (older interviewees typically relate that their mother was a homemaker), and children interacted with them more and observed their behavior to a much greater extent than the behavior of their fathers.

There were also parents who were revolutionaries, ardent Communists, and, correspondingly, strident atheists; but even individuals who generally adhered to tradition oftentimes neglected this or that commandment, including for economic reasons, and did not seek to inculcate tradition in their children, partially for the sake of their greater integration into Soviet society. Interviewees frequently recall that their parents “didn’t force them to do anything” (Interview with Dina Shuevna Dukhan), as they understood “it was simply a different time, and they, being demoralized both morally and materially, were no longer in a position to shape the fate of their children and left everything to [...] chance, so to speak” (Interview with Anna Efimovna [Khantsiia Khaimovna] Limonnik). One of the older interviewees relates the following episode, which attests to the extraordinary flexibility of his family members:

Our family was intellectual [*intelligentnaia*] and clerical, but also modern. [...] [Father] gave us latitude, not complete freedom and not officially, but let’s say ... he shut his eyes. And we, all the children, were grateful to him our entire lives. [...] At the age of 13, it came time for my bar mitzvah. I understood that I wouldn’t be able to complete all these rites, going to the synagogue, tying these little straps, these so-called phylacteries, around my arms. [...] [Grandma] heard me praying and asking God to free me from this obligation [...]. The next day, the one after that, the one after that, I noticed that they weren’t reminding me to prepare for my bar

2. Interviews cited without dates are undated in the original source material.

3. On this process in Leningrad see Beizer 1999.

mitzvah, there was no talk of it. A long time passed like this—two, three, four months. Then later I found out that Grandma [...] had told Mama, Mama had told Papa ... At any rate, he didn't remind me about it through all the years that followed, and they forgave me for not fulfilling the obligations of a pious Jew [...]. On the contrary, I became a big-time activist at the workers' school ... (Interview with Natan Iosifovich Shapiro 1995).

Education facilitated secularization: Jewish schools that in one way or another familiarized their pupils with tradition were closed in the course of the 1930s, and the children carried on their education in atheistic Russian or Ukrainian schools.

In retrospect, the interviewees tend summarily to deny or downplay their parents' religiosity (the remark "they weren't fanatics" is particularly popular), although further description typically makes clear that their family was fully observant (Interview with Shmushkevich; Interview with Iosif Abramovich Bursuk 2002). The level at which traditions were observed in many interviewees' families can be identified as a declining intermediacy, between the "kosherness" of their older family members and the complete secularity of their children and grandchildren. The latter, however, may, particularly in conditions of emigration, return to "kosherness," or even go all the way to "fanaticism" (Interviews with Anna Iosifovna Ivankovitser, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2007 [CBJS]; Zelenina 2012b).

The traumatic experience of war, and especially the Holocaust, bolstered two contradictory tendencies among Soviet Jews: a national-isolationist one ("never forget" and "stick together with one's own") and an assimilationist one (Gitelman 1997; Arad 2009; Gitelman 2014). They were manifested in various social and marriage strategies, but in both cases the level of traditional observance dropped, with the rare exception of purposeful crypto-Jews, such as the Chabad.⁴ As a consequence of the war and genocide, small towns were destroyed—homes, synagogues, ritual items, and books—and along with them the entire small-town way of life. Large families were thinned out, particularly at the expense of the older generation, who were the most observant and who served as the bulwark of tradition and were least capable of bearing the strains of occupation or evacuation:

4. For Soviet Chabad memories, see Shekhter 2014. Shekhter unduly standardized his sources and subjected them to overly literary editing, which has resulted in a rather problematic historical source, yet one that nevertheless provides a depiction of the worldview and values of this group and its relationship with the state.

All was lost in the war. It wasn't until after the war that we didn't celebrate holidays, that assemblies were no longer held, that the entire family was gone (Interview with Ida Moiseevna Gel'fer 1995).

In the second half of the century, identity was maintained through social intercourse and marriages among Jews, observance of certain rites—particularly circumcision (Zelenina 2012a)—solidarity in the face of anti-Semitism, and solidarity with Israel (which coexisted with indifference toward Judaism).

In the 1990s, a renaissance of Jewish life began in the former Soviet republics, but it typically did not involve the rebirth of local traditions, but rather the importation of external ones—whether Israeli, Chabad, or others. Interviewees evaluate this occurrence positively, but do not view it, naturally, as the closing of the circle and the return to the prewar way of life, although reverberations of the latter have been preserved and integrated, to one degree or another, into the new Jewish life. One interviewee, an intellectual from Kyiv who studies Jewish history, reflected upon the topic of the decline of tradition and shared his “approximate estimate”: “*Yiddishkeit* is lost already in the first generation. But the remnants of *Yiddishkeit* are lost approximately in the fourth generation” (Interview with Kh. Kantor 1997).

Below we shall consider the decline of religious bibliophilism among Soviet Jews and investigate how the role and place of the Tanakh and other central texts of Orthodox Judaism changed and what came to replace them.⁵ The interviews allow us to uncover who read the Tanakh and its surrogates and with whom and under which conditions this occurred, as well as what they learned from their reading of it; or, to use the terminology of Michel Foucault and Roger Chartier, the interviews shed light on strategies and tactics of appropriation (Chartier 2006: 14, 198ff.).

“Either the Bible or the Gospels—Some Hefty Book Like That, I Don’t Remember Anymore”

A minimal selection of religious books (the Pentateuch, a prayer-book, special prayer-books for holidays) was an attribute of every tradition-

5. We have decided to use the term “Tanakh” throughout the body of this translation for technical accuracy in English whenever the authorial voice is used, even though the more ambiguous Russian “Bibliia,” frequently rendered “Bible,” is used in the vast majority of cases in the original. In quotations from primary source material, we have rendered the term “Bibliia” as “Bible” in order to distinguish it from the much rarer mentions of the term “Tanakh” in the primary sources. — Translator and editors.

al Jewish home; a wider corpus of religious literature (the Tanakh—i. e., Prophets and Teachings in addition to the Pentateuch—the Talmud, and later Halakhic works) was an attribute of a Jewish home of at least some education. The representatives of the older generation—the grandparents of the interviewees born in the 1930s or the parents of the interviewees born in the 1920s—particularly in non-Soviet areas, owned and made use of the Tanakh, and in this capacity—as a part of the family library and as an object of reading and discussion among older family members—the Tanakh and other “holy books” (*sifrei kodesh*) became fixed in the interviewees’ childhood memories:

Papa had a magnificent library, there were books in leather bindings, which was something incredible. [...] holy books! [...] I remember them: they were these big books, just in leather bindings with golden embossing, remarkable books (Interview with Shapiro).⁶

A change in reading practices from the generation of grandparents to the generation of parents is evident, and the further secularization of these practices among the generation of the interviewees themselves can be discerned:

- Grandma had religious books.
- *Did your parents have secular books?*
- Yes, Grandma Betty had various books, she read a great deal. My parents had secular books (Interview with Leonid Grigor’evich Averbukh 2003).

Having grown up in these kinds of families, my parents, even though they spoke Russian, couldn’t completely tear themselves away. Papa was a doctor, he got his degree in 1926 from the Kyiv Medical Institute, he would sit together with his father and they would discuss which medical recommendations are in the Talmud. So, Papa knew the Talmud, but it didn’t get passed on to me (Interview with Kantor).

The family Tanakh had one more function, one that naturally diverged from its traditional function (since the editions in question were not

6. See also: Interview with Debora Iakovlevna Averbukh 2001 (“Father was very educated. All the way up to the war, we had a wonderful library in Hebrew”); Interview with Ernest Ishaevich Gal’pert 2003 (“The Talmud, the entire set, then the Chumash, the Tanakh—we had all the Jewish literature in its enormity at home”). In numerous other interviews, the Tanakh and Talmud are mentioned as books that were kept at home (Mark Grigor’evich Golub, Irina Davydovna Sadynskaia 1997, among others).

traditional ones, but rather bilingual and illustrated editions): an aesthetic-recreational function, the Tanakh as an artistic album, as an object of beauty.

Father acquired [...] a Bible with a red cover with illustrations from Doré [...] This was a splendid edition of the Bible, in Hebrew, with the script in Hebrew and old high German, not even in Russian. But I grew up with this Bible because a child would get sick, there weren't any vitamins, no food ... As soon as I would get sick, they would place this Bible in my lap, so I remember all the Bible stories as depicted by Doré. Doré's illustrations are such splendid drawings that still haven't been surpassed (Interview with Elizaveta Moiseevna Usherenko 2002).⁷

Some interviewees—primarily older men (born in the 1910s or 1920s)—mention the Tanakh (Interview with Mikhail Tsalevich Loshak 1994; Interview with Evgenii Moiseevich Geller), more often the Torah or Chumash (Interview with Nikolai Izidorovich Shvarts 2003; Interview with Ernest Ishaevich Gal'pert 2003; Interview with Shapiro) and Rashi (Interview with Abram Iankelevich Krupnik 1998), as subjects in school. Even some who studied the Torah in a cheder do not exhibit bibliographical precision (below we shall consider cases of considerable confusion among younger interviewees, including women), perhaps due to the imposition of generally accepted Christian terminology (Old Testament, New Testament) upon traditional Jewish terminology (Chumash, Nevi'im, Ketuvim, Gemara):

[G]randma took me to a cheder [...] I studied Hebrew, then we read various Bible stories—now when I think about it, it wasn't the Old Testament, it was, most likely, a compilation of the history of the Jewish people. For example, to this day I remember this really strange story ... [he proceeds to tell the story of Sodom and Lot's wife] (Interview with Samuil Davidovich Sukhenko 2001).

Boys from more well-to-do families, and girls as well, did not go to cheders, but rather studied Hebrew and the Torah at home, with a melamed (Interview with Leonid Shapsovich Mar'iasis 2002; Interview with Isai Davidovich Kleiman 2003), a rabbi (Interview with Ge-

7. In addition, the Tanakh is elsewhere described as “a very pretty book” with “pretty pictures” in the interview with Evgeniia Grigor'evna Krishtal' 2002.

nia Peretiat'ko 1998), or their fathers (Interview with Anatolii Petrovich Shor; Interview with Peretiat'ko):

— *Did everyone go to a cheder?*

— The rebbe came to us, but boys definitely went to the cheder. [...] But the rebbe came to the girls. I was four or five, I too had to sit at the table when the rebbe with the white beard [...] came. The girls sat and studied, while I crept under the table and pinched the rebbe's legs (Interview with Gel'fer).

The terminological distinction is noteworthy: the interviewees typically call what they had at home and studied at the cheder—the Tanakh in book form—the Chumash (the Pentateuch), while they call the Torah scroll they read at synagogue the Torah. It was the scroll that boys were summoned to for their bar mitzvah, and this is another type of childhood memory connected with the Tanakh:

The day came [...] father took me to the synagogue, I put a tefillah on my head (it's this little box), a second on my arm, and I attached it to my left arm with a little strap—to keep it short, they took out the Torah and I read aloud for the whole synagogue [...] This was the custom. My coming of age (Interview with Miron Il'ich Chepovskii 2000).⁸

But more often—especially in the case of women (girls did not go to cheders, and poor families could not have a rebbe come to their home) and younger interviewees (born in the second half of the 1930s, when Jewish schools were closed)—the Tanakh came to be known via oral transmission from parents or grandparents. In many interviews, the grandmother acts as the main conveyor of tradition to the grandchildren (she typically lived longer and socialized more intimately with the children and grandchildren), if not the main bearer of tradition (this could also be the grandfather):

Papa would tell many stories from the Bible, tales, anecdotes (Interview with Anna Grigor'evna Rysina 2008 [CBSJ]).⁹

Grandma prayed, she had the Bible with her. Grandpa knew everything. Whenever I asked him something, for example: “Grandpa, tell me about

8. See also interview with Shor; Interview with Bursuk 2007 (CBSJ).

9. On the topic of “Tanakh legends” as told by one's father, see also interview with Gel'fer.

Samson and Delilah”—he would tell me all about it. He would tell me the story not from the opera, but on the basis of Scripture, the Tanakh. He knew everything (Ol’ga Rapai-Markish 1998).¹⁰

She would always tell me stories, I would join her in bed—she was in bed most of the time. [...] The Bible, she knew the Bible by heart. Her vision was no longer very good. I would ask Mama: “Mama, grandma can’t even see. How does she pray every day, looking at the Bible and reading?” Mother says: “No, she simply knows it all by heart” (Interview with Klara Lazarevna Dovgalevskaia 2001).

In the process of oral transmission and out of concern for safety, the Tanakh underwent certain tendentious changes, which may be labeled atheization:

They would tell us some tales, stories [...] they even would tell us things from the Bible, but very carefully, very carefully. [...] They didn’t draw our attention to what the Bible is, what it represents, what God is, what this is. There was no talk of this (Interview with Iurii Kliment’evich Pinchuk 1998).¹¹

When speaking of traditions, holidays, and ethical norms, the interviewees often see the Tanakh as their source, which is sometimes true, sometimes false, but the contention is rarely based on familiarity with the text:

It’s written in the Bible: a man comes and asks you for alms. It doesn’t matter whether it’s a Jew, a Russian, a Gypsy or a Moldavian. All the same, you have to give them (Interview with Moishe Khaimovich Frimer 2011 [CBSJ]).

Jews are given names on the basis of their parents’ or family members’ names [...] this is a law, Jews aren’t named arbitrarily, this is written in the Torah (Interview with Ruvim [Grigorii Vladimirovich] Gitman 2009 [CBSJ]).¹²

10. See also interview with Basia Gutnik.

11. For other memories of how the Tanakh was passed on orally “as either tales or stories,” see the interview with Rimma Markovna Rozenberg 2003; Interview with Lazar’ Veniaminovich Sherishevskii 2003.

12. Few interviewees proved sufficiently knowledgeable to differentiate between the Torah and post-Tanakh tradition and to determine that this or that practice was “not included in the Torah,” that “the rabbis dreamed it up,” and those who could were naturally

We see that the Tanakh, which has given rise to various traditions and faiths, serves as a universal “legitimizer.” The obverse also holds true: stories from the Tanakh are told without reference to the Tanakh, and post-Tanakh (aggadic) stories are told without reference to Midrash and other sources, simply as authentic histories. Both scenarios seem natural for a community where Scripture maintains its authority, but where intimate familiarity with it has been lost, and the “scribes” have lost control over the knowledge of the “flock.”¹³

* * *

In the Judaism in decline practiced by Soviet Jews, certain ritual, especially culinary, practices (holiday menus were painstakingly reproduced) were better preserved than the practice of reading and studying Scripture. This can be explained through both the loss of the books themselves—in the inferno of war and the Holocaust, and also as a result of moving (due to evacuation or peaceful causes such as a work assignment, study, service or Communist construction projects)—and the forgetting of the language. A further reason was the dominant role of women in clandestine domestic religious observance and the transmission of tradition, given that Jewish women did not participate in the public reading of the Torah and were not obligated to study scripture and Talmudic literature (some rabbinical authorities even consider it forbidden) or to know Hebrew.¹⁴ The proverbial “women’s” position is expressed, for instance, in the following statement, although it was made by a rather young interviewee:

— *What does the Torah mean for you?* [...]

— I don’t know. For me the Torah is something radiant. [...] What can it mean for me? I didn’t read it in the original. And if I had read it, how do I know whether I would have understood it? I just have a good feel for [Judaism]. To me it seems that certain impressions are true, on an

among those who were able to go to a cheder or a Jewish school or who studied at home with a rabbi (Interview with Lazar’ Mikhailovich Gurfinkel’ [CBSJ]).

13. Or for a community where there is a great gap between “the people” and “the scribes.” The existence of Bible stories as folklore (“the people’s Bible”) is well-researched in the Slavic context (see, for instance, Belova 2004), and in recent years research on the topic has also been conducted on the basis of expeditions to former shtetls.
14. See, for instance, the individual articles in Wolowelsky 2001 as well as Fuchs 2014, a new in-depth survey of the various positions within Judaism (ancient to modern) on the question of religious education for women.

intuitive level. It's not knowledge. [...] Though they say that for a Jewish woman it's completely sufficient to be a good wife, a good mother, and she'll go to heaven. For men it's more difficult (Interview with Elena Kasavina 1997).

But it would be erroneous to presume that this position was held universally by Soviet Jewish women, and all the more for their mothers and grandmothers. Grandmothers, as previously mentioned, are frequently recalled as a source of deep knowledge of the Tanakh, gained through reading, not oral transmission of tradition; some grandmothers read the Talmud, too. In the following example, a description of two grandmothers, the differentiation between book-based religiosity, which was associated with great piety, and basic (mechanical?) observance, is noteworthy:

Mama's mama, Grandma Etl, never parted with the Talmud. She was very pious. And Grandma Khaika always observed all the Jewish traditions, but didn't display particular piety. But she observed the traditions without fail (Interview with Efim Shoilovich Zhornitskii 2002).

Women who did not know Hebrew (just like their male counterparts) made use of special editions of the Tanakh in Yiddish translation, the so-called *taytsh-chumash*:¹⁵

[S]he had a prayer-book, it was called the *taytsh-chumash*, it was in Hebrew here and a Yiddish translation there, the first upper half was Hebrew and the lower half was Yiddish. Well, of course the children—there were two of us [...] would sit next to her and listen to her pray, she would pray out loud. So, by the time I reached adolescence, I had memorized the content of these prayers, starting with the day the world was created, and for a long time in my life, a long time, I remembered just those images starting with the day the world was created—the story of Adam and Eve, their sons, all the way up to Moses, and then the story of the Exodus (Interview with Anna Efimovna Limonnik).

15. That is, *taytsh* (the Yiddish word for the German language, then Yiddish, and also commentary) plus *chumash* (the Pentateuch). The books of the Tanakh and prayer-books were translated into Yiddish as early as the early modern period, and the Yiddish translation included a commentary, hence the word *taytsh* taking on a corresponding meaning.

Until the universal closing of Jewish schools in the mid-1930s, girls born in the 1920s were able to study at such schools and gain a certain knowledge of the Tanakh, including in an unconventional manner: they staged stories from it.¹⁶ Some even recall studying at the Holy Pentateuch Talmud Torah (Interview with Sura-Dora Nisman) or using connections to get into a cheder (a primary school for boys):

Aside from the gymnasium ... there was also a progymnasium there [...] and a Jewish school for poor children. When the war started brewing, it wasn't possible to send me to the progymnasium, you had to pay a lot. I could have been sent to the poor Jewish school, but they wouldn't accept me. It happened that I wasn't rich enough for the progymnasium and I wasn't poor enough for the Jewish school. I thus wasn't able to go to any school, and I was already eight years old. Then they decided to send me to a cheder because, for people who were so pious, it was a great tragedy if children weren't educated at the proper time, and how. But the cheder didn't accept girls, only boys went there. But thanks to the fact that Father had good friends in the synagogue who held sway with these melamed types, they prevailed upon the melamed to allow me to be enrolled in the cheder together with one other girl so I wouldn't be alone. It was just under one condition: that we wouldn't be beaten (Interview with Limonnik).

* * *

One symptom of the forgetting of “holy books” is loss of familiarity with their titles. A minority of the interviewees uses the appropriate terminology—Tanakh, Chumash, Gemara—typically those who went to a cheder or a Jewish gymnasium for school, as well as the children of rabbis. Some interviewees recall and use these words (owing to Yiddish folklore and songs, for example), but do not remember their correct meaning:

[Father] was well-educated in this regard, he knew the Tanakh—this, this is the highest teaching, yeah. It's even some kind of philosophical teaching, the Tanakh (Interview with Polina Iakovlevna Leibovich 2004).
 — At some point there were rebbes, they studied Hebrew, studied the Gemara, the Chumash. At home, in the cheder.
 — *What is the Gemara?*

16. “They put on pageants in Hebrew. Even though we didn't know Hebrew, it was a Bible story, as far as I know. Since they wrapped up the children ... with paper, with costumes made of paper, and they wove garlands from multicolored paper flowers [...] my joy knew no bounds” (Interview with Anna Efimovna Limonnik).

- The Gemara is prayers.
- *And you said something else, too. The Gemara and what?*
- The Chumash. [...] This is the same. It's Jewish prayers to God. It's also history, it's Bible stories. There's this one song [...] A mother sings a lullaby to her child. Sleep, my boy, my babe. [...] Soon you'll go to a cheder and you'll study the Chumash and Gemara, and soon you'll be betrothed, you'll be betrothed, but now you've wet yourself (Interview with Esfir' Borisovna German).

I remember, there was rebbe Iankl, who taught me. [...] I had learned to read, [...] so I went on to study translating, the Chumash—this meant “to translate” (Interview with Iakov Abramovich Driz 2002).¹⁷

Various surrogates—sources of knowledge about both Tanakh history and the Jewish people as a whole—came to take the place of the Torah and its manifold, partially forgotten names, which were left behind in childhood. First, the Gospels:

When I turned eight years old, Father decided that I had to know Russian, so they sent me to a parochial church school. [...] I read pages from the Gospels, and I developed a passion for the Gospels. I started studying hard, I knew the Gospels well, and I still know them well, and I later studied the Gospels. And the Gospels led me to atheism [laughter] (Interview with S. D. Sukhenko).¹⁸

In the Soviet period, I didn't read the Bible, I didn't read it. But sometimes its words struck me, their harmoniousness, their succinctness. The start of the Bible goes, “In the beginning was the Word.” You understand? It's so succinct, expressive, deep, musically powerful (Interview with Mikhail Saulovich Turovskii 2001).¹⁹

Second, there are the Jewish “classics”—Sholem Aleichem, Isaac Babel and anecdotes:

17. See also the interview with A. P. Shor, who likewise has difficulty explaining what the Chumash, which he covered in his cheder, is.
18. This is an atypical, though not unique, case: some other interviewees recall parish schools as the basis of their education or that of their parents.
19. “In the beginning was the Word” is actually the beginning of the Gospel of John, not of the Tanakh. — The editors.

I only knew about the Torah from the stories of Sholem Aleichem. I only knew about kashrut, which was never observed in our home, from anecdotes (Interview with Berta Solomonovna Trakhtenbroit 2002).

We didn't purposefully deny our roots, but we knew very little about them. With no little effort my wife got hold of a book by Babel, so we could read it. We no longer had any living ancestors to tell us stories, though my wife's grandma enlightened us a bit (Interview with Simon Nusievich Gonopol'skii 2003).

Paraphrases of the Bible, authored primarily by Zenon Kosidowski,²⁰ as well as "Biblical" novels were available only to the urban intelligentsia:

S.G., a convinced atheist, knew the Pentateuch well and, as it happens, condemned Thomas Mann for his excessively impudent treatment of the Torah in *Joseph and His Brothers*. He liked neither this novel nor *The Master and Margarita*. I lapped up both books, but I didn't dare say it out loud since at that point I still hadn't read the Bible and, perhaps, hadn't even seen a copy of it. My sources for Biblical history were the Hermitage and Zenon Kosidowski's popular book from 1963 *Tales from the Bible* (by the way, at that time it was very difficult to obtain the Bible. It wasn't sold in bookstores) (Maz'ia (Maz'ia n. d.), unpublished manuscript).

"I'm a Member of Three Libraries"

Starting in the 1930s, religious literature is gradually supplanted by *belles lettres* (the Russian classics and foreign fiction), and the paradigm of traditional, if not Orthodox, behavior is supplanted by the paradigm of "culturedness" (*kul'turnost'*), which by definition included a cult of reading and being "well-read" (*nachitannost'*). Not so much chronologically as in terms of meaning, secular Jewish literature, including Yiddish authors like Sholem Aleichem, Mocher Sforim, and others, served as an intermediate literary corpus—between the Tanakh and Pushkin (or Jules Verne). Older family members collected and read these books in Yiddish:

20. Zenon Kosidowski (1898–1978) was a Polish writer and the author of popular scholarly works, including paraphrases from the Old and New Testaments (accompanied by some critical analysis). Both books, *Tales from the Bible* (1963) and *Tales from the Gospels* (1977), were translated into Russian and were reprinted numerous times in the USSR.

[Grandma] was, by and large, an interesting woman. You could talk to her about many things because she read so much. [...] She read different types of literature, including Yiddish literature. This included, naturally, Sholem Aleichem, Bialik, Frug, etc. (Interview with Rimma Markovna Rozenberg 2003).

My papa, as soon as new Jewish books in Yiddish appeared, would immediately buy them. Even though this was a bit risky for him since he was the head of a division in the district [*okruzhnyi*] hospital and they, of course, kept an eye on him. [...] Maybe he didn't even always read them. But how could that be? It's a Yiddish book, a Soviet book, and he's not going to have it at home? (Interview with Kh. Kantor 1997).

The national “statistics” which affirm that the works of Sholem Aleichem were an indispensable attribute of every Soviet Jewish household that was in the slightest intellectual are well known.²¹ Our sources indeed confirm Soviet Jews' love for this central writer, but it should be noted that the works of another author were also indispensable in these households: those of Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin. One may say that Pushkin—who, in respect to significance, the position of principal book in the home, and tradition, occupies the top spot on any list of books—supplanted the Tanakh. Without exception, the interviewees include Pushkin in the long descriptions of their home libraries. He invariably leads the list of classic Russian and Soviet authors (Tolstoy, Nekrasov, Chernyshevsky, Korolenko, Kuprin, Gorky, et al.) and popular foreign novelists (Walter Scott, Dumas, Sienkiewicz) (e. g., Interview with Viktor Semenovich Fel'dman 2003; Interview with Motel Goren 1998). But Pushkin is often mentioned singly, as one's favorite author, or together with Tolstoy (the main poet and the main prose writer) or Lermontov (the two main poets). Entire poems by Pushkin were learned by heart and, in the absence of books, passed on to one's children, like the Tanakh, through oral transmission:

21. It is difficult to define this group precisely and objectively, since professional and social status did not always adequately reflect one's cultural level, whether due to difficulties stemming from the war, among other circumstances, or due to anti-Semitic discrimination in education and job placement. Permit me one example of this incongruity: A. E. Limonnik, a machinist by profession, requires many paragraphs to describe her reading preferences and uses expressions like “equilibrium” (*paritet*) and “indifferent.” (*Indifferentnyi* — a foreign borrowing that sounds much more literary in Russian than does its English equivalent. — The editors.) On the integration of Sholem Aleichem into Soviet literary canon see Estraiikh 2012; Krutikov 2012.

- Pushkin is my favorite [author].
- *Which of his works?*
- I like them all (Interview with Fenia Aronovna Kliaiman).

Well, my mama knew Lermontov and Pushkin very well by heart. So, even though we didn't have the books, I absorbed them by listening (Interview with Khana Davydovna Bronshtein 1995).²²

As has been observed, the universal Pushkinization of literary tastes in the prewar Soviet Union was not an arbitrary occurrence, but rather purposefully inculcated and far from unique to Jews.

The mythology of Pushkin's invisible presence in the USSR at the end of the 1920s and in the 1930s ("Pushkin is part of our lives and the construction of our culture") is certainly comparable with analogous forms of the sacralization of Lenin. [...] Pushkin is the chief in the assembly of Russian poets, a martyr who perished "in the struggle against autocracy," one of the patrons of the new Soviet Russia (Panchenko 2005: 539).

But in the case of Jews, one substitution is especially apparent: Pushkin is cited on questions central to both narrative and life; that is, Pushkin, in the role of primary referent, supplants the traditional Torah. One interviewee, for instance, was in a POW camp, where he at first found himself in a storage barn that seemed ready to collapse at any moment. He was taken from there and placed in a column, where everybody was ordered to remove their pants. He was about to be exposed as a Jew, but this did not come to pass as the storehouse collapsed and everyone rushed over to it:

I wouldn't call it good fortune; it was misfortune that actually helped. For when the entire roof collapsed on the wounded, everyone who happened to be under the beams, of course, was crushed. And I was there at the time, so I either could have been shot or I could have been crushed by the roof, but that's not how things turned out—like Pushkin wrote: "But Eugene was by fate preserved" and so forth (Interview with Leonid Borisovich Serebriakov [born Vol'f Kagan] 1998).

22. On knowing Pushkin by heart, see also: Interview with Efim Shoilovich Zhornitskii 2002; Interview with Lazar' Veniaminovich Sherishevskii 2003; Interview with Dukhan.

Some interviewees attempt to connect Pushkin, as a representative of the pantheon and simultaneously as “a part of our lives,” to their family history: “Just think. Pushkin lived in Kishinev at that time, and my great-grandma had already been born. A link in the chain of time” (Interview with Boris Grigor’evich Molodetskii 2003). One interviewee takes a volume of Pushkin, her most precious book, with her during evacuation—Pushkin, not the Torah, which, as we are able to discover, was also in this interviewee’s library:

Our father left us a wonderful library. It was lost during the war. The only thing that was saved was a volume of Pushkin that I took with me during the evacuation. It then returned with me to Odessa. [...] The mama of my brother’s classmate, Iasha Shikhtman, had given me a Bible as a gift before the war. It was one of those where one page of text was in Russian and the other was in Hebrew (Interview with Berta Solomonova Trakhtenbroit 2002).

Veneration of Pushkin and deep knowledge of his poetry marked the entrance of our protagonists and their parents into the ranks of the Russian-speaking intelligentsia—first under the Russian Empire, then in the Soviet period. Hereby, the object being read is not always of relevance—it might be a Russian, Soviet or foreign classic, it might be an adventure novel, political economy²³ or even the press²⁴—the culture of reading itself is what is important: regular reading practices, begun in early childhood, the scope of what is read (“being well-read”), the presence of books in the home, visiting the library, being informed of the latest literary news. All this, in particular, distinguished a member of the urban intelligentsia from a small-town Jew with an accent.²⁵ Here are but a few of the dozens of declarations of love for books and of devotion to ‘binge reading’ (*zapoinoe chtenie*):

23. Interview with Dukhan: “[My husband] wound up with a group, Jews incidentally, drunks, and lived in some kind of cellar with a cot, but he would spend entire days in the library studying Marxism-Leninism.”

24. Interview with Rimma Markovna Rozenberg 2003: “[Grandma] didn’t work, but she was very well read. She read newspapers without glasses until the last year of her life.”

25. An example of this sort of disassociation from small-town life: “Some of the workers were very much ... from small towns. The small town had left its stamp upon them. They were, nevertheless, sufficiently cultured, it was just their appearance that gave them away, and their accent a bit” (Interview with Dukhan). On the contempt of the Soviet Jewish intelligentsia for small-town culture, which was “associated with a provincialism combining a primitive range of interests with self-assurance and a certain insolence,” see Krutikov 2010.

I started reading when I was 4 years old. I learned to read from newspapers left lying on the window-sill, and I learned to read by myself, I read in Russian and in German (Interview with Rimma Markovna Rozenberg 2003).

I was already following those writers I liked, whether prose writers or poets; I followed their creative doings and their works which were published for a broad audience (Interview with Anna Efimovna Limonnik).

Mother read a great deal. My brother acquired such unique books, I don't know where he bartered for them. [...] My brother attached a little battery and a small lamp to himself and read under the covers since my parents objected to reading. We got drunk on reading [*chitali my zapoem*], we read a great deal (Interview with Debora Iakovlevna Averbukh 2001).

When I was still in school, I read a great deal, generally speaking I read a great deal. Literature is my habitat (Interview with Shifra Sel'evna Gol'dbaum 1997).

The epithet “well-read” is often encountered in our interviewees’ descriptions of themselves or their family members, followed by passion for reading as the second (if not the first) trait, even if there are only two total. For example:

- [Grandpa] was engaged in some sort of business, all I know is that he was *well-read*, was seen as an authority, provided counsel to all. [...] [Grandma] was small, very energetic. *Well-read*. [...]
- *Tell me about your mom.*
- She *read* a great deal. She was pretty. [...] Our clothing was quite modest, but we were satisfied with life. I don't recall any grumbling at home ever, we had many *books*, we *read* a great deal (Interview with Simon Nusievich Gonopol'skii 2003; emphasis added).

On the one hand, this cult of reading both manifested itself and was perceived as an inheritance of Jewish bibliophilism, simultaneously on the personal, familial, and cultural levels: Jewish religious tradition demanded, in theory, universal literacy, which gave rise to the habit and love of reading, and ancestors possessing this trait passed it on to their descendants:

Well, I know that before the revolution all children of Jewish nationality were literate and certainly went to school, to a cheder, including grandma. But she only learned to read Russian when she was 52. She read a great

deal, she loved to read, sitting at the window with her glasses on her nose, a footstool beneath her feet (Interview with Luiza Abramovna Kagosova).

We fired our stove with the husks of sunflowers. [...] And [Grandma] and I sat for hours and poured these husks into the stove. [...] And during this time she told me Bible stories. [...] I know that she was religious, and she was very well-read [...] She awoke in me interest in reading literature (Interview with Simon Nusievich Gonopol'skii 2003).

On the other hand, the cult of reading manifested itself as part of the “culturedness” ideal, formulated by Soviet propaganda in the 1930s in the context of the attempt to build a “new man,”²⁶ which was maintained in the following decades.²⁷ The concept of culturedness comprised various everyday, behavioral, ideological, and intellectual components: from personal hygiene and new standards of consumption to the struggle against “linguistic unculturedness” and political vigilance. Reading²⁸ was encouraged along two lines—broadening one’s horizons and proper organization of one’s leisure time, under which was understood, aside from reading (including at the library), visits to concert halls and theaters, engagement in sports, and excursions into nature. The interviewees frequently draw a picture of their free time that corresponds to these priorities. Sometimes, of course, this is the result of their natural tastes and desires, perhaps inculcated from childhood. At other times, this appears to be a rather idealized description, a demonstration of “correctness,” and perhaps the fruit of systematic autodidacticism (“I tried to inculcate in myself ...”). Cultured free time, including reading and purchasing books, was also seen as a required part of raising children:

We traveled around the entire southern coast of Crimea and photographed it. Then, when I went to a mineral springs resort, I took [the children] with me. [...] I tried to inculcate in my son, my wife, and myself a love of nature and beauty. We read a great deal, we subscribed to many magazines, and we had

26. On the concept of “culturedness,” see Fitzpatrick 1992 and Volkov 1996 as well as local studies of the same phenomenon, for instance Klimochkina 2006.

27. “And although this movement was not officially revived after the war, many cultural imperatives continued to be realized on the level of everyday life, including in the 1950s, transforming the norms of cultural life into commonplace customs. When this occurred, people simply forgot about culturedness, as you don’t talk about something habitual, and continued to speak in general of culture” (Volkov 1996: 211).

28. “The book must be the most powerful means of instruction, mobilization, and organization of the masses for the tasks of economic and cultural construction” (“Postanovlenie TsK VKP (b),” 1931).

interesting friends. [...] Then we all became passionate about subscribing to thick journals. My wife tried so much to get them that sometimes we denied ourselves food in order to buy some of the available the books. [...] Our son grew up very well-read (Interview with Simon Nusievich Gonopol'skii 2003; see also: Interview with Efim Shoilovich Zhornitskii 2002).

The source of books—the library—is the most important cultural locus in the life narratives of Soviet Jews. In their memories of childhood, home libraries, primarily of their grandfathers and fathers, figure prominently; in their memories of adolescence, these are joined by public libraries, which are dominant in the memories of their adult years as well. The 1930s to the 1950s was a period when Soviet public libraries flourished (Dobrenko 1997), fulfilling both their primary function and, given the deficit of other forms of entertainment, the function of a club. Finally, in the epoch of Jewish rebirth in the 1990s, “Chesed”²⁹ libraries and libraries of other Jewish organizations appeared. These “generations” of libraries sometimes flowed into each other:

— *Did the library of your grandfather, the rabbi, survive?*

— No. [...] It was transferred to the library of the Academy of Sciences sometime after the rabbi died, perhaps even while he was still alive, around 1926 or 1927 (Interview with Lev Evgen'evich Drobiazko 2001).

Father had the most splendid library. He was a great lover of books, and it was books that made him human. [...] [During the evacuation] we lived in Serdobsk, a rather solid merchant city where there was the most wonderful library. The reason for this, most likely, was the confiscation of many private libraries (Interview with Larisa [Klara] Aleksandrovna Rozina).

When I was leaving for Israel, [a friend] gave me a large library of Jewish books by Jewish writers. I kept a few Jewish books for myself, but I gave the rest to the Jewish library in our community. [...] I view these books as sacred objects (Interview with Ida Moiseevna Gel'fer 1995).

Many interviewees or their family members—mainly women—worked in libraries, work which granted high social status and numbered them among the intelligentsia, in their own eyes as well as others’:

29. The name or a part of the name of the Jewish charitable centers created in the 1990s in many cities of the former USSR (*chesed* is Hebrew for “kindness”).

My aunts sang in the famous Leontovich choir. One of them was the head of a Ukrainian library. [...] They were considered part of the intelligentsia and everyone listened to them (Interview with Efim Shoilovich Zhornitskii 2002; see also Interview with Rimma Markovna Rozenberg 2003 and Interview with Rakhil' Davidovna Shabad 2004).

Librarians and bibliographers themselves speak of their activities with notable self-regard:

I graduated from the institute in 1947 and began working in the oblast scientific library. I've been working in this library from '47 to the present day (Interview with Berta Solomonovna Trakhtenbroit 2002).

I so adored my medical institute, the medical institute where I worked, I was the head of the bibliographical division (Interview with Sarra Solomonovna Shpital'nik 2004).

I was the head bibliographer. [...] I slept four hours a day because I always came in with a mountain of books and read and acquainted myself with them. [...] It was extraordinarily interesting work! I can be proud: I worked in the library for 52 years, and for 52 years I was happy to go to work every morning. Things didn't work out this way for everyone (Interview with Viktor Semenovich Fel'dman 2003).

Assessments of the profession change with the following generation, the generation of the interviewees' children, when the salary of librarians employed by the state becomes insultingly low:

My daughter worked in various libraries, both children's libraries and otherwise. The last seven years she worked at a medical institute. [...] When her salary came to equal what she spent on riding the bus to and from work, she gave it up, even though she worked as the head of the professors' reading room (Interview with Boris Grigor'evich Molodetskii 2003).

“Two Years Ago, I Read the Torah with Great Pleasure”

All the internationalization of Jews' cultural horizons and reading preferences notwithstanding, Jewish identity certainly was in evidence prior to perestroika, but more in national-political than cultural-religious terms: Soviet Jews compiled “libraries of classic Russian authors of Jewish nationality” (Interview with Natan Iosifovich Sha-

piro 1995), cultivated an interest in Israel, read *Exodus* by Leon Uris (Interview with Lev Evgen'evich Drobiazko 2001), and, given the absence of a suitable literature, developed the habit of utilizing hostile discourse—by reading between the lines:

[My husband] would buy all the books like *Caution: Zionism!* [Iu.S.Ivanov, Politizdat, 1970] and read them very carefully. He would take certain phrases, like “they think that they allegedly,” and cut out all the nonsense, like “allegedly.” Then the phrase had a completely different meaning. [...] This is how he obtained information on Israel. He also would take newspapers that scolded us, likewise cut them up, and between the lines understand how things were actually going (Interview with Larisa Aleksandrovna Rozina).

The situation changed with the advent of the Jewish revival in the post-Soviet space in the 1990s (Gitelman 2003, 2012; Aviv and Shneer 2005; Friedgut 2007): religious-cultural identity was revived, or rather began to be fostered anew, and the Torah returned to bookshelves—of Chesed libraries at least. Many interviewees note that they began to read the Torah “quite recently,” “two years ago,” “in retirement” or “when Ukraine gained independence” (Interview with Grigorii Isaakovich Stel'makh; Interview with Kh. Kantor 1997; Interview with Zel'da Aronovna Lerner 1997; Interview with Shifra Sel'evna Gol'dbaum 1997; Interview with Rimma Markovna Rozenberg 2003). Some reflect upon how their interests in things Jewish changed in comparison with the Soviet period:

Grandma told us Bible stories, too. Now, in the mid-1990s, I have read these stories in the Bible myself. This didn't interest me before. Though everything that happened in Israel always interested us, and we took joy in its successes and triumphs (Interview with Efim Shoilovich Zhornitskii 2002).

The revival was built upon supports different than the declining underground observance of Soviet times. If the key concepts at that time were family, privacy, prohibitions, and traditional cuisine, then in the 1990s these became communality, publicness, positive injunctions, and new ritual dishes.³⁰ Tradition is not so much reborn as it

30. On the replacement of the traditional East European Hanukkah dish—potato pancakes (latkes)—with Israeli doughnuts (sufganiyot), see, for instance, Amosova and Kaspina 2010: 26.

is imported, and the books involved in the religious revival are not those editions of the Tanakh from one's grandfather's or father's library. Those have most likely been lost, while the Cheseds "give out" (Interview with Moris Shiff 2006) "new" copies of the Torah and prayer-books. And secularized elderly Jews' attitude toward them is typically far from a traditional one: to them it is "pleasant to read," they view it as a "most magnificent literary-historical work," as fine literature "of the highest sort," as a "very insightful book" (Interview with Shiff; Interview with Leonid Moiseevich Dusman 2003; Interview with Kh. Kantor 1997). Some, however, draw greater inspiration—they apply stories and images from the Tanakh to themselves, that is, they reproduce the essence of the traditional Jewish relationship with the Torah: the Torah remains eternally relevant, all contemporary events are merely a renewal of Biblical archetypes:

Our names: his is Isaak and mine is Rimma, that is, Riva. And Riva is Rebecca. So, when we began reading the Bible, *and we began reading it fairly late in life [ne tak rano]*, we reached the conclusion that we are the descendants of the Biblical Isaac and Rebecca. [...] Since ours is a friendly union and we have been married already for 50 years, this means that it's not a coincidence and it's a blessing. We aren't religious, but there's some kind of element of this sort to it (Interview with Rimma Markovna Rozenberg 2003, emphasis added).

The bond of time, of course, could not completely be torn asunder, and some interviewees' fresh familiarity with the Tanakh elicits memories from before the war, breaking through the shroud thickened by decades: "When a chapter of the Torah is read aloud in the Chesed, Grandpa's stories come back to me from the dark recesses of my memory" (Interview with Anna Grigor'evna Rysina 2008; Interview with Grigorii Isaakovich Stel'makh; Interview with Mikhail Iankelevich Shkol'nik 1998).

From "Constitution" to "Imaginary Book" to Real-Life Encounter

In the context of the declining crypto-Judaism of the Soviet period, the Tanakh and religious bibliophilism gradually lose their central cultural position and their relevance for identity. From a community of "scribes" who read the holy books and studied the Torah as a constitution of sorts, the Jewish community transforms into a so-called tex-

tual community (Stock 1990): most do not read and are incapable of reading the holy books (the heretics described by Stock are illiterate or minimally literate; Soviet Jews do not know the relevant language), and in any case the books for the most part are simply not available (banned, destroyed). Owing to certain knowledgeable individuals, representatives of the older generation, and individual copies, the memory of these books, the Tanakh above all, is preserved, and as a result it maintains some authority—even when nearly completely absent. In particular, all sorts of norms and popular beliefs—sometimes erroneously—are derived from it.

The community contents itself with surrogates (translations of the Tanakh into another language and retellings lacking in sacrality, completeness and exactitude), and the Tanakh functions as an “imagined book,” which is known and remembered, but which cannot be accessed and which effectively does not exist (Mel’nikova 2011). Correspondingly, the holy books cease to be the core element of crypto-Judaic tradition, identity and society (which gradually ceases to be a “textual community”), and are supplanted by other elements: prohibitions (the least notable and least labor-intensive), rituals, particularly for holidays, particularly their culinary component (we are dealing with “women’s religion”), as well as a unifying common threat—national and state anti-Semitism—and a common, if external, hope and solace in this world: Israel. The “Jewish revival” of the 1990s, the appearance of new Jewish institutions, and the restoration of religious life return to elderly post-Soviet Jews³¹ the Torah, but its meaning is far different than what it once was: it becomes for them one facet of Jewish experience alongside holidays in the “Chesed,” the Jewish press, Sholem Aleichem, and news from Israel; that is, the Torah becomes, in essence, an additional element of Jewish life.

31. The “appropriation” of the Torah by their children and grandchildren born after the war is a separate topic, upon which our sources shed hardly any light. One can speculatively presume that their perception and assimilation of Jewish religious bibliophilia differed from what has been described here for a number of reasons: the absence of prior experience (I am not taking into consideration the families of practicing crypto-Jews, Chabad above all—see note 4), a more active life disposition and greater openness to change, a different level of involvement in the religious rebirth of the 1990s, a different sort of participation in the programs of Jewish organizations, a rather different cultural background, and a different level of criticism of Soviet ideology. Research on this topic (together with others, above all the Chabad Lubavitch movement’s strategies for missionary activity) may help to answer the question of why, of all currents within Judaism, the ultra-orthodox have prevailed in the post-Soviet space.

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