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Kishinev Revisited: A Place in Jewish Historical Memory

DAN LAOR

ARISE AND GO NOW to the city of slaughter,” עִיר הַהֲרָגָה — so says the opening line of Bialik’s immortal poem, written one hundred years ago. It was obviously not the first time that I came across this line; but now—over ten years after the fall of Soviet Russia, and as the roads to Eastern Europe were made open—I felt compelled to obey this statement literally and pay a visit to Kishinev, a place so deeply engraved in our collective memory. “There with thine own hand touch, and with the eyes of thine head, / Behold on tree, on stone, on fence, on mural clay, / The spattered blood and dried brains of the dead” (lines 3–5).

I landed at the Kishinev airport on July 17, 2003, which happened to be the seventeenth of the month of Tammuz—the day on which (according to the Jewish calendar) the Roman army led by Titus broke down the wall of Jerusalem, an event followed by the destruction of the city and the Temple. The seventeenth of Tammuz has been therefore declared as a fast day and as the beginning of a twenty-one-day period, culminating in Tishah b’Av, that is dedicated to the remembrance of the great destruction and the loss of Jewish nationhood. Bialik, who came to Kishinev for a historical mission, arrived in the city—according to his biographer Fishel Lachower—at the beginning of the month of Sivan, and left sometime during Tammuz (June–July 1903). After almost a month in Kishinev, he traveled north to the house of his father-in-law, in Korostishev, a small village on the road between Kiev and Zhytomyr. He stayed there a few weeks and wrote “In the City of Slaughter” instead of preparing an official report for which he was

commissioned by the historical committee in Odessa (Lachower 1964: 429). In the margins of the poem, first published in *Hazeman*, Bialik inscribed the exact days of composition: Tammuz – the eleventh of Tishrei Tarsad (July–September 22, 1903). By the time that the poem was written, Bialik was thirty years old and his position as a leading figure of Hebrew letters was fully established.

Soon after I landed in the relatively small airport, heavy rains began; the roads leading to the city were thick with fog, and the streets of Kishinev were almost flooded, thus creating an atmosphere that seemed to fit with the image of a place traditionally associated with the “City of Slaughter.” Within an hour or two, however, the rains stopped, the sun was shining, the trees on the sidewalks were glittering, and early summer was everywhere. It was probably under the impact of similar conditions that Bialik wrote in Kishinev his hymn to the sun, “Im shamesh,” which he sent on June 27 to Joseph Klausner in Odessa, to be published in *Hashiloah*. But later on, as he became more and more obsessed by the testimonies of the victims of the pogrom, to which he was exposed day after day, the beauty of nature and the glittering sun turned into an emblem of the neutrality of nature—and maybe also that of God—in the face of the suffering and death of the local Jews: “For God called up the slaughter and the spring together, / The slayer slew, the blossom burst, and it was sunny weather!” השמש זָרְחָה, הַשָּׁטָה פָּרְחָה וְהַשּׁוּחַט שָׁחַט (Hebrew line 22; English lines 25–26). This powerful image, invented a hundred years ago, has been used extensively in the course of the last century in defining various modes of Jewish victimhood, unforeseen then by Bialik.

Kishinev of today (officially called Chisinau) is the capital of the Republic of Moldavia, which received its independence in 1991, soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union. On the main street of the capital—Stefan Cel Mare (formerly Alexandrovskaya)—one can already recognize the presence of a McDonald’s branch; on nearby Pushkin street is a new, fashionable mall called “Sun City,” and the CNN broadcast is transmitted to one’s hotel room—symbolizing the slow shift of the country from long years of communism to a market economy. Nevertheless, Kishinev is the capital of one of the less developed countries in the ex-Soviet Union, its five million people living on an average income of 50–80

dollars a month. Approximately 800,000 people live in the capital, among them no more than 7,000 Jews: at the beginning of the last century, there were more than 50,000 Jews living in Kishinev, almost half the population; more than a hundred thousand Jews lived there on the eve of the Second World War (36 percent of the population), and even in the 1970s—before the great migration began—approximately 49,000 Jews lived in Kishinev, constituting 14 percent of the total population. Yet under the auspices of the new regime, which vowed to defend the cultural freedom of the various minorities, the small community of Kishinev Jews is going through a process of revival: an active community center, a library, two Jewish schools, local newspapers, active synagogues, a welfare center—much more than had ever been seen in the Soviet era. Local authorities have even promised that the huge “Lemnaria” synagogue—from where the funeral of the Torah scrolls desecrated in the pogrom had made its way—will soon return to Jewish hands, to serve as a “community campus” for Kishinev Jews.

In a notebook kept in the Bialik archives in Tel Aviv, together with other manuscripts related to his Kishinev visit, Bialik made himself a note to check on the first day of his tour “where the pogrom started, and if it started in one place or in many places all at once.” This brought Bialik in no time to the Chufliya area, mentioned at the very beginning of the collection of testimonies that he compiled while still in Kishinev, published by Ya‘akov Goren in 1991. According to Yudl Fishman, a witness with whom Bialik spoke, the first house attacked by the rioters in the 1903 pogrom was the Feldman house, at 22 Svechnaya Street, which was facing Chufliya Ploshchad—a large square that served during the holidays as a gathering place for the masses, as a fair, and as a sort of amusement park. “At 4 in the afternoon,” says Fishman, “a few hooligans moved away from the big crowd; some of them were very young and some were adults. They started to break the windows of the big house owned by Feldman, and then moved on to break the door of an empty house next to him” (Goren 1991: 65). Chufliya Ploshchad is still there, though nothing remains of the Feldman house, where a large, formerly Soviet hotel—Hotel National—is now located. The old Svechnaya Street (now with a new name) has turned into a modern

four-lane street, with the famous Greek Orthodox Chufliya Church—painted blue—serving as the sole reminder of those distant times.

Trying to follow Bialik's footsteps, I left Chufliya Ploshchad and went toward the inner part of the city, holding an old map and an updated one and trying to make connections between the old Russian street names and the new Rumanian/Moldavian names, many of them recently invented. The driving force behind my journey is still Bialik's poem—"Proceed thence to the ruins, the split walls reach, / . . . Pass over the shattered hearth, attain the broken wall" (lines 6–8)—but it is Bialik's detailed reports on the investigations that he led that serve as my Baedeker: for it is there—not in the poem—that the poet was careful in writing down the names of the witnesses with whom he had spoken and their exact location, thus defining the territory of the pogrom as well as his own itinerary. Bialik was leading a very systematic investigation: holding a huge map of Kishinev—recently found in his archives—he walked along the streets and alleys in which the pogrom had taken place and visited the relevant houses, shops, and yards, making an effort to meet the witnesses in their own private locations. Pesach Averbuch, a local teacher who served as Bialik's assistant, writes in his memoirs: "Most of our work was the visits to the places hurt by the pogrom and taking testimonies from the victims and from other eyewitnesses" (Averbuch 1963: 28). He also remarks that Bialik was extremely gifted in his ability to hold an open conversation with the people he met, while encouraging them to speak out and tell their traumatic story.

Walking the streets of Kishinev reminds me of the opening scene of Agnon's masterpiece *A Guest for the Night*—the search for the past in a city that has changed its face. In the former Nikolayevskaya Street (now called Columna), where some of the most severe atrocities happened, I searched desperately for two addresses: first for house number 52, the Sobelmans' yard, in which the murders of a home tutor named Yudl Krupnik and his son took place: as the killers came into the yard, so says the report, they recognized a man at the top of a ladder, dragged him down, and beat him to death. Then they took hold of his son, Yitshak Meir, who was running from a hiding place. One of the Gentiles started

to beat him with a broken table. “At noon, they [the father and son] were taken away by carriages,” Bialik was told by one of the witnesses (Goren 1991: 78).

I was also searching for house number 11, where Bialik was shocked to hear the testimony of Rivka Schiff, who told him in great detail how she and another young woman were raped in the attic in the presence of her husband and some of her neighbors. “I was begging for mercy: ‘Don’t touch me, Mitya. You have known me for so many years,’” she told Bialik, who wrote down all that she said, lines that were later echoed in his poem. Then “I fell down to the ground, and Mitya started to make love with me, as other members of the gang were waiting. My husband and all the other Jews in the attic saw when Mitya was lying on me” (Goren 1991: 80).

My attempts to find these two houses were not very successful. Though some parts of this previously prosperous street remain as they were a hundred years ago, most of it has drastically changed in this long period, in which the city has been exposed to war, destruction, massive migration, and the frequent transposition of political regime.

Yet as I move farther away from the main streets of Kishinev, toward the lower part of the city, I find myself in a much less developed and semirural area, near the Byck river. “Descend into the valley . . . there / A garden flourishes, and in the garden / A barn, a shed—it was their abattoir” (lines 127–29). Indeed, in this area, which was once populated mainly by Jews and later was included in the Jewish ghetto established in 1941, we get a glimpse of old-time Kishinev: narrow, curved, and unpaved streets; small one-story houses with wooden fences and triangular tile roofs; and, above all, large inner yards, some of them used today for growing vegetables or for maintaining cattle. It was into these yards that families fled for shelter, and it was there where some of the most brutal scenes of torture took place. It is here, more than in other places in the city, that you can see—at least in some of the houses—the attics, the roofs, the cellars, the hiding places to which the speaker in the poem relates in a most imperative manner: “Unto the attic mount, upon thy feet and hands” (line 38). “Lift thine eyes to the roof” (line 53). “Descend then, to the cellars of the town” (line 78). By walking in these

alleys, you, the reader, may also become an eyewitness of the pogrom, even if you were not there when it happened.

One street in this area is the former Azyatskaya Street—now Romana—which is, incidentally, the location of the “22 School,” the central Jewish day school in today’s Kishinev. Only three houses remain from old times, the middle one being Azyatskaya 13. This crumbling house, with its inner yard—now shared by an eighty-two-year-old Jewish woman named Tauba Abramovna and her Russian and Moldovian neighbors—has gained its reputation because of the widely circulated report published by the Russian writer Vladimir Korolenko in the aftermath of the pogrom, titled “House Number 13.” Azyatskaya 13 was also important for Bialik, who carried out there a very long and thorough investigation (Goren 1991: 145–53). Lea Grinshpun, whose husband, Mordecai, was murdered in the pogrom, was the first to tell Bialik how the Gentiles came to the street on the second day of the pogrom and began to break the windows of the house. Then they destroyed a nearby shop, and finally they broke through the backyard, where all the families tried to find refuge. “The *Zhids* are hiding,” they screamed, and opened the wood store, which was used as a hiding place for several families, taking by force her husband, who stretched out his hands, crying and begging for his life. “Come, now, and I will bring thee to their lairs / The privies, jakes and pigpens where the heirs / Of Hasmoneans lay, with trembling knees, / Concealed and cowering,—the sons of the Maccabees!” (lines 113–16). Yet the crying and begging of Mordecai Grinshpun, a glazier, were in vain: according to Lea, one hooligan thrust a knife directly into his throat, and then the other hooligans dragged him, wounded and bleeding, into the corridor of the house, where they beat him with metal and wooden yokes, then dragged him back to the yard, beat him again, and left him dying. “Close now the gate behind thee; / Be closed in darkness now. . . / So tarrying there thou wilt be one with pain and anguish / And wilt fill up with sorrow thine heart for all its days” (lines 164–67).

Bialik’s tour of Kishinev—I refer now to his poetic itinerary, the way it is described in his grand poem—brings him, at a later stage, to the outskirts of the city. “Beyond the suburbs go, and reach the burial ground. / Let no man

see thy going; attain that place alone, / A place of sainted graves and martyr-stone” (lines 175–77). A newly wrought metal gate, painted in gray, and a shield written in Yiddish — קעשענעווער יידישער בית-עולם — welcomes you as you climb the hill on which the Jewish cemetery is located. From the new fence, you turn left, and after a ten-minute walk along the high wall of the cemetery, you reach the old rusty gate, now closed; behind it is the room of purification, to which the bodies of the dead were brought in the aftermath of the pogrom; a bit farther on lies their gravesite, easily identified by the presence of a memorial for the desecrated Torah scrolls, buried here in a mass funeral that took place on August 6, 1903. The path between the semi-broken tombstones is very narrow, the foliage has grown thick and high, and the accessibility to the graves is rather difficult. The letters engraved on the tombstones have blurred throughout the years, making it almost impossible to read the inscriptions in full. Nonetheless, I managed to read at least one of them and to copy it into my notebook: פ"נ הקדוש יהודה ב"ר שמואל קראפניק, כג ניסן תרס"ג, תנצ"ה. Indeed, this is the grave of Yudel Krupnik, the home tutor who was dragged from his hiding place on the ladder and killed with sticks, together with his twenty-year-old son, Yitshak Meir. “Stand on the fresh-turned soil. / Such silence will take hold of thee, thy heart will fail / With pain and shame, yet I / Will let no tear fall from thine eye” (lines 178–81).

Going down the hill, I cross Sculena Park, a beautiful place with large tennis courts built during Soviet times on the grounds of the eastern part of the Jewish cemetery, which had been demolished. It is no wonder that this spot was chosen by local authorities in the post-Soviet era as a location to set up a memorial dedicated to the victims of the 1903 pogrom. The memorial was inaugurated in 1993, and a new part was recently added to mark the centennial of this event: לעולם נכאב את זכרונם / ולנצח לא ימושו מלבינו “We shall forever maintain their memory with pain / and never will we let them shift away from our hearts.” The re-inauguration of the monument took place on April 7, 2003, and was followed by a series of official events—including a public ceremony in the Philharmonic Hall and a scientific conference dedicated to the pogrom. As Jewish cultural heritage is receiving its full legitimacy in today’s Moldavia, the memory of the

pogrom—which had been suppressed during the Soviet regime—is finally receiving formal expression and serves as a unifying myth for Kishinev’s Jews.

On the eve of my departure, I decided to pay a visit to the distinguished Yiddish writer Yekhiel Shraybman. Shraybman, who lives on the upper floor of a rather shabby and deteriorated housing project, celebrated his ninetieth birthday in 2003. Born in Bessarabia, he arrived in Kishinev after the Soviet occupation in 1940, fled to central Asia when the Nazis came, and returned to the city in 1946. In his small study, Shraybman told me about Jewish life in Kishinev, mainly about a local Yiddish center, where a small and a very devoted audience attends his lectures every month. This is for him his one and only public activity, as most of his time he sits in his room and writes his books and articles, which are published in various places, including Israel and the United States. Shraybman is certain that Jewish life in Kishinev will continue to exist, though he has great doubts about the future of Yiddish. “Am I not the last of the poets of Zion / and aren’t you also the very last readers?” pondered Judah Leib Gordon, himself a resident of the Russian Pale of Settlement in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Speaking about the 1903 pogrom, Shraybman confirms that it has become a significant event for the Jewish community now living in Kishinev. He also considers it to be a very important event in his own life, since for someone born in 1913 this event was not just history. He has written a few articles about it, some of them published in the Russian Yiddish magazine *Sovetish heymland*. One of his recent articles on this subject refers to Bialik and to his poem *שחיטה-שטאָט*. Shraybman thinks that Bialik was a genius, a poet of the stature of one of the great prophets, though he does not accept his rhetoric. “Go find my article,” he says to me. “It will be published in the New York *Forverts* any day.” And so I did: a few days after returning from Moldavia to Israel, I managed to get hold of the August 1 issue of the Jewish *Forward*, where I read the following lines:

In Kishinev—for one hundred years—tombstones have stood on the graves of almost fifty victims from the . . . pogrom. On each tombstone, the word “Holy” [הקדוש] is engraved. . . . Let us honor their memory! [פֿאַר זײַער אָנדענק!] Let us take off our hats in honor of

the heroes of the Kishinev pogrom. The holy heroes. It was not at all simple: a few Jewish youngsters resisted against the Kishinev pogromists. Some were killed, some defeated the pogromists and turned them away. . . . [And] it is painful to see our national poet Ḥayyim Naḥman Bialik, in his work on the Kishinev pogrom, moralizing severely against the killed people who had let themselves be killed and did not resist. [As we know,] things were somehow different. . . . Let us honor their memory.

There is indeed nothing new in this argument, which has been repeated many times since the publication of the poem in 1903. Shraybman himself quotes an article written decades ago by the Yiddish writer Mordecai Spector, who visited Kishinev soon after the pogrom and reported about a few cases of self-defense. This debate is by now passé, as it has already been agreed that Bialik was promoting a distinct public agenda, disregarding historical data of which he was fully aware. However, the publication of Shraybman's "miniatures" of August 2003 is yet another proof of the living interest in this work and the need to come to grips with it—whether in Kishinev, Tel Aviv, or New York. This need emerges not only from the appreciation of Bialik's artistic genius—well reflected in this work—but, most of all, from the unshattered recognition of the impact of this poem on the Jewish mind and Jewish politics in the twentieth century. "The day in which this great poem was written is maybe the most important date in the history of modern Hebrew poetry," wrote Yaakov Fichmann in a book dedicated to the poetry of Bialik (Fichmann 1953: 60). And it is very much this feeling of awe in the face of "In the City of Slaughter" that urged me to visit Kishinev, to follow Bialik's footsteps in the city, and, in a way, to make myself present at that historical moment in which this unique poem was generated.

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