Jeffrey Veidlinger, *Jewish Public Culture in Late Imperial Russia*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2009, pp. XIII – 382

by *Elissa Bemporad*

The work of Simon Dubnov, the dean of Russian Jewish history, aptly captured (albeit not intentionally) the fissure existing between high culture and low culture in late-nineteenth century Russian Jewish society. Even after he rejected the *maskilic* apologetic stance of history writing as a means to ascertain the legal status of the Jews of Russia (the largest Jewish community in the Diaspora and the only one in Europe still deprived of civil equality), and became the advocate of a populist-nationalist interpretation of the Jewish past, Dubnov was unable to bridge the gap between the masses and the cultural elite. How was it possible to reach the broad Jewish public in the Pale of Settlement and the Kingdom of Poland, thereby promoting Jewish national identity formation, which was Dubnov's prime intention, without even considering the option of Yiddish as the language of scholarship and culture? Especially when in 1897 - with an unparalleled modest linguistic acculturation compared to other countries in Europe, - 97 percent of the 5.3 million Jews in the Russian Empire claimed Yiddish as their mother tongue?

The underlying tension in the idea of writing a "history of the people" addressed explicitly to the Jewish audience in the Pale lied, therefore, in Dubnov's choice of language: the people, for whom and about whom he wrote in order to consolidate and spread national identity, had no knowledge of Russian (during the same 1897 census, only 26 percent of Russian Jews claimed to be literate in Russian). Dubnov himself summarized his ambivalent approach to "the people" and the language question in a definition of the "Jewish Clio's craft," in 1893. "The history of the people is not a mere science such as mathematics or botanical research," wrote Dubnov, "but is rather a living science that has a direct and immediate influence on the national*Weltanschauung*. In fact, history is not even a science, but rather a 'living teacher,' a teacher of life… By explaining to the people their past, making them aware of their biography, history will penetrate their souls and force them to know themselves; it will create a national philosophy, and what is more, …exert an influence on what is called 'national character.' This is a science about the people and for the people…"[1] Despite his grand vision of history as the cornerstone of a secular Jewish national identity, like so many other

[1] Simon Dubnov "Istoricheskie soobshchenie," *Voskhod* 7 (1893), p. 11.

Russian-Jewish *inteligenty* at the time, the historian and nation-builder Dubnov could not overcome the deep-rooted barrier separating cultural celebrities from the common folk on the Jewish street. Or at least not until 1905-1906.

Entitled *Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire* (Indiana University Press, 2009) Jeffrey Veidlinger's ambitious study on the emergence of public culture among early-twentieth century Russian Jewry recounts a world of ideas, beliefs and performances (as well as its promoters and beneficiaries), in which the barrier between high and low culture dwindled and, in some instances, gave in entirely. This was at the time of the 1905 Manifesto issued by Tsar Nicholas II, following the abortive First Russian Revolution of that same year, when hope and excitement merged with the violence and the destruction of the pogroms that followed. With the curtailment of Jewish political activity by the tsar, many Jews replaced (at least temporarily) the enthusiasm for political messianism in the form of resettlement to Palestine or utopian socialist reconstruction *in situ* so beautifully described by Jonathan Frankel,[2] with "cultural messianism," or putting their faith in cultural reconstruction, nourishment, and enrichment. Taking advantage of the new opportunities offered by the March 4, 1906, Temporary Regulations on Societies and Unions, namely the first tsarist legislation to recognize the right of private individuals to form societies (even if under the rigorous scrutiny of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs), a number of Jewish liberal nationalists sought to construct and promote Jewish public culture. By building public institutions to raise, redefine and modernize the intellectual creativity and aesthetic interests of Russian Jews, activists and common folk came together, for the first time, in a communal and national endeavor to create Jewish culture intended to be public. From St. Petersburg to Odessa, from the shtetls of Congress Poland to the small towns in Volhynia, many young Jews "exchanged prayer halls and synagogue pulpits" for the newly established public libraries, literary societies, drama circles, theaters, musical groups and orchestras, as the Jewish traditional restriction against the modern notion of cultural (secular) leisure began to wane. What makes Veidlinger's book so remarkable is therefore his ability to reveal the junction between professional cultural production and its dissemination, between cultural reception and the amateurs' response to the cultural project. So that the protagonists of this book are not only the professional cultural producers like Dubnov, but also the folk recipients and re-enactors of this secular culture: the musicians, performers, patrons, subscribers, librarians, members of the fire brigade ensembles, and amateur historians, who, given the multilingual reality

[2] Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917*, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

of Russian Jewry, might have referred to this new secular culture as *Kultur* (in Yiddish), *Kul'tura* (in Russian), *Kultura* (in Polish), or*Tarbut* (in Hebrew).

In a commendable effort to recreate Jewish reading habits beyond the Talmud, in chapters two and three Veidlinger introduces the reader to the most widespread cultural institution of the time, the public library. Connecting the average Jew and the cultural movements of the early-twentieth century, public libraries (Jewish sections in the municipal libraries, as well as parochial Jewish libraries that emerged from private lending libraries, coffeehouse or tavern libraries) became a powerful surrogate of the *besmedresh* (study hall), and came to provide a glimpse into the world of the modern. Whether supported by the Society for the Spread of Enlightenment among the Jews of Russia (Obshchestvo dlia rasprostraneniia prosveshcheniia mezhdu evreiami v Rossii, OPE), founded in St. Petersburg in 1863 to enlighten the Jews of Russia through acculturation and Russification, or with funds allocated through the *korobka* (a tax levied on kosher meat to fund the needs of the Jewish community), the library developed into the largest Jewish communal organization beyond the synagogue. With a membership typically fluctuating between 100 and 400 outside major urban centers, the library spread modernization and enlightenment and, in the words of a contemporary, "it was like a magical incantation, a siren that enticed people there, and no force in the world could keep them back" (p. 34). But beyond "the magical incantation," how integrated really was the library into the local Jewish communities of the Pale of Settlement? The process of cultural standardization - described by Veidlinger as perhaps too linear and uncomplicated - must have involved fierce tensions and dramatic rifts among the members of the community, triggered by generational, political, religious, and even class differences.

What kind of books did the average Jew in the largest Jewish community of Europe crave to read in the early-twentieth century? By examining the holdings of a number of public libraries, Veidlinger suggests the primacy of Russian-language books among library collections. Not only did the pre-1905 official restrictions on acquisition of books in Yiddish, as well as the general paucity of Yiddish-language materials in print, determine the predominance of the Russian-language book. As Veidlinger points out, librarians resisted the acquisition of books in Yiddish (and even in Hebrew) for fear of parochializing the library and creating backwardness in what was supposed to be the most modern cultural space in every city and town in the Pale. It is therefore not surprising if in 1911 the Odessa Jewish Clerks' Library, "subscribed to fifty-one Russian-language journals and five journals in European languages but only three in Hebrew and one in Yiddish" (p. 85). Its Jewish readers – not unlike their Russian neighbors - preferred belletristic to non-fiction

works. The most popular books at the time included the works of novelists Anastasiia Verbitskaia, Mikhail Artsybashev, and Alexander Kuprin, as well as Russian classics Leo Tolstoy and Ivan Turgenev. With the exception of the works by Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem, the circulation of fiction originally written in Yiddish was significantly less than that of Russian fiction; at the same time, however, Jewish readers enjoyed having access to Yiddish translations of major works of world literature, including Jules Verne, Guy de Maupassant, Charles Dickens and Anatole France. By virtue of the greater selection of reading material available, the Jewish public library deeply affected the reading habits of Russian Jews, more significantly than the underground Bundist reading circles or the *maskilic* private libraries of the nineteenth-century. The unintended consequence of Veidlinger's admirable attempt to pinpoint the reading habits of the "typical Jew" of the late Russian Empire is however to downplay the immense regional, demographic, cultural and linguistic differences between, for example, Congress Poland, Bessarabia, Moscow, or Podolia, superimposing homogeneity on a geographically and culturally disparate Jewish world.

Chapter four deals with the emergence of Jewish literary societies, in particular the Lovers of the Hebrew Language Society (Hovevei Sfas Eyver) – which by 1910 had established 48 branches throughout the Empire seeking to spread the knowledge of Hebrew language and the development of Hebrew literature; and the Jewish Literary Society (Evreiskoe literaturnoe obshchestvo) – which was founded in St. Petersburg in 1908 and by 1911 counted 122 branches distributed across the Russian provinces. While its members and activists disagreed on whether the society should promote Russian-language acculturation, Hebrew as a spoken tongue, or Yiddish as a literary language, in its brief existence the Jewish Literary Society succeeded in generating an impressive network of lecturers, who were regularly dispatched from the capital to the provinces with guidelines about cultural events and recommendations on reading materials. Despite ongoing and unpredictable harassment by the governor, city gendarme or secret police – which eventually resulted in the society's liquidation in the summer of 1911 - the branches sponsored lectures, discussions, and concerts attracting young Jews to libraries, wedding halls, and beer gardens.

Entitled "Cultural Performance: The People of the Book and the Spoken Word," chapter five is perhaps the most compelling section of the book. Here, Veidlinger considers the most common form of secular cultural performance among early-twentieth century Russian Jewry, namely "spoken-word events" such as poetry readings, lectures, debates, and conventions. Attending secular "spoken-word events," which forged "Jewish modes of speaking and

listening," was something entirely new for most Jews in the Pale of Settlement and the Kingdom of Poland, so much different from its religious counterpart, the sermon delivered by itinerant preachers and rabbis who moved from town to town. The "spoken-word events" were rare occasions for common people to interact with the authors of the texts they read, be in close proximity with the celebrities of the day and even learn their oratory skills. As Veidlinger poignantly argues, the writers' speaking tours in the provinces became Jewish national events, symbolic moments of national unity. When Hebrew and Yiddish writer and cultural activist Y. L. Peretz spoke at the Warsaw Philharmonic Hall, he was greeted by mass hysteria, as enormous crowds cheered for him at the railroad station. When he arrived in Minsk, in 1907, the "entire town was topsy-turvy… By 8PM the Paris Hall… normally reserved for weddings and other activities - was so packed that one could hardly breathe…college students, the labor force and the radical intelligentsia had come" (p. 148).

Chapters six and seven trace the institutionalization and professionalization of drama circles, klezmer bands and fire brigade orchestras, as grassroots musical and theatrical groups considerably shaped Jewish public culture. Striving to be part of the modern world, shtetl inhabitants joined amateur drama circles, signed up for dance classes, and set up choirs in the provinces. In their new European dress, they emulated the repertoire – and sought to gain the status - of professional cultural producers in the metropolises. And what about Jewish women? While the world of Jewish public culture was still heavily gendered, many young women found their way to the new public spaces, partaking if not as cultural producers at least as recipients. Challenging deeply-ingrained social and religious norms, they freely intermingled and socialized in public in these (at least allegedly) "gender neutral spaces," far removed from the traditional notions of religious society and the confines of rabbinical authorities. In some instances, young women even played an active role in performing public culture. As Veidlinger contends, by joining drama circles many girls violated, for the first time, the longstanding Jewish taboo against women appearing on stage (p. 207).

In chapters eight and nine Veidlinger studies the St. Petersburg elite learned societies. He dwells, in particular, on the Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society (Evreiskoe Istoriko-etnograficheskoe obshchestvo) established in the Russian capital in 1908. With the goal of promoting the academic study of the Jewish past and serve as a meeting place for social and scholarly exchange among leading Jewish intellectuals, the society also sought – most interestingly - to reach out to the broad public, disseminate education to those excluded from universities, and popularize the study of Jewish history among adults and

children so as to instill in them a deep "national self-awareness and love for their people and past" (p. 250). Unlike Dubnov's efforts of the 1890s, the post-1905 national venture of collecting sources regarded as crucial for the study of the Russian-Jewish past (minute books of Jewish communities, Jewish folk sayings and gravestone impressions) could become triumphant. This time Dubnov - himself one of the founders and promoters of the Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society - could erect his national project on preexisting social networks of cultural producers and recipients eager to forge a national secular culture, as well as rely on the changed attitudes towards the Yiddish *jargon*, no longer indiscriminate victim of tsarist legal restrictions, but new-found literary language of the Jewish *intelligentsia*.

But the cultural project so accurately depicted by Veidlinger was short-lived. The story of Jewish voluntary associations and societies ended abruptly (perhaps too abruptly in Veidlinger's rendition) with the devastation of the Great War. To be sure, massive migration, war dislocation and, eventually, the establishment of a new totalitarian political order in parts of the region destabilized and transformed Jewish cultural life. However, the cultural producers and recipients who survived the violence of World War I and the Civil War, and found themselves in the new geopolitical context of the post-World-War-I era, arguably sought ways to circumvent the state-promoted eradication of independent social and cultural organizations in Russia, Ukraine and Belorussia. Within the Bolshevik constraints of state-sponsored associations and societies, many strove to collect and preserve Jewish artifacts of historic and ethnographic value, establishing archives and museums, while others produced an idiosyncratic Soviet Jewish public culture made of theater and drama circles, musical performances, public libraries and "spoken-word events." Grassroots Jewish secular culture was no longer viable under the Bolsheviks, and yet some elements of continuity in the attempt to carry on Jewish modernization and national identity formation might have very well persisted even after 1917.

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