

## Introduction to *The Family Crisis*: The Author, His Time, and His Work

Unlike Jewish Poland or Lithuania, the Jewish Ukraine does not feature large in today's historical imagination of American Jews. Ukrainian Jewry produced neither a world-class painter who would commemorate their country through an instantly recognizable trademark image, as Marc Chagall did for Vitebsk with his large beautiful fiddlers flying over the town's rooftops and little ugly peasants relieving themselves under its fences; nor an intellectual of the stature of Rabbi Elija, the Gaon of Vilna, who personified the glorious urban tradition of Jewish scholarship, however incomprehensible his ideas may be today for the vast majority of Jews. And although Ukraine was the center of modern Yiddish literature, the depictions of its countryside and towns do not carry the evocative magic of Isaac Bashevis Singer's Warsaw or Chaim Grade's Vilna. Hasidism, the major Ukrainian contribution to the Jewish civilization, is usually perceived today detached from its local character, owing partly to the efforts of the German scholar Martin Buber who sought to represent Hasidism as a purified spiritual quest of the Jewish soul for God rather than a historical phenomenon. Yet the early Hasidism, from its founder Besht to his great-grandson Nahman of Bratslav, was a product of the very special combination of traditional piety, daring entrepreneurship, and somewhat backward provinciality that characterized the Jewish population of Podolia and Volhynia, the south-eastern frontier territory of the Polish Commonwealth which was annexed by Russia in 1793 and now forms part of the Republic of Ukraine.

Among the great Hasidic masters of that period were Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev and Nahman of Bratslav, who personified two different trends in Hasidism. Rabbi Levi Yitzhak (1740-1810) was born in Galicia but became famous as the Rabbi of Berdichev, where he settled, after a series of peregrinations, in 1785 and spent the last 25 years of his life. "Rabbi Levi Yitzhak became a legend in his own lifetime, - a modern hagiographer tells us - and the city of Berdichev was transformed into a radiant goal for countless Jews from distant towns."<sup>1</sup> On the more mundane level, however, "Jerusalem of Volhynia," as Berdichev was sometimes referred to, was a rapidly growing commercial center, which exerted a strong pull on thousands of destitute and hungry Jews from Ukraine and Lithuania by its promise of prosperity.

Rabbi Levi Yitzkhak established himself in this new dynamic urban environment both as the communal rabbi and the Hasidic rebe, the legal authority and the spiritual leader in one person. By contrast, Rabbi Nahman was never keen on achieving a stable social status and prestige beyond a small circle of his devotees. Unlike other Hasidic rebbes, he never established a dynasty and did not attach himself to any particular community. Instead he moved from one place to another, preaching ascetic self-denial as the way of preparing to the coming of Messiah to his not numerous but committed followers. He dressed his message in the symbolic garb of tales and parables, whose esoteric meaning was accessible only to the small circle of devotees. The two complementary if not contradictory aspects of Hasidism, the reverential attitude to the worldly status and the rejection of attachment to a place or property, are embodied in the two brothers Mashber, the protagonists of the novel *The Family Crisis* by the Ukrainian Yiddish writer Der Nister.

### Berdichev in Jewish Literary Imagination

The novel is situated in the fictional town of N., which is modeled after the author's native town of Berdichev (Polish Berdyczów, Ukrainian Berdychiv), now a small provincial town in Ukraine. Berdichev's most glorious time fell on the mid-nineteenth century, when the town served as the commercial hub of the southwestern part of the Russian Empire. Founded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Berdichev remained in the private ownership of the Polish families of Tyszkiewicz and Radziwill(?) until 18???. It became part of the Russian Empire in 1793 as a result of the second partition of Poland when Russia extended its sovereignty on the historical regions of Volhynia and Podolia. In 1795 the Polish Commonwealth ceased to exist on the political map of Europe, being swallowed up by its three imperialist neighbors, Russia, Prussia and Austria. Two attempts to restore Polish independence, the uprisings of 1830-31 and 1863-64, were suppressed by the Russian army, with each defeat entailing loss of privileges and influence by Polish nobility.

Despite the decline of Poland, Berdichev Jewish community was steadily growing during the first half of nineteenth century thanks to the growth of the town's commerce. By 1861 Berdichev Jewish population had reached nearly 50,000 people, which constituted 80 percent of the total population. At that time Berdichev was the second largest Jewish community in the Russian Empire (after Warsaw), but unlike other major Jewish centers, such as Warsaw, Vilna, Odessa, it did not have the administrative status of a provincial capital. Its importance was determined solely by its commercial significance as the center of the grain trade and money lending, not by its proximity to power.

Berdichev economy showed the first indications of slowing down as early as the late 1840s, and was further undermined by the liberation of the serfs in 1861, by the defeat of the uprising of 1863-64, and by the development of the railways. As a result, the impoverished Polish gentry began to abandon the Ukraine to Poland, while the Jewish capital moved out to larger centers of the Empire such as Odessa, Warsaw, and St. Petersburg. In the early twentieth century Berdichev regained some of its economic importance as a local center of small industry, but its Jewish population remained nearly the same as in 1861. The vicissitudes of the social and economic history of this uniquely homogeneous Jewish town – the rise and decline of its commerce and the subsequent emergence of small industry and the sizable Jewish proletariat – form the historical background of *Der Nister's* novel.

*Der Nister's* debt to the classical Yiddish writers and his distance from them can both be measured through the place that the town of Berdichev occupies in his novel. Berdichev fascinated the imagination of nineteenth-century Yiddish writers. It served as the prototype of Glupsk (Fooltown), the town that dominates the fiction of Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh. Abramovitsh was born in a shtetl not far from Minsk (now the capital of Belarus), but as a teenager wandered down south to the more prosperous Volhynia along with thousands of other *litvak* migrants. The years he spent in Berdichev (1858 to 1869) were his most fertile time when invented his literary persona of Mendele Moykher Sforim which has secured his fame as the “grandfather of Yiddish literature”.

The memorable depictions of Glupsk in the Mendele novels combined satiric realism with mythological generalization. When one of the protagonists, Benjamin the Third,

arrived to Glupsk for the first time, the first things that met his eye and nose were huge bogs full of sewage and mountains of garbage. Having past the town's "guts", he reached its "heart, which beats without stopping day and night" – the market square with shops "with their shelves of goods, and especially, with their odds and ends of cloth, lace, ribbons, satins, and furs that are Glupsk's famous discount fabrics, so called because its tailors disdain to count them as the customer's when they are left over from what he has paid for."<sup>2</sup>

Glupsk is the quintessentially commercial town. Trade has been the main preoccupation of Jews in exile from time immemorial. "Where there are Jews, there is Mercury the angel, the overseer of trade" – Mendele informs the reader of his biggest Glupsk novel *The Magic Ring*.<sup>3</sup> Der Nister echoes this reference to the Greek mythology by informing his reader in the first chapter of *The Family Crisis* that after a prolonged delay the wandering god Mercury, the symbol of commerce "has finally arrived here [in N.] out of ancient times" (42). And yet Glupsk's commercial activity is mostly counter-productive. Dan Miron explains in his introduction to the translation of Mendele's works in the Library of Yiddish Classics: "In Glupsk, the connection between cause effect, effort and product, gesture and response, has been severed. People run but they do not get anywhere; they buy and sell but they do not prosper; they act but they do nothing."<sup>4</sup>

Mendele's Glupsk is a "Jewish ship of fools", a mock-myth of Jewish existence in Diaspora which is based on the real experience of the Jewish Berdichev. This peculiar social atmosphere was created by the feverish activity of thousands of migrants from small impoverished shtetlekh of the Ukraine and Lithuania who plunged into the sea of Berdichev commerce without any knowledge or experience of how to navigate in it. The contrast between the depressed lethargy of the shtetl and the exciting rush of Berdichev gave rise to plentiful social, cultural, and psychological conflicts, which provided a writer with abundant material for satire and moralization. Inspired by Abramovitsh's example, his younger contemporary Sholem Rabinovitch known in literature as Sholem Aleichem wanted to go a step further to write a series of realistic novels about the "Jewish Paris", as he called it, in the style Balzac or Zola.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the circumstances of his life did not allow Sholem Aleichem to spend in Berdichev considerable time, and his grand plan remained unrealized.

From the time of Mendele Moykher Sforim on, Berdichev epitomized the Jewish character in Russian literary imagination. The town's most memorable portrait in the twentieth century was created in several novellas and novels by Vassily Grossman, the most famous of which is *Life and Fate* (1961). Born in 1905 as Yosef Grossman into an educated and assimilated Berdichev Jewish family, he made his literary career in Moscow but retained warm memories about his native town. Grossman was among the first Soviet journalists to discover the horrors of the Holocaust, which he reported in his highly popular war dispatches from the liberated Ukraine, the most famous of which was "Ukraine without Jews" – written originally in Russian but published only in Yiddish. Some of the most memorable pages of *Life and Fate*, based on Grossman's own discoveries, depict the mass murder of Berdichev Jews – among whom was the writer's mother – on October 5, 1941.<sup>6</sup>

The final chapter in the literary history of the Jewish Berdichev was written by the brilliant and provocative Russian writer Friedrich Gorenstein (1932-2002). Berdichev

emerges in his vision as an eerie “ghost-town, a town which is dispersed over the country and the entire world, a town populated by people who may have never set their foot on Berdichev streets: a Moscow professor, a New York lawyer, a Paris artist.”<sup>7</sup> As a complex image, the literary Berdichev carries a cluster of ambivalent symbolic meaning and stereotypes, representing the most mundane side of the Jewish existence Diaspora, its economic misery and moral degradation, vulgarity and greed, but also Jewish energy, pride, ingenuity, and optimism.

### **The Author**

Both the title of the novel and the pseudonym of its author invoke symbolic and mystical connotations. The name Mashber, which comes from the Hebrew root Sh-B-R – “to break” – means “crisis”, so that the original Yiddish title, *Di mishpokhe Mashber*, can mean both “The Family Mashber” and “The Family Crisis”. Der Nister – from the Hebrew root STR – means “the hidden one”, a concept that in Hasidic lore denotes a tzaddik in waiting, someone who remains unknown to the world until the moment when he can reveal himself as a righteous man and a charismatic leader.

Der Nister was born as Pinkhes Kahanovitsh on November 1, 1884. His father, a relatively well-off Hasid, earned his living by trading in smoked fish. On one side, the family had ancestors who were “very pious, learned and steeped in Kabbalah”; on the other, there were “simple hard-working village Jews”.<sup>8</sup> Pinkhes had two brothers and a sister: Aaron, the older, had interest in Kabbalah, and eventually joined the Bratslaver sect of Hasidism; Motl (Max), the younger, became a sculptor and later emigrated to France, where he amassed an impressive collection of modern art now on display in Musée d’Orsay in Paris; the sister Hannah stayed in Russia and became a doctor in Kiev. Pinkhes received a serious Jewish education in the Hasidic tradition. In 1905 he left Berdichev, and for 12 years lived under a false name in order to evade service in the army. This must have been a difficult experience that left a lasting impression on his personality. This fact elucidates the choice of the pseudonym “The Hidden One,” which, apart of the obvious literal meaning, also has a mystical one. “Pinkhes Kahanovitsh means Phineas, Son of the Priest, or Cohen. It was unmistakably the name of a Russian Jew” - so David Roskies explains the significance of the chosen pseudonym – “the writer who called himself Der Nister, a pen name so redolent with Kabbalah and Jewish esoteric tradition, served notice from the outset that he belonged to the world, to the cosmos.”<sup>9</sup>

As many Yiddish writers, Der Nister first tried his hand in Hebrew but soon switched to Yiddish, and published his first book, *Gedanken un motivn* (Thoughts and Motifs) in 1907 in Vilna. He earned his living by teaching in a Jewish school for girls and giving private Hebrew lessons. At the beginning of World War I he found a job in the timber industry, which gave him an exemption from military service. From 1912 on Der Nister was associated with the Kiev group of young writers who championed universalistic modernist aesthetics in Yiddish literature and at the same time were deeply rooted in Ukrainian natural and cultural landscape.

His early poetry and tales (“Poylish,” 1908; “Friling,” 1909; “Hekher fun der erd,” 1910; “Gezang un gebet,” 1912), published in periodicals and little artistic books, established his reputation as an original Yiddish symbolist among his fellow modernists but left the more conventional critics rather unimpressed. “Der Nister’s

writing has not yet formed. He suffers from the lack of clarity in form and in thought,” was the verdict of Zalmen Reyzen in the first edition of his *Lexicon of Yiddish Literature and Press*.<sup>10</sup> Along with other young Kiev writers, such as David Bergelson, David Hofshateyn, Leyb Kvitko, Osher Shvartsman, Der Nister aspired to create a new Yiddish style that would combine European modernism, the local color of Ukrainian nature, and the simplicity of Slavic and Jewish folklore.

In 1920 Der Nister moved to Moscow, worked for a short time as a teacher in an orphanage for Jewish children who lost their families during the Civil War, and soon left the Soviet Union for Berlin, which was at that time the major center of Jewish creativity in Europe. In 1924 he moved to Hamburg, where he got a job as a trade representative of Soviet Leather Syndicate. In 1926 he went back to the Soviet Union and settled in Kharkov, then the capital of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic. In Kharkov he published his works in the newly founded monthly *Di royte velt* (The Red World), the best Soviet Yiddish literary magazine of that period. In his symbolist tales Der Nister created a fantastic universe his own, which he populated by various mythological creatures from Jewish and Slavic folklore.

There was nothing overtly Jewish about these characters, who in some ways resembled the inhabitants of J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth. Yet Der Nister's symbolist tales had an unmistakably Jewish flavor owing to the exquisitely suggestive use of the Yiddish language and creative adaptation of the cabalistic imagery. Unlike Tolkien's, Der Nister's universe was not dominated by dark powers. His was a cute little world where “wanderers wander and walkers walk, fools seek and saints pray, hermits fast and wizards speak spells.”<sup>11</sup> Of course, there were obstacles to surmount, dark forces to combat, despair to overcome, but also confidence that the quest was within the reach. “Elitist and supremely optimistic” –David Roskies characterizes Der Nister's works of the early 1920s.<sup>12</sup>

As the time went by, the colors of Der Nister's were becoming darker. After his return to the Soviet Union the split between reality and fiction became unbridgeable. The fictive protagonist, who increasingly resembled the author, was no longer able to navigate the world even by the means of his fertile imagination. Der Nister felt at odds with the dominant Soviet literary ideology that required from a writer to be an “engineer of human souls” who would forge the new socialist man out of the ruins of the capitalist system. Der Nister's imagery was getting more bizarre and confused, until it became evident to him that, as a symbolist writer, he had no future in the Soviet Union.

The writer's confusion and loss of direction found its utmost expression in his last symbolist tale “Under a Fence” (1929), where the narrator's self is torn between two conflicting worlds, which are symbolically represented as an esoteric scholarly order and a circus. The publication of this tale in *Di royte velt* called upon the author the wrath of ideological vigilantes, and marked, according to Khone Shmeruk, the foremost authority on Der Nister's life and work, “the end of a period in Der Nister's writing, one which we might concisely label as the visionary, fairytale-like phase.”<sup>13</sup> Der Nister entered the period of crisis.

Considering Der Nister's overtly elitist and non-realistic orientation, it may come as a surprise that there were communist critics who admired his writing. His most eager

supporter was Moshe Litvakov, the influential editor of the Moscow newspaper *Der emes* (The Truth), which was the Yiddish equivalent of the Russian *Pravda*. In 1926 Litvakov declared: “Der Nister is one of the deepest phenomena in our literature. He has come from the depths of popular Hasidism, and he draws his literary and artistic nourishment from Peretz. The origins of his art are buried in the remote age of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav” (69). Litvakov then offered a remarkable insight into the nature of the writer’s art:

He is searching, Der Nister – he is searching for the secret of the world, of the human world order, of the individualized meaning of the people, of his own artistic ‘self’. He is an indefatigable ‘wanderer’ from his own works, and on his way he generously distributes tales and parables, legends and riddles full of fantastic characters from Hasidic folklore [...] This is an original, thoroughly Jewish poet who searches for a way to artistic universalism. (70)

The communist critic concluded his praise of the mystical symbolist writer with a prediction that was to become true in Der Nister’s magisterial novel: “we follow him arduously, hoping with fast-beating heart that any moment the *nister* (hidden one) can become a *nigle* (revealed one), that he would reveal to us the hidden secret of ideas and the social meaning of the Hasidic element, that we will be dazzled by the sunbeams of Hasidic-*folkstimlekh*n universalism.” (70). Litvakov referred here to a Hasidic concept, according to which a genuine tzaddik had to remain hidden for the period of his spiritual search and wandering, whereupon he would reveal himself through miracles and establish his presence in the world. Litvakov would certainly admire *The Family Crisis* as the revelation of Der Nister’s hidden realistic genius, but by the time of the publication of the first part of the novel he was already dead. He was arrested in 1937 and perished in prison about a year later.

Not all Soviet critics, however, shared Litvakov’s passion for Der Nister. In 1929-32 Der Nister found himself in the eye of a literary storm around the issues of modernism and realism in Yiddish literature. His supporters, mostly his pre-revolutionary Kiev colleagues, were eventually forced to give up his defense under the pressure of the guardians of ideological purity. Those zealots of proletarian literature, most of whom were associated with the Institute of Jewish Proletarian Culture in Minsk, attacked Der Nister for “reactionary and petit-bourgeois morals,” “empty metaphysics, mysticism, idealism, and ubiquitous reaction,” etc.<sup>14</sup> Yet, like their opponent Litvakov, none of the proletarian critics were destined to see the publication of Der Nister’s novel: only one of them died by a natural death, the others were arrested and perished in the Gulag during 1936-38.

It would be an oversimplification to attribute the causes of Der Nister’s creative crisis exclusively to external circumstances such as the political pressure or economic hardships. By the late 1920s symbolism as a creative method had by and large exhausted itself, giving way either to more radical forms of modernism or to the revival of more traditional psychological realism. As Shmeruk tells us, “Der Nister himself had predicted that he would abandon the symbolist’s tower”<sup>15</sup> in “Under a Fence”. From 1929 to 1935 the writer did not publish original fiction, earning his meager living by translations and journalism, and receiving some modest support from his art dealer brother in Paris. This must have been a period of the intensive work aimed at mastering the new literary form of the realistic novel. In a 1934 letter Der Nister wrote to his brother Max about the pains of the transformation he was undergoing in the process of being “born anew” as the writer. But he was determined, despite all obstacles, to fulfill his mission: “and I must write my book. If I don’t, it

will be the end of me. If I don't, I will be erased from literature and from the life of the living."<sup>16</sup>

The crisis came to an end when the first chapter of Der Nister's new novel appeared in a Moscow Yiddish almanac in 1935. When the first part of *The Family Crisis* came out in the book form in Moscow in 1939, it was greeted by almost univocal approval as a major achievement of Soviet Yiddish literature. The publication also brought its author an ample honorarium of 25,000 rubles that allowed him to devote two next years solely to the novel. The second edition followed in 1941. It contained two parts, fifteen chapters in all.

The book carried the imprimatur of the Moscow Emes but was printed in Vilnius, which became part of the Soviet Union in 1940. Apparently the book had not been distributed by late June 1941, when Vilnius was captured by the German army. The author himself did not have a chance to see this publication until 1944, when Vilnius was liberated and a few hundreds copies of the 6,000 print run were found.<sup>17</sup> Der Nister continued working on the novel during the first years of the war, and the final text was sent to New York to be published by the pro-Soviet Congress for Yiddish Culture (YKUF), which was headed by Nachman Meisel, a former member of Kiev group. The book appeared in New York in two separate volumes, Part One in 1943 and Part Two in 1948.

During and after World War II Der Nister published a number of new stories and reportages. His major theme was the destruction of Russian Jewry during the Holocaust, the heroism of Jewish resistance, and the restoration of Jewish life after the war. He undertook a journey to the Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidzhan with an echelon of settlers, which he described in a series of optimistic reportages. This revival came to an abrupt end during the Stalinist anti-Semitic campaign of 1948-53 that effectively destroyed Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union. Der Nister was arrested on February 19, 1949, sentenced to 10 years in prison for "hostile nationalist activity" and involvement with "especially dangerous state criminals," and sent to Abetz prison camp in the north of Russia, which had the most illustrious prisoner population of philosophers, poets, and scholars. As Der Nister's prison medical file testifies, the writer was already seriously ill by the time of his arrest, and had little chance of survival in prison. On June 4, 1950, he died from sepsis after an operation performed in the prison hospital and was buried in the prison cemetery.<sup>18</sup>

From his early age on, Der Nister tried to hide from the all-seeing eye of the Russian state. In a letter to the Yiddish critic Shmuel Niger in 1909 he confessed: "There are days when I think of 'going-a-roving'— in the style of Mendele's Fishke of course. Oh, my dear friend! There is a saying that if you cannot climb over, you must crawl under."<sup>19</sup> Referring to the main hero of the classical novel *Fishke the Lame* by Mendele Moykher Sforim, Der Nister formulated a philosophy of life that he would try to follow until his death. He would consistently prefer social invisibility to high profile. He shied of publicity and avoided important positions in the Soviet literary hierarchy, stayed away from politics and ideology.

The success of *The Family Crisis* in the situation where the majority of ideologically engaged Yiddish literati fell victim to the Stalinist terror proved that Der Nister's strategy of evasion was a better way of creative and physical survival than that of

identification with the aggressor. Even in the situation of the nearly total terror of 1948-53, which was specifically aimed both at the Jews and the remained representatives of pre-Soviet modernism, Der Nister's minor position in the Soviet Yiddish elite saved him from the death sentence meted out at more prominent former members of the Kiev Group. Yet his ill health did not allow him to survive even those of his prominent colleagues who were executed on August 12, 1952.

### **The Town of N. and Its Jews**

*The Family Crisis* opens with an urban portrait, which remains unsurpassed in Yiddish literature in its precision and depth. The narrator depicts the town with great care, building step by step the symbolic structure of the urban space. The urban space emerges divided into three concentric rings, each one with a distinct architectural face that reflects its social character. The first ring encapsulates the commercial center, the heart of the town life. The second ring encloses the middle-class residential area, and the third ring is the territory of the poor under-classes. Money reigns supreme in the first ring, where the profit is worshiped by all possible means including "lying labels, false seals". The multiple synagogues and houses of study in the second ring reflect the variety of spiritual dispositions of the prosperous and established segment of society. Theirs is the religion of "a wandering and an exile God," which is rooted in the permanent state of anxiety of Diaspora Jewry caused by the tension between an illusory stability of everyday life and the profoundly insecure state of exile.

By endowing the architectural imagery with the symbolism of exile and redemption, Der Nister incorporates the first two rings of N. into the grand narrative of Jewish history. But the third ring does not fit so neatly into the age-old narrative. The third ring Jews have religious concepts of their own, which in many respects deviate from the strict normative Judaism of the first and the second ring: "their customs are the same, but their laws are not those of the town." (54) Here observance is more relaxed, knowledge of the law less thorough, and the yearning for Jerusalem less intense. Despite their visible material insecurity, the third ring Jews seems to be more comfortable with their exilic condition.

Bratslav Hasidism is shown as an authentic product of the third ring religious creativity. Der Nister's fascination with this branch of Hasidic movement originated during his early symbolist period from the fusion of his personal experience with the literary worldview of the Russian modernism with its longing for the transformation of life. The young Der Nister, David Roskies tells us, "was able to reclaim the Hasidic master thanks to the prophets and poets of Russian renewal."<sup>20</sup> Following the trendsetters of Russian modernism in literature and art, Der Nister drew his inspiration from folk mythology and religion, transforming religious Hasidic imagination into artistic tales.

The young Der Nister was not alone in his attempts of applying the general aesthetic and philosophical principles of Russian modernism to the specific Jewish case. Another representative of this trend was his older colleague Hillel Zeitlin, a Jewish thinker whose return to Judaism was facilitated by his interest in Russian religious philosophy. All the difference between Der Nister and Zeitlin in ideology, temperament, and age notwithstanding, Zeitlin's 1911 essay "Among Bratslaver Hasidim" reads as if it were written by Der Nister during his early, symbolist period:



[I]f someone wants to hear a melody that comes after the deepest and hardest *grief*; [...] if someone wants to see ecstasy that comes not from enthusiasm and excitement, but from the deepest and clearest *knowledge*; if someone wants to see for real how people can walk around on earth and yet be not here – let him make an effort and measure Berdichev’s mud with his feet, follow all the little crooked streets, pass by the Old Cemetery, the large and desolate field where night-shadows lie on the orphaned little hills [...]. Let him then pass by the “Living Synagogue” [...], let him absorb the entire Jewish forlornness and Jewish broken spirit that one feels especially acutely in Jewish towns when the Sabbath *shekhinah* is about to part with its children, and dark reality comes out with its staring eyes. Let him then turn to the *shitibl* of Bratslav Hasidim, bringing with him his whole brokenness, and stand in a dark little corner, listening to a *kekhts* after *kekhts* of a few Bratslav Hasidim who sit around the table and listen to the words of Torah, let him feel in their *kekhtsn*, as their speaker puts it, “a yearning for God so strong that it becomes unbearable,” [...] Let him hear the *essence*, hear the *tone*: the greatest *humility*, which has merged with the greatest *knowledge* [...] Let him hear the world-grief, which, when the inner redemption comes, must turn into the world-joy. Let him sense the hovering spirit of the great Reb Nahman, which elevates people from the deepest and darkest hell to the brightest eternal light, let him thereafter see how the Hasidim quietly leave the table one after another, take one another’s hands, make a circle and start dancing. One cannot notice a single coarse movement because every turn, every touch, every bow is polished, refined and sanctified to the highest degree. [...] These seemingly simple people, Jews of little or no learning, who look like artisans and porters, show such inner strength, such depth of feeling, such clarity of thought, such spirituality in every movement, in every position of their foot, in every sound of melody that cannot be found anywhere else.<sup>21</sup>

When we read the naturalistic depiction of the Bratslav sect gathering in the same Living Synagogue at the entrance of the Old Cemetery (Part One, Chapter 3) written by the mature Der Nister, we notice its fundamental difference from Zeitlin’s neo-romantic representation. Der Nister shows us the physical aspect of Hasidim, their ugliness and the crudeness of their manners along with the immediacy of their spiritual quest mixed with social protest. In his realistic stylistics the general neo-Romantic clichés are replaced by concrete details that help to stress the heavy materiality of the Hasidic way of life. There is little beauty in their movements and behavior. During prayer, some Hasidic clap their hands, some stamp their feet, some scream, some vibrate in silent ecstasy.

The contrast between Zeitlin’s neo-romanticism and Der Nister’s realism becomes especially evident if we look at the depiction of the Hasidic dance in the novel:

And then, as was their custom, they danced. For a long while and on empty stomachs, and until they forgot themselves in the residue of the pure joy they still felt from their prayers. Forming a circle around the reading desk, the whole congregation danced heartedly, passionately, hand in hand, head to shoulder, unable to tear themselves away from each other – engrossed as if there were no real world. (111)

The ecstatic dance of the poor Bratslavers is contrasted by the orderly dance of middle-class Hasidim at Moshe’s party: “The Hasidim danced with each other, hand in hand, or head to shoulder or clinging to their neighbor’s waistband with their hands. Merchants danced apart: prosperous, polite and quiet folk. It was easy to see that the paces of dance did not come easily to them.” (87) Thus, the manner of dance reveals not only the dancers’ inner feelings but also their social status.

The motif of dance links the everyday material reality with its symbolic meaning. Through the individual manner of dancing each major character reveals deepest

aspects of his or her personality. The ritualized and restricted traditional Jewish way of life left little for the external expression of emotions and feelings, which in turn imposed limitations on the realistic means available to the artist for the representation of strong passions. Der Nister's extensive depictions of dances form part of a metaphoric language that enables him to convey the nuances of social behavior, the intensity of spiritual quest, and the tenderness of romantic sentiment, without overstepping the borders of realist representation. Dances take place at critical moments in the characters' lives, offering a parallel symbolic commentary to the real events.

### **Money and Commerce: the Realistic Core**

Der Nister pays a lot of attention to the material aspects of life. His aim is to show us how the social and spiritual discontent was ripening among the poor and unruly population of the third ring. As a realistic writer he is convinced that "anyone with a keen eye might even then have been able to see the seeds of the future floating in the air" (58). To elucidate the mobility of the disorderly third ring, the author contrasts it to the stagnation of the town center. The town's three-ring layout imposes a rigid social hierarchy upon its inhabitants, building up a potential for conflict.

As a rule, each character is introduced by indicating the area on the symbolic map of the town to which she or he belongs. Any movement in space bears symbolic connotations, which offer clues to interpretation of the novel on a spiritual level. Houses and streets in the first and second ring embody the fixed order. The town with its complex array of religious, commercial and residential buildings, which includes not only Jewish houses of worship and study but also Christian churches such as the famous baroque Carmelite cathedral, is radically different from the uniformly Jewish shtetl image of Yiddish fiction, where individual buildings are barely differentiated, and the Christian presence is absent from the landscape.

The commercial activity reaches its peak during the Prechistaya Fair in the harvest season. From the time of emergence of Berdichev as a local trade center in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, peasants and squires from the surrounding area came to this fair to sell their produce, make purchases and arrange loans. During the days of the fair the whole town seems to be devoted to the worship of mammon. The synagogues and *kloyzn* stay nearly deserted, little or no time is devoted to prayer and Torah study. Rabbis are busy resolving disputes between partners, using the opportunity to complement their meager budget. "But – the narrator tells us – the fair was something more than a fair. It served as a sort of holiday for everyone" (223).

During the fair the town is flooded with people and merchandise, the air is laden with odors and "thousands of voices". Ukrainian folksingers are as busy making money as Jewish merchants and Polish gentry. Despite its apparent anarchy, the carnival, with its gluttony, cheating, swearing, merrymaking, does not disturb the hierarchical structure of the town. The fair obeys a strict order, with each market dedicated to a special kind of merchandise. The upper and lower classes, Jewish traders, Polish nobles and Ukrainian peasants interact economically but do not mix socially even in the moments of great excitement. For socializing each group has its own class of taverns, where it follows its own carnival customs.

By and large, the economic mentality of N. remains pre-capitalist. Investors are interested not so much in maximizing the return on their capitals as in securing the safety of their deposits. Money carries a mystical aura, which is underscored by the connection between business and religion: “[t]heir faith in these financial establishments was on a par with their faith in God” (290). Following the example of the great French realists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Der Nister focuses his artistic attention on the advancing financial capitalism, whose effects on everyday life he chronicles in minute detail. The influence of Balzac (whose marriage to the Polish countess Évelina Hanska, which took place in the Berdichev cathedral in 1850, shortly before the great writer’s death, left a lasting imprint on the town’s memory) can be felt in the manner of representation of the entangled net of personal and commercial interests within the business community of N. Berdichev after the defeat of the Polish uprising of 1863, like Paris after the fall of Napoleon, was undergoing the transition from the feudal economy dominated by the landed aristocracy to the capitalist system based on the circulation of money.

Like Balzac’s Paris, the world of N. is densely populated by various “Kittens”, blackmailers, loan sharks, shady brokers, “so-called lawyers”, who, like hyenas, come out of their holes when they sense the smell of prey. In the new world of capitalist laissez-faire, the old social hierarchy may still look stable for some time, but the old concepts of reputation and honor are already undermined by corruption. The criminal underworld and the old elite become increasingly interdependent on each other for their survival. This link becomes evident in the episode in Reb Dudi’s house in Part 2, where the respectable town rabbi gets implicated with Yone the tavern keeper in a plot to discredit the Bratslav sect. The growing importance of Yone and his ilk in the communal affairs is a sign of the diminishing authority of the religious oligarchy.

As a representative of the old business culture, Moshe Mashber has no chance of economic survival in the new economic order. He does not understand the advantage of a business partnership over a family-owned business, is not keen on investing his capital for high profit, or on exploring new business opportunities beyond the traditional wholesale and money lending to Polish noblemen. He is helpless in a situation where the Polish landowners have lost their economic and political importance, the capitalist competition is increasing, and money is scarce.

### **The Politics of History: Russia vs Poland**

The age-old conflict between Russia and Poland did not end with the defeat of the 1863 uprising. When the Polish Republic was finally reconstituted in 1918 as a result of the Treaty of Versailles, it quickly became the key segment of the so-called “sanitary cordon” that was meant to separate Europe from the Soviet Russia. In the summer of 1920 the Red Army occupied a large part of Eastern Poland and nearly captured Warsaw in the ambitious attempt to bring the revolution to the West, but was thrown back by the Polish counter-attack. This first defeat of the Red Army led to the radical revision of ambitious plans of the Bolshevik leadership to spread the revolution by military means. Eventually the Soviet leadership abandoned Trotsky’s radical doctrine of “export of the revolution” in favor of Stalin’s more practical concept of “socialism in one particular country”. Nevertheless, during the two interwar decades the bourgeois Poland personified the capitalist enemy on the Soviet

doorstep, and was divided again in September 1939, this time between Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union.

Not surprisingly, Poland had a bad reputation in prewar Soviet literature. One of the earliest and most famous examples of this anti-Polish attitude is *Red Cavalry* (1925?), a series of sketches from the Soviet-Polish war by the Russian-Jewish writer and journalist Isaac Babel. Yiddish literature generally followed suit: such different novels as David Bergelson's *Measure of Judgment* (1929) and Note Lurye's *The Steppe Calls* (1931?) both depicted Poland as the source of political and military danger for the Soviet state.<sup>22</sup> Der Nister was no exception to this rule. Like Bergelson, he projected his rather negative personal attitude to Poland on his novel. The Polish past looms in the cityscape of N. through the ruins of the fortress and the town hall, which are the material reminders of the "important government function for which in its time the ancient city has had a need" (196). The past is also alive in the memories and fantasies of Polish nobles who live on their family estates around N. Even though Volhynia was not in the main area of the 1863 uprising, the local landowners, the narrator tells us, "manifested considerable sympathy for the anti-government movement and aided it with money and various other forms of help" (229).

Der Nister's grotesque depictions of the Polish landowning class borders on caricature, which was not unusual in the Soviet historical fiction. The catalogue of the vices of the Polish nobility in Chapter 7 reads like a medical description of a fatal social and biological disease. Degradation runs in the families – 'it was enough to know the old man to guess at the sort of man the son was', we read about count Kozeroge. The narrator's diagnosis is clear: 'all of them noble parasites'. The only clear-minded person among this collection of degenerates is Lisitsin-Sventislavski, a man of no definite ethnic identity. The ambiguity of his character is highlighted by his double Russian-Polish name, the Russian part of which means "fox man". This fearsome figure of a secret police agent might have had more than a purely historical significance for Der Nister's readership in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, reminding them of the daily reality of denunciation that was the backbone of Stalin's terror, in which members of ethnic minorities, including Poles and Jews, played a significant role.

The fateful episode of the shooting at the czar's portrait brings to the fore the age-old mutual dependency between Jews and Poles. The town rabbi Reb Dudi – who is introduced together with the warden of the Polish Catholic Carmelite cathedral in the opening chapter – reminds the Jewish community leaders about the age-old link between Polish security and Jewish prosperity: "if the noblemen are carried off, you may as well say good-bye to the sums they owe you." (E248). Interestingly, the Russian officials investigating the incident are not hostile towards Jews. Der Nister is careful to represent the Russian authorities not as anti-Semitic but as anti-Polish, showing an astute understanding of the political climate of his day. The Russian authorities regard Jews as mere accomplices, not the main culprits in the political crime.

The lesson to be derived from this episode is that closeness to the Poles can be dangerous for Jews, as it is for Moshe Mashber and his family. The landowner Rudnitski's refusal to pay his debt undermines the stability of Moshe's business; the need to contribute towards bribing the Russian officials involved in the investigation

further drains his resources; finally, the “best and the wisest doctors in town”, as the narrator ironically characterizes the two Polish doctors Yanovski and Pashkovski who first treat Moshe’s daughter Nekhamke and then Moshe himself, turn out to be as worthless as their noble compatriots – they can merely confirm the fatal illness of their patients but not cure them.

Apparently, the real story that served as the historical core of the novel had little to do with the Russian-Polish conflict. As the Yiddish literary scholar and critic Dov Sadan has discovered, the plot of *The Family Crisis* is based on an episode that occurred in Berdichev in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at the height of the struggle within the Jewish community between the maskilim - the adherents of the Western-oriented ideology of Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) - and the traditionally-minded Hasidim. According to the local Hasidic historical writer Rabbi Osher Pritsker, the wealthy Hasidic banker Reb Yankev Yoysef Halpern mounted a successful counter-attack on a group of radical Galician maskilim and nearly drove them out of town. But when his banking business experienced temporary financial difficulties, the maskilim bribed his accountant to disclose Halpern’s commercial secrets, and then deliberately pushed Halpern into bankruptcy by setting up his creditors against him. As he was unable to return all deposits at once, Halpern was sent to prison, where he soon fell ill. He was eventually released and died at home shortly thereafter. “He died as a saint, the victim of the Berlin Haskalah” – Rabbi Pritsker concludes the story.<sup>23</sup>

Der Nister moved this episode to the 1870s, when the confrontation between Hasidim and maskilim in Berdichev had reached a status quo. In his fictionalization of Halpern’s story, the maskilim have nothing to do with the downfall of the pious Hasid Moshe Mashber, which was caused by a combination of objective social, economic, and political reasons as well as by an inner spiritual crisis. By contrast to the real story, the Haskalah appears as a side issue in the novel.<sup>24</sup> The chief maskil in N. is Yosele “the Plague”, an independently minded and rather well off young man who has established himself as a public figure, a moral critic of the community. The Haskalah is shown as an ideology of the liberal middle-class intelligentsia, which has little to do with the concerns and aspirations of the masses. Indeed, it can even be dangerous for the lower classes, as is demonstrated by the example of the Hasid Mikhl Bukyer, whose decision to “succumb to the man of Dessau” (Moses Mendelssohn) leads eventually to mental illness.

It has to be noted that the mainstream Soviet Yiddish scholarship of the 1930s, represented by such figures as Meir Wiener and Max Erik, interpreted Jewish Enlightenment not only as the positive and progressive movement but also as the ideological precursor of socialism among East European Jews. By sidelining the Haskalah in his novel, Der Nister seems to carry on the ideological line of Litvakov, who disapproved of the maskilim for being aloof to the concerns of the Jewish masses. Litvakov and Der Nister perceived Haskalah as the ideology of the Jewish bourgeoisie alien to the simple people. Instead of enlightening the medieval mentality of a simple Jew like Bukyer, the ideology of Haskalah brings about “a violent spiritual upheaval” with disastrous consequences for his mind. The ideological message that the novel seems to convey is that the spontaneous protest of the masses found its authentic expression not through the rationalism of the Haskalah but through the anarchic mysticism of radical Hasidic sects, such as the Bratslav one.

## Der Nister and the Soviet Historical Novel

*The Family Crisis* is a historical novel in a double sense. It is interesting not only as a portrait of the Jewish Berdichev of the 1870s, but also as a reflection of the spiritual atmosphere in the Soviet Union in the late 1930s. To appreciate this connection between two epochs, we need to understand the significance of the genre of the historical novel for the cultural system of “High Stalinism”, as the period of the late 1930s is now called by some scholars. The promotion of proletarian internationalism in culture and ideology that dominated the 1920s gave way during the following decade to the celebration of the Soviet state as common to all people. The new collective historical hero was not the international working class but the Soviet *narod* – a new classless unity forged out of various nations of the former Russian Empire under the leadership of the Russian people.

The historian of Soviet literature Evgenii Dobrenko sees in the new scheme of Russian history “an attempt to resolve the main problems of Stalin’s epoch: those of personal power, of coup d’état, of economic leap, of strengthening of the state power, centralization and expansion of the state, its internal unity, struggle against internal and external enemies.” Historical fiction, film and drama that began to be produced in big quantities after 1935, were usually little more than a mere “historical masquerade”, representation of contemporary ideological issues in historical guises.<sup>25</sup> This new statist concept of history, which focused on the continuity of state power between the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, gradually pushed out the previous revolutionary scheme, which emphasized the class struggle and the radical break with the old regime. “During the second half of the 1930s the image of the past is being filled with such values as heroic spirit, state, patriotism,” Dobrenko continues.<sup>26</sup>

Yet by sanctioning interest in the past, Stalin and his henchmen not only imposed ideological constraints on historical interpretation by artists and writers, but, unintentionally, also created an escape hatch for writers who were suffocating under the rigid regulations of socialist realism with regard to the representation of the contemporary Soviet reality. The groundbreaking study of the historical novel by Georg Lukács, one of the leading Soviet Marxist theorists of that time, which was published in Russian in 1938, not only offered a theoretical and ideological justification of this genre within the framework of socialist realism, but also expanded this framework.

Without deviating from the general socialist realist guidelines that regulated the representation of history in Soviet literature, *Der Nister* was able to adjust them to the specific case of the Jewish writer. “The changes in Party policy in the thirties enabled him to find a new writing pattern by which to remain true to himself,” Shmeruk explains the writer’s situation.<sup>27</sup> *Der Nister* elaborates on this peculiar vision of the writer based on fusion of socialist realism and romantic nationalism in his 1940 essay entitled “Letter to David Bergelson”:

All that the people have experienced in a certain time, the most joyful as well as the most painful, should be recorded and embodied in types and half-types which are created by the artist’s writing. This writing is the people’s witness, which is unearthed from the people’s deepest innermost treasures, polished and clarified with the help of all means that the people’s artist and plenipotentiary representative is endowed with.<sup>28</sup>

The artistic work is a mirror in which the people can contemplate its collective reflection, with all its merits and defects. The artist, continues Der Nister, is not simply the creator of his people's collective portrait, but also a leader who envisions the way to the future.

Der Nister regarded the writer as a prophetic figure, a visionary capable of conveying his vision via verbal images to his readership. Although this concept may sound like an echo of I. L. Peretz's neo-romanticism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>29</sup> it is in fact close to the concept of "plebeianism" that was developed by Lukács in the 1930s and applied to the historical novel. Lukács was convinced that "when a writer is deeply rooted in the life of the people, when he creates on the basis of his familiarity with the decisive questions of popular life, he can penetrate through to the genuine depths of historical truth."<sup>30</sup> The concept of *narodnost* – "plebeianism" is probably the best English equivalent – is the core of the socialist realist theory of the historical novel, according to which each moment in history is to be artistically represented as an episode in the incessant struggle of the masses against their oppressors for a better life, the struggle that is predestined to culminate in the final victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie.

In his preface to *The Family Crisis* Der Nister reiterates a few points which appear to be in tune with the socialist realist principle of plebeianism. In this novel, the author states, the doomed classes will "proceed quietly on their historically necessitated way toward the abyss," while revealing "the hidden strength of those who lay, profoundly humiliated, in the 'third ring,'" the lower class suburbs where the "vital seed from which would emerge first enlightenment and then the revolutionary movement was already ripening." But, as Shmeruk perceptively observed, Der Nister avoids mentioning such key attributes of his realist method as "critical", let alone "socialist"; instead, he declares his adherence to "the principle of artistic realism" and pronounces himself the follower of Goethe.

The author's decision to stay neutral, without dividing his characters into positive, or "progressive", and the negative, or "reactionary", ones, was a bold statement in the cultural-political context of the 1930s, which could easily provoke accusations in the ideological sin of "bourgeois objectivism". The text of the novel bears witness of the author's meticulous study of the style of the European and Russian realists, but has little in common with the contemporaneous Soviet historical fiction. Der Nister learned from Dostoevsky how to depict the agonizing internal struggle between good and evil in the heart of man and how to show the spiritual quest through the polyphony of different ideological positions personified by various characters;<sup>31</sup> he borrowed from Thomas Mann the concept of the family novel as a tale of the declining patrician merchant class under the pressure of modern financial capitalism; Victor Hugo taught him to aestheticize and romanticize the ugliness of the underworld and to interpret the symbolism of architectural forms. The influence of Balzac is felt in the meticulous depiction of the shadowy world of money and in the images of rapacious dealers; while the depiction of the destructive animalistic instincts of the crowd is the influence of Emile Zola's naturalism.

As the Der Nister stated in the preface, the seeds of the future were hidden in the rebellious and anarchic underworld and marginal Hasidic sects of the third ring. The latent discontent of the poor could occasionally turn into an open confrontation

between courageous individuals and the financial-religious oligarchy, but it would never lead to anything more serious than a public scandal, let alone threaten the foundation of the political order. Moreover, the spontaneous social protest of the Jewish masses did not appear to be connected with the broader Russian revolutionary movement, as was required by the doctrine of socialist realism. A social conflict among Jews as depicted in the novel seemed to follow certain rules of the game: a lot of shouts and threats, but little violence. Both the communal oligarchy and the masses are represented as politically reactive rather than pro-active, as if still living in the static medieval world where politics is the prerogative of the nobility.

The perception of the Jewish community as a static corporation that stays outside the mainstream of political progress of society at large echoes the general socio-historical concept of Karl Marx, but in the particular case of nineteenth-century Russia it follows from the theoretical construction of Moshe Litvakov, which he developed before the revolution of 1917. Litvakov believed that the backward state of social development of the Jewish people precluded them from active participation in the Russian revolutionary movement. According to him, the Jewish social protest expressed itself in the medieval forms of religious heresies and messianic movements, one of which was Bratslav Hasidism, rather than as open rebellions of the poor against the rich.

Der Nister portrayed the Bratslav congregation in the beginning of Chapter 3 as a proto-communist cell, all members of which share their meager possessions and earnings “because, as they put it, money ‘is neither mine nor yours, but God’s’.” (E100-101) But the impulse of social protest is quelled by the strict Hasidic religious discipline that regulates their lives to the minutest detail. The narrator clearly disapproves of their fanaticism, calling it *frumkayt un meshugas* (piety and madness, translated as “fanatically religious”). This reduction of the spontaneous feelings of social protest to the futile religious sectarianism can be seen as an indication that Der Nister still followed Litvakov’s historical scheme at the time when Litvakov himself was probably no longer alive.

The novel contains only a few vague references to the future time when “the finest youth of the town” will come to the third ring to teach the poor and to learn from them. Jointly they will “participate in historically pleasing events”, but this prediction is left unsubstantiated. “This will happen much later”, the narrator promises at the end of Chapter 1, leaving this development for another story. As the novel progresses, the narrator’s vision of the future of N. and its inhabitants becomes more pessimistic, while his attitude to the characters grows tender. Der Nister’s realistic perception of his own time was getting ever gloomier as Europe was sinking into the abyss of World War II – following the same pattern of gradual darkening as his symbolist fiction during the 1920s.

### **Narrator and Characters**

There are two different narrative perspectives in the novel. One is represented by the collective “we”, which implies the contemporary readership for whom the narrated events belong to the universal historical past. The “we”-narrator often sees the past reality through the eyes of a “stranger”, a ghostlike figure that helps the reader to visualize the lost world in the smallest detail. Usually the “we”-narrator sees and



knows everything, but sometimes he becomes uncertain about the motivations and personal reasons of characters' actions. Commanding full control of the story, he tells it according to a certain plan, which presupposes some degree of manipulating the chronology and the speed of the narration. This technique becomes evident, for example, in Chapter 5, where the narrator chooses to pass over some important events, such as the conversations between Luzi and Sruli because, as he explains to us, retelling it now "would delay us for an unnecessarily long time" (175). The mystery is revealed at the end of Chapter 6, when the reader is already prepared for it by the long digression about Sruli's origin.

By adopting a position outside of the historical frame of narration, the "we"-narrator can claim the privilege of the wisdom of hindsight, which enables him to express a definitive judgment about the historical meaning of the events. This detached critical attitude that dominates Chapter 1 becomes more involved as the narrative progresses, as if the narrator gains more personal sympathy for his characters. Sometimes the narrator seems to realize that he has been carried away by his nostalgic sentiments, and decides to regain his strictness.

In a short digression in the end of Chapter 8 the narrator revives for a moment Der Nister's early symbolist fantasy, visualizing with great expressive force "all those things that are mentioned in books," such as fairy-tale animals and creatures, "prophets, seers, wanderers, pilgrims with ashes on their heads and dust in their eyes. In a word, everything that is touched on in those marvelously begun and incompleated tales and half tales, forming a fantastic arabesque of God's Name braided with flowers and with the dead" (273-4) This déjà vu from Der Nister's youths gets interrupted by the censoring voice of the socialist realist of the 1930s, who feels obliged to condemn all "those wildly imagined writings whose authors, with evil intent of because they are themselves misled, have written to blind or to deceive the world." (274).

These occasional lapses into judgmental tone notwithstanding, the tone of sentimental nostalgia prevails in the novel. The narrative voice acquires distinctly *yidishlekh* intonations when the narrator sometimes addresses the reader directly.<sup>32</sup> The tendency towards a tenderer mood is evident in the stylistic changes that Der Nister introduced in the American edition. One example can illustrate this development: the phrase "But in those days people still maintained the archaic manners of their ancestors – even in business matters"(E478, Ch3/II) [fort hot men zikh nokh demlt gefirt a hipsh bisl urfoterish un altfrenkish (YII, 144)] sounded slightly different in the Soviet edition: "fort iz dokh demlt dos lebn nokh primitiv gegangen" (480) [the way of life in those days was still primitive].

The replacement of "primitive" by "archaic" [altfrenkish] in the later version is just one reflection of the shift in the narrator's voice as Der Nister continued working on the novel during the early 1940s. The Second World War, which began for the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, claimed the writer's daughter as its victim: she died during the siege of Leningrad. One may assume that this personal tragedy had affected his attitude as the narrator, transforming the novel from a critical historical account into a eulogy for the world lost to the destruction. The second part, published in New York in 1948, bears a dedication (unfortunately, left out in the English edition) to "My child, my sorrowfully perished daughter Hodl (born in July 1913 in Zhitomir, died in

the spring 1942 in Leningrad). May your father's broken heart be a tombstone on your unknown grave; may this book be dedicated to your eternal sacred memory. Your *tate* – the author.”

The figure of the “stranger” appears as early as the second paragraph of Chapter 1 and accompanies us through the entire narrative. A detached and objective observer, he occasionally offers a critical insight from the informed viewpoint of today, explaining the meaning of events in the light of the Marxist theory of historical materialism. This “supposititious stranger,” as Leonard Wolf calls this narrative device, was sometimes dismissed by critics as a mere “loyalty oath”, “the price Der Nister paid so that he could get on with the work at hand.”<sup>33</sup> In fact, the “stranger” is a more complex artistic construction, which enables the author to combine the conventional realism with symbolist tradition. First, the stranger functions as an realistic device – a bearer of critical historical consciousness, which, not unlike the didactic voice in Tolstoy's novels, helps the author to achieve the effect of objectivity by creating estrangement between the narrator's present audience on the one side and the past narrated events on the other side. Second, the stranger serves as a new guise of the traditional symbolist figure of the “wanderer,” a guest from the future who sees but is not seen.

Being placed in the midst of the events, the stranger alone is capable of perceiving the “disaster, hanging over the place” as well as the first signs of the dawn of redemption arising from the third ring. This wandering stranger stems from the Yiddish modernist tradition, and particularly from the works of Y. L. Peretz. Dan Miron traces the origins of the wanderer figure, which often plays the mythological part of a “minor messiah” in the shtetl fiction, back to the biblical prototypes.<sup>34</sup> In *The Family Crisis*, the realistic-critical and the symbolist-messianic aspects merge in the comprehensive image of the stranger, creating a bizarre fusion of Jewish religious tradition with secular communist messianism.

The complementary narrative perspective is established in Chapter 2 through the childhood memory of Moshe's grandson Mayerl, the future family chronicler. The inner life of the family is shown through the eyes of this sensitive and intelligent teenager. On the realistic plane, his vision is limited and fragmented due to natural constraints of his age and his position within the family. But these limitations are overcome at the symbolist level thanks to Mayerl's remarkable intuition, the “gift of foreknowledge” that runs in the family (358) and occasionally manifests itself in dreams and forebodings of its most sensitive members. Mayerl's perspective complements that of the stranger allowing the reader to see the events from within rather than without. Shmeruk finds that on a personal level Mayerl has a lot in common with Der Nister.<sup>35</sup>

Although *The Family Crisis* is not an autobiographical novel in a strict sense – after all, Mayerl was born about twenty years prior to Der Nister – it contains certain autobiographical references. Mayerl, a passive observer in the beginning, matures during the eventful nine-month time span of the action into an active and responsible character. The pre-war 1941 Soviet edition ends with the gesture of Mayerl joining hands with Moshe and Gitl, as if symbolically accepting responsibility for the future of the Mashber family (Part 2, Chapter 3) and stressing the active aspect. The last section of the novel in its final, post-war form, in which Mayerl takes over the

narration as the family chronicler, recasts him as a more passive figure of the custodian of the past.

Shmeruk sums up the connection between Der Nister's symbolist and realistic periods: "the anonymous images which had populated his previous fantastical visions and tales descended in *The Family Crisis* to the real world, acquiring historical presence."<sup>36</sup> By historicizing the abstract images of his symbolist fiction, Der Nister achieved the desired synthesis between realistic veracity and symbolic generalization. Yet this synthesis was also a compromise. As Dov Sadan pointed out, the main characters of the novel were psychologically out of tune with the historical period where they the author placed them: "whereas the town and the events are firmly embedded in the remote time, a few generations back, and reflect that historical situation, the characters – and the main characters in the first place, all their connections to the historical framework notwithstanding – belong to a more recent time, one generation ago [Sadan lived between 1902 and 1989] and reflect the author's half-native, half-adopted family, his brothers and even the author himself."<sup>37</sup> Sadan's insight can be corroborated by Der Nister's own words about the plan of his novel from a letter to his brother: "my whole generation is involved – what I have seen, heard, experienced, and fancied."<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, each major character in the novel experiences a profound psychological and spiritual crisis, which is caused either by external events (Moshe, Sruli) or by internal problems (Luzi, Alter). In representing the inner world of his characters Der Nister remained truthful to the technique he used in his visionary symbolist tales. By a careful realistic depiction of a setting he prepares the ground for a deep introspective look into the character's troubled self. Once firmly established in a certain place and time, the character reveals his most intimate thoughts and feelings in a long monologue addressed to an imaginary partner. Der Nister's perplexed characters, realistic and symbolist ones alike, bear more resemblance to the turn-of-the-century Jewish intellectuals rather than to the mid-nineteenth-century middle class Jews. The theme of a crisis caused by the disruption of the continuity of life was central to the novel as it was central to its author, who had to face the brutality of the Soviet regime and the devastation of the war, striving to retain his integrity as a human being, a Jew, and an artist.

All action revolves around two poles, the brothers Moshe and Luzi Mashber. As a character firmly set in social reality, Moshe, unlike Luzi and Sruli, has no obvious predecessors in Der Nister's symbolist writing. Yet his realistic nature notwithstanding, Moshe inhabits a world that is saturated with symbolist meanings. Bad omens accompany this character as soon as we first meet him in Chapter 2, where he is depicted visiting the cemetery in order to acquire a burial plot. Moshe's story, as much else in the novel, can be interpreted on two levels: on the material level he is sentenced to the economic extinction by the objective laws of social development as the representative of the old order, whereas on the spiritual one he is himself responsible for his punishment.

Luzi has a number of prototypes among various "dispersed and wandering" types that captured Der Nister's imagination during his symbolist period.<sup>39</sup> In contrast to his well-established brother Moshe, Luzi is permanently on the move, searching for a better place and a more spiritual environment. It is Luzi who represents the family's

*yikhes*, its illustrious genealogy, and carries on the tradition of learning and asceticism that goes back to the age of the exile from Spain. After the death of his beloved rebbe, Luzi's spiritual quest drives him from one Hasidic court to another, sometimes here, sometimes there, until he finds his place among the Bratslav Hasidim of N. On the level of the events, Luzi's story is synchronized with Moshe's: his unexpected elevation to the position of the leader of the Bratslav Hasidim in N. coincides with the beginning of his brother's economic decline.

From the beginning, the two brothers personify two different paths in life. Moshe seeks stability and respect that would place him in the center of the Jewish community of N. As *Der Nister* shows us, this path leads to death, first spiritually then physically. In contrast, Luzi's restless dissatisfaction with himself and his unquenchable spiritual thirst keep him moving and alive. His spiritual alertness enables him to anticipate the destruction that is about to come first upon his brother and then upon the whole town of N. Finally he leaves the doomed place and goes into a permanent exile, back to his position on the periphery.

The third brother Alter plays little role in the action. His significance has to do with his supernatural ability to serve as the barometer of upcoming changes in family and society as well as in weather. Alter's fantasies evoke the mystical landscapes of *Der Nister*'s early works, full of esoteric erotic references to the Song of Songs and cabbalistic books. Alter's lust for Gnessya is the only motif in the novel that can be remotely associated with love in a romantic sense. In this *The Family Mashber* differs from most of European novels. A love story, the traditional backbone of the European novel, cannot be as prominent in the Jewish novel from the traditional life of Jewish middle classes due to the highly ritualized form of relationships between sexes in Judaism. One the whole, Alter is probably the saddest figure in the novel, the absolutely innocent victim of the punishment inflicted on the family. Unable to cope with the fate himself, he nevertheless shows the way out to Mayerl by helping him to develop the talent of creative writing.<sup>40</sup>

Alter's passivity and weakness are counteracted by Sruli Gol's activity and apparent strength. Sruli carries himself as a Jewish Robin Hood, a noble savage who terrorizes the rich and is benevolent to the poor. Sruli's mesmerizing power over people finds its expression in music and dance. And yet, in spite of all his apparent confidence, he was a deeply trouble personality, "a somewhat mad, contradictory person" difficult to understand (140). Sruli certainly belongs to the Dostoyevskian set of types, a man of extremes who longs for the spiritual heights but is drawn to the depths of life by certain restlessness in his character. He plays an ambivalent role of the agent of fate in Moshe's life. Provocative and sometimes aggressive, Sruli at the same time operates as a mediator between different social and religious groups. He is the only character in the novel who feels equally at ease among wealthy Jewish merchants, lower class artisans, Jewish villagers, and Ukrainian peasants. A vagabond with no place of his own, Sruli resembles the type of an uprooted and alienated man, which acquires prominence both in Hebrew and Yiddish literature of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The only elaborate folk character in the novel is Mikhl Bukyer, a lower class version (and something of a caricature) of the symbolic type of spiritual searcher. His association with the biblical Job introduces this motif of key significance for the philosophical concept of the novel. A product of his time and social environment,

Mikhl is ill prepared for the challenges of modernity. His transformation from a Hasid into a maskil turns into a painful “violent spiritual upheaval”. As an innate mystic, he interprets the Haskalah as a new variety of the radical folk myth. Objectively, from the point of view of the Marxist historical materialism, Mikhl’s progress from religious prejudice to rational skepticism must have a positive significance, illustrating the awakening of class consciousness of the Jewish masses. Instead, we see Mikhl as a mentally disturbed person. This deviation from the normative line can be taken as an indication of Der Nister’s skepticism regarding the value of Enlightenment for the Jewish masses, which echoes Litvakov’s negative assessment of the Haskalah as a purely bourgeois phenomenon that remained alien to the people. In Mikhl Der Nister shows us both the bright and the dark aspects of the folk psyche: on the one hand, the quest for social justice and a better life, on the other hand, the dark destructive impulse. It is left to the reader to speculate to what extent the latter can be linked with the orgy of Stalinist terror in the time of the writing of the novel.

The women are mediators between the different male-dominated groups within the family as well as in the world at large. Devoid of any social authority of their own in that traditional world, women nevertheless possessed considerable resources of emotional power, the skillful use of which could make them more efficient than men in a time of crisis. Women were the glue that keeps the social structure together, and a carefully crafted collective portrait of the women of the community of N in Chapter 9 stresses their role in preservation of the tradition and continuity. Gitl’s dance with her two daughters in Chapter 2 conveys her steadfastness in trying to keep her family intact. Trying to mend the ruptures between the brothers within the family, she brought Luzi back to Moshe and re-established the contact with Alter. In her final heroic act, she rescued her bankrupt husband from the angry crowd of his creditors. Service to her husband was the sense of her life, and with Moshe gone nothing was left for her in this world.

Gitl’s lower class counterpart is Malke-Rive, the mother of Moshe’s poor employee Zisye whose illness initiates the chain of Moshe’s misfortunes. Having had lost her husband and five sons, she, like her class brother Mikhl Bukyer, possessed “a diminutive Job in her character”. But her social behavior was far from meek and submissive. Her demand for social justice from Moshe, forcefully put forward became the first in the series of public outbursts of social protest. This also happened to be the key event in the plot development that devastated Moshe. The reference to the biblical Job suggested a spiritual dimension in Malke-Rive’s tragedy without diminishing its concrete social significance. In accordance with the structural pattern of the novel, the initially positive motif of the woman leading social protest is reversed further in the text. In Chapter 7, Part 2, we meet the poor woman Pesye leading the mob against Luzi in an outburst which is orchestrated by the crook Yone the tavern keeper. Here again Der Nister sends us a veiled warning about the potential destructive energy – this time feminine – of mass violence.

### **Symbolic Realism: Fire and Exile**

Two symbolic motifs accompany the reader through the entire novel. Fire is first mentioned in the preface, where Der Nister speaks about the generation of children “who later would turn away from the ancestral traditions and would destroy by fire the mold accumulated in previous centuries,” and then reappears in several dreams

and visions, which bear great symbolic importance for the overall concept of the novel. Moshe's dream in Chapter 2 portends his future: his late father comes to his house with a message: "A spark has been kindled. Part of your house is on fire". Indeed, Moshe sees a small fire but does nothing to put it down or cry for help. Within the novel's symbolic framework this dream augurs Moshe's imminent bankruptcy, but in the larger historical scheme it can be interpreted as a sign of the future destruction of the entire commercial community of N in the fire of revolution and civil war. Fire grows bigger in the dream of Mikhl Bukyer (Part One, Chapter 3), where it envelops the entire town, until it reaches apocalyptic dimensions in the vision of Luzi (Part One, Chapter 8), where people voluntarily go into the flames to die for the sanctification of God's name (E272-3). Although both scenes belong to the first part of the novel published in 1939, in retrospect they may seem like a prediction of the mass murder of Berdichev Jews in 1941.<sup>41</sup>

As Dan Miron tells us, the motif of fire devouring the town is the core element of the comprehensive metaphor of the Jewish shtetl which is closely linked with the motif of exile and wandering. The multiple fires in Yiddish literature "are presented as reflections and duplications of the one great historical fire that lay at the very root of the Jewish concept and myth of *galut* (exile): the fire that had destroyed [...] both the First and Second Temples of Jerusalem."<sup>42</sup> An abstract wanderer comes to a big town and leaves it while the town people go about their business in some of Der Nister's earlier works, such as in the story "A Tale of Kings" based on Rabbi Nahman's tales<sup>43</sup>.

Although in *The Family Crisis* the town and the wanderer are depicted in the realistic manner, their symbolic core remains essentially the same as in Der Nister's earlier texts. The vision of Luzi Mashber (Part One, Chapter 8) the town of N. appears as a replica of the archetypal eternal city, an East European mock-up of Rome. Der Nister refers to the medieval Jewish legend about the Messiah sitting at the gate of Rome disguised as a leprous stranger beggar. The inhabitants, preoccupied with their business, pass by and spit at the man, without noticing his radiant features (271). This symbolic vision turns into reality in the final chapters of Part Two, where the mob, instigated by the crooks in the service of the community oligarchy, drives Luzi and Sruli out of town into the exile. The exile is both curse and salvation, Der Nister suggests to his contemporary reader. It turns into a curse if we get too deeply involved with the vanity of the world as represented by the busy city life. But it can also save us, once we disengage from the temptations of world and set off on the eternal path of searching the truth.

### **Conclusion: Composition and Meaning**

It has long been thought that Der Nister could have also had written Part Three of the novel, which he did not manage to publish and which might have been confiscated at the time of his arrest in 1949. This seems not to be the case. Der Nister probably did initially plan a three-part novel, of which the 1941 Moscow edition constitutes the first two parts. Part One of this edition includes chapters 1-9, and Part Two chapters 10-15. In the New York edition, Part One contains 12 chapters and Part Two has 10 chapters. In other words, after the 1941 publication Der Nister added to his novel 7 more chapters, which could have formed a Part Three in accordance with the original plan. Later, however, Der Nister probably changed the structure of his novel. The

manuscript of the novel, which has been deposited in the Russian State Archives of Literature and Art in Moscow in 1990, contains the author's remark at the beginning of chapter 4 of Part Two (according to the New York edition), which indicates it as the beginning of Part Three.

Therefore we should consider the novel essentially complete, although, of course, the author would probably have made some changes in its text had he had a chance to prepare it for a new publication.<sup>44</sup> Judging by a few indications in the text of the novel, *The Family Crisis* was meant to be followed with a continuation portraying the next generation of the Mashber family against the background of the first Russian revolution of 1905, but this would be a completely different work. The Yiddish critic Yehoshua Rapoport perceptively suggested that had Der Nister actually written such a novel, it would turn out a "profanation" because he would not be able to maintain the same delicate balance between his creative imagination and restrictive self-censorship as he did in his novel set in the more remote and ideologically safe period of the 1870s.<sup>45</sup>

To understand the meaning of the novel is can be helpful to compare the structure of the Soviet and the American versions. The initial two-part edition of 1941 was a straightforward tale of Moshe's bankruptcy. Its first part focused on the events that contributed to his misfortune, whereas the second part was devoted to the depiction of it. The division between the parts coincided with the Jewish New Year, the symbolic moment of spiritual accounting for one's past sins. Within this framework Moshe's story was presented primarily as an illustration of the historical forces at work according to the objective laws of social development, which carried a veiled moral message. Yet Moshe did not die at the end, which left the novel open for the third part.

In the second edition of 1943-48 the same two-part structure gets expanded, with the family story becoming dominant over history. The division between the two parts gets shifted forward, now the first part ends on the eve of Alter's engagement. By the end of Part Two the family saga is brought to its logical end, with one main character, Moshe, dying peacefully after having suffered for his sins, and the other, Luzi, leaving N. for good. The added seven chapters that tell the story of Moshe's imprisonment soften the harshness of historical judgment and shift the emotional balance towards sentimental reflection on the futility of worldly aspirations. In the final version the novel reads like an elegy for the past world rather than its critique.

An authorial digression in Chapter 8 (E264) outlines the plan of the novel: Part One mainly describes the characters, whereas Part Two narrates the events. Indeed, the novel gets off to a very slow start. The actual events that set the action in motion – Rudnitski's refusal to pay his debt to Moshe, Zisye's work accident, and the resulting quarrel between the brothers – occur as late as Chapter 5, by which time we are already thoroughly familiar with the setting and the main characters. Nothing happens unexpectedly. Every event is preceded by manifold signs and premonitions. The symbolic framework, disguised under the cover of everyday life and visible only to a few individuals in possession of the special gift of clairvoyance, slowly comes through as abstract symbols thicken into solid facts of social reality. The symbolic language of dance, dreams, and sensations gets translated into the realist vernacular of money, property and law. This technique of slowing down the narration requires

constant attention to details on the part of the reader. The narrative momentum never builds up, because the dynamic action constantly gets interrupted by long descriptive digressions. Every action scene is constructed like a finale of an act in ballet, where all participating characters suddenly turn up in one place and perform a carefully choreographed dramatic dance.

The family-centered narration unfolds in a slow chronological order, interrupted by flashbacks, dreams, visions, and other digressions that add symbolic depth and illuminate the characters' inner world. The author deliberately limits his use of the full repertoire of the European realistic novel, especially when it comes to the relationships between the sexes. Intense erotic undercurrents that run beneath the middle class propriety are either suppressed and disguised under symbolic forms, or displaced to the lower reality of the third ring. The effect of slow pace is achieved by the intensive use of repetitions at several levels: as the repetitive syntactic structure of phrases, as repetition of images (like the portrait of the Czar in the tavern and in brothel), and as repetition of events (for example, Sruli first helps Malke-Rive and then Mikhl in the same fashion; Mikhl comes twice to Reb Dudi to reaffirm his renunciation of community; Sruli pays two visits to Brokha, etc.).

Some events mirror others, thus creating the sense of symmetrical order in the world of the novel, and certain details occur more than once: when Sruli comes to Moshe's house a second time, now as the owner, he sits down looking at the same corner of the dining room where he had set his knapsack down at his last visit in this house, when he was driven out (p. 447). The installment of Mikhl Bukyer's widow with her family in Moshe's house comes as a compensation of Moshe expelling Sruli in the beginning of the novel. This logic affects the narrative time as well: the Yom Kippur season in chapter 9 of the first part is mirrored by Purim season in chapter 9 of the second, Moshe's fall by his release. All these devices help to add gravity to the realistic description, imbuing it with symbolist meanings. Deer Nister, as Leonard Wolf puts it, "has created a realistic novel and compelled it to serve his symbolist imagination."<sup>46</sup>

The fusion between realism and symbolism enabled Der Nister to overcome the artistic impasse that he reached by the end of 1920s. In her study of Der Nistor's symbolist period, Delphine Bechtel points to the situation of loss of meaning in his late symbolist works: "The reader of the stories, like the hero, searches for a system of interpretation, for values, but there is no frame of reference, we are lost in a forest of symbols without the possibility of transcending them."<sup>47</sup> In *The Family Crisis* Der Nister creates a new frame of reference by setting his symbolist tale into a realistic historical context.

As his other works, the novel is a parable about spiritual quest. In this parable the main character is not Moshe, the protagonist of the realistic novel, but Luzi, the eternal symbolist wanderer. Luzi's quest leads him from his middle class origins to the masses, where the social and religious discontent is slowly ripening. Luzi paves the way for Mayerl, the future writer, who will soon join the masses in their eternal struggle for the better life. Past and future may appear separated on the realistic plane, but they are interlinked on the symbolist one. The town of N. with its elaborate social and religious hierarchy is doomed to extinction by the fire of history, but the Jewish people is immortal. This is the message of the novel written on the eve of the



catastrophe of East European Jewry. Those who follow the quest have to leave the town and might escape its destruction, but those who stay behind, holding to their status and possessions, will perish in flames.

Der Nister's way to realism was neither straightforward nor easy, but it led him to his greatest artistic achievement. Shmeruk summarized the significance of *The Family Crisis* as the writer's crowning work:

He remained true to his way in literature and to his worldview that he developed from his youth. All his artistic achievements merged to the degree of perfection in this book – the depth of his vision, his rich imagery and his original style – and his ability to capture the Jewish historical reality that was disappearing before the eyes of his generation but was not adequately represented in literature before him.<sup>48</sup>

Like some Russian symbolists before him, most notably Aleksandr Blok, Der Nister outgrew rather than betrayed the norms and conventions of symbolism. In the 1930s symbolism as an artistic style was not only out of favor with Soviet ideologues of literature, but it also exhausted itself artistically. Its formal conventions became too restrictive and narrow for Der Nister's imagination. By choosing the genre of the realistic novel, the writer remained true to the quest of his life but changed the manner of its presentation. This enabled him to create one of the greatest novels of twentieth-century European literature, which combines a meticulous realistic restoration of the past, a disturbing testimony of the present, and a prophetic vision of the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel H. Dresner, *Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev: Portrait of a Hasidic Master* (New York: Shapolsky, 1986), 46

<sup>2</sup> S. Y. Abramovitsh, *Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler: Fishke the Lame and Benjaming the Third*, edited by Dan Miron and Ken Frieden, translated by Hillel Halkin (New York: Schocken, 1996), 361-362.

<sup>3</sup> Mendele Moykher Sforim, *Geklibene verk*, vol. 4 (New York: YKUF, 1946), 131.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. lv.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the literary image of Berdichev see in Mikhail Krutikov, 'Berdichev in Russian Jewish Literary Imagination: From Israel Aksenfeld to Friedrich Gorenshtein', in *The Shtetl: Image and Reality*, eds. Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutikov (Oxford: Legenda, 2000), 91-114.

<sup>6</sup> *The Bones of Berdichev*

<sup>7</sup> *Travel Companions (...)* ...

<sup>8</sup> Zalmen Reyzen, *Leksikon*, vol. 2 (Vilno: Kletskein, 1930), col. 580.

<sup>9</sup> David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), 195.

<sup>10</sup> Zalmen Reyzen, *Leksikon funder yiddisher literature un prese* (Warsaw: Tsaentral, 1914), Col. 411.

<sup>11</sup> Der Nister, "The Hermit and the Little Goat", in *The Dybbuk and the Yiddish Imagination: A Haunted Reader*. Edited and translated by Joachim Neugroschel (Syracuse Unvierstiy Press, 2000), 241

<sup>12</sup> Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing*, 211.

<sup>13</sup> Khone Shmeruk, "Der Nister's 'Under a Fence': Tribulations of a Soviet Yiddish Symbolist", *The Field of Yiddish, Second Collection* (The Hague: Mouton, 1965), p. 265.

<sup>14</sup> Bechtel, 19.

<sup>15</sup> Shmeruk, "Der Nister's 'Under a Fence'", p. 285.

<sup>16</sup> Leonard Wolf, 15

<sup>17</sup> Letter to Kipnis

<sup>18</sup> Peter B. Maggs, *The Mandelstam and "Der Nister" Files: An Introduction to Stalin-era Prison and Labor Camp Records* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996),

<sup>19</sup> Bechtel, 8.

<sup>20</sup> David Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing*, 196

<sup>21</sup> Hillel Zeitlin, R[abbi] *Nakhman Braslaver: der zeer fun Podolye* (New York: Matones, 1952), 296-7

<sup>22</sup> One exception was Peretz Markish, who even kept his Polish passport until his arrest in 1948.

Markish's poetic cycle *The Dancer* (1940) about the Warsaw Ghetto was not published in the Soviet Union till ...

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<sup>23</sup> Dov Sadan, "Vegn Dem Nister" in *Toyern un tirn: eseyen un etyudn* (Tel Aviv: Yisroel-bukh, 1979), 64-65

<sup>24</sup> The marginalization of the Haskalah in the novel was noticed already by Nachman Meisel. He expressed his surprise that Der Nister left out the significant group of maskilim who were active in Berdichev during the 1860s-70s, among them Sh. Ya. Abramovitsh. Nachman Meisel. *Forgeyer un mitsaytler* (New York: YKUF, 1946), 357.

<sup>25</sup> Hans Günther and Evgenii Dobrenko (eds.) *Sotsrealisticheskii kanon* (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2000), 883

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 886.

<sup>27</sup> Smeruk, "Der Nister's 'Under a Fence': Tribulations of a Soviet Yiddish Symbolist," 285.

<sup>28</sup> *Der Nister, Dertseylungen un eseyen* (New York: YKUF, 1957), 290.

<sup>29</sup> I. L. Peretz Reader, ...

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Pikes, 282

<sup>31</sup> Shmeruk and Meisel specifically point out the similarities with *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Idiot*.

<sup>32</sup> Rapoport, "Notitsn", 74.

<sup>33</sup> Leonard Wolf, 'Introduction', in *The Family Mashber* (New York: Summit Books, 1987), 24.

<sup>34</sup> Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 31.

<sup>35</sup> Chone Shmeruk, "Der Nister, hayav veyetsirato," in *Der Nister, Hanazir vehagdiya* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1963), 39.

<sup>36</sup> Shmeruk, "Der Nister, hayav veyetsirato," 36.

<sup>37</sup> Sadan, 60.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Shmeruk, "Der Nister's 'Under a Fence': Tribulations of a Soviet Yiddish Symbolist," 285

<sup>39</sup> Shmeruk, "Der Nister: hayav veyetsirato," 36-37.

<sup>40</sup> The autobiographical aspect of the connection between Alter and Mayerl is mentioned by Shmeruk in a footnote to his introduction. According to Der Nister's brother Motl, Alter has a prototype in Uncle Tsadek, their mother's mentally unstable brother, who lived in their house in Berdichev and with whom Pinye and his brother Aron spoke 'common language'. 'Der Nister, hayav veyetsirato', 52, n.4.

<sup>41</sup> Russian writer Vassily Grossman described the destruction of his native Jewish community in his reportage 'The Berdichev Tragedy', which was later included in *Black Book*, edited by him and Ilya Ehrenburg.

<sup>42</sup> Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl*, 18.

<sup>43</sup> In Yenne Velt, pp. 470-552.

<sup>44</sup> On the history of the publication of the novel see Khone Shmeruk, "Arba igrot Der Nister: Letoldot sifro 'Di mishpokhe Mashber' vehadpasotav", *Behinot*, 7-8 (1977-8), 226-7. Shmeruk did not see the second edition of 1941.

<sup>45</sup> Y. Rapoport, "Notitsn vegn Dem Nisters 'Di mishpokhe Mashber'." *Di goldene keyt*, 43 (1962), 69. Indeed, parallel to *The Family Crisis* Der Nister worked on a novel about 1905, which he left unfinished. The draft of the novel was published in *Sovetish Heymland*, ... , and its artistic weakness proves Rapoport's insight.

<sup>46</sup> Wolf, 'Introduction', 17.

<sup>47</sup> Bechtel, *Der Nister's Work 1907-1929*, 266.

<sup>48</sup> Shmeruk, 41.