

MYROSLAV SHKANDRIJ

The Jewish Voice in Ukrainian Literature

Jews have contributed to Ukrainian literature over several generations, but the Jewish voice — one that expresses explicitly Jewish concerns and articulates the problems of a Jewish-Ukrainian identity — can perhaps be best viewed through the work of three individuals: Hrytsko Kernerenko, Leonid Pervomaisky and Moisei Fishbein. An examination of their work outlines the evolution that this voice and identity have undergone in the 20th century and suggests a spectrum of responses to the predicaments faced by Jewish Ukrainian writers.

Hrytsko Kernerenko

Kernerenko (Grigorii, Hryhoriy, or Hirsch Kerner) appears to have been the first Jewish author to write in Ukrainian. He represents the generation of Jewish intellectuals who in the 1880s met their Ukrainian counterparts “at the crossroads,” to use the title of Ivan Franko’s novel, *Perekhresni stezhky* (1900), and opened a dialogue with them. This was a pioneering group of Jewish intellectuals who began to assume a Ukrainian identity, express pro-Ukrainian positions and prepared the Jewish-Ukrainian rapprochement that resulted in the declaration of Jewish autonomy by the Ukrainian National Republic (UNR) in 1917.

Born in 1863 into an affluent family in Hulyay-Pole, Kernerenko completed his post-secondary education in Munich, traveled throughout Italy and Austria in 1883 and then returned to help manage the family estate, which included an agricultural machinery factory, a liquor plant, a large store and 500 hectares of land leased to German colonists. A Ukrainophile with a large library, he began publishing in the 1880s in *Ukrayinska khata* (Ukrainian Home), *Hromadska dumka* (Community Thought), *Rada* (Council), *Skladka: almanakh* (Collection: an Almanac) and *Literaturno-Naukovyi Vistnyk* (*Literary-Scientific Herald*), the most important Ukrainian periodical of its day, which began appearing in Lviv in 1898. Four books of poetry appeared — *Nevelychkyi zbirnyk tvoriv Hryt-*

ska Kernerrenka (A Small Collection of Works by Hrytsko Kernerrenko, 1890), *Shchetynnyk* (Kharkiv, 1891), *V dosuzhyi chas* (n.p. 1896), and *Menty nadkhnennya* (Moments of Inspiration, 1910) — and one story, *Pravdyva kazka* (True Story, 1886 and 1890). A play entitled “Khto pravdy vkryvaye – toho Boh karaye, abo Lyubov syloyu ne vizmesh” (God punishes whoever conceals the truth, or love cannot be forced), which deals with conscription to the army in the reign of Nicholas I, was banned by the censors because of its depiction of corrupt administrators and appalling prison conditions, particularly for women inmates.¹

Kernerrenko's lyrics appeared in the leading anthologies: Franko's *Akordy. Antolohiya ukrayinskoyi liryky vid Smerty Shevchenka* (Accords. Anthology of Ukrainian Lyrics from Shevchenko's Death, 1903); Oleksa Kovalenko's *Ukrayinskyi deklamator. Rozvaha* (The Ukrainian Declaimer: An Entertainment, 1905 and 1908) and *Ukrayinska muza. Poetychna antolohiya* (Ukrainian Muse. A Poetry Anthology, 1908); and Bohdan Lepkyi's two-volume *Struny. Antolohiya ukrayinskoyi poeziyi vid naydavnishykh do nynishnikh chasiv* (Strings. An Anthology of Ukrainian Poetry from the Earliest to Contemporary Times, 1922). He also published translations of Heine, Sholom Aleichem and Semen Nadson. From 1900, he conducted a correspondence with Franko, with whom he discussed Jewish writers and who helped him to publish in *Literaturno-naukovyi vistnyk*, the leading Ukrainian periodical of its day, between 1904 and 1908.

Much of Kernerrenko's poetry is about the universal themes of love and loneliness, but he also published civic poetry dealing with Ukraine and the importance of the poet's role. This patriotic verse, such as his “I znov na Vkrayini” (Once more in Ukraine), was little known.² In this poem, Kernerrenko's Ukraine is described in terms of the Promised Land that overflows with milk and honey. He is ecstatic to return to this “holy” and “sacred” land that is so dear to him.

Pavlo Hrabovsky was under the mistaken impression that Kernerrenko subscribed to the ideal of “art for art's sake” and attacked Kernerrenko for asocial writing in an essay entitled “Deshcho pro tvorchist poetychnu” (On Poetic Creativity, 1896).³

¹ Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, “The Construction of an Improbable Identity: The Case of Hryts'ko Kernerrenko,” *Ab imperio*, 1 (2005), p. 212.

² It was published in *Literaturno-Naukovyi Vistnyk*, no. 12 (1900), pp. 116-117.

³ Pavlo Hrabovsky, *Vybrani tvory v dvokh tomakh* (Kyiv: 1985), pp. 105-109.

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From 1900, Kernerenko began writing on explicitly Jewish themes and expressing Zionist sentiments. At this time he translated and published a number of Semen Frug’s poems. In Frug, who wrote in Russian and Yiddish, he found a kindred spirit — a writer who also came from southern Ukraine, and one who thought of himself as the first Jewish voice in Russian poetry, just as Kernerenko saw himself as the first in Ukrainian. But it was Frug’s Zionist enthusiasm that no doubt exerted the strongest attraction.

Kernerenko’s translations of Frug’s poems were sometimes rendered into Ukrainian in a way that their Jewish content passed without notice. For example, the critic Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern has pointed out that Kernerenko modified the last lines of “Dve troiki” (Two Troikas).⁴ The original contains the image of three horses, a reference to three Judaic terms that stand for “repentance, prayer and charity.” These are translated as “faith, hope and endurance”: in this way, an adaptation is made to a Christian context, while any religious references become almost imperceptible. “Novyi rik” (New Year), another translation from Frug, contains the image of a harp hung on a tree, a reference to the psalm “On the Rivers of Babylon.”⁵ It is a lament over the loss of Zion and a reminder to Jews to remain focused on their liberation from bondage.⁶ This kind of Biblical imagery was widely used in Ukrainian poetry at the time, and served to link the fates of the Jewish and Ukrainian peoples. As a result, these Biblical references were generally read as an expression of universal sorrow over national oppression.

Kernerenko’s importance within Ukrainian literature stems from the fact that he was the first to clearly raise the issue of Jewish-Ukrainian identity. In his “Ne ridnyi syn” (Not a Native Son, 1908), he portrays himself as an orphan, who has been adopted by his stepmother, Ukraine. His life has been one of suffering because of the mockery he has endured. Although he loves his stepmother dearly, he feels that he must part from her. It is not clear whether she has been unwilling, or is simply unable to shield this child of a different faith from insults:

Proshchay, Ukrayino moya –
Tebe ya kynut mushu;
Khocha za tebe ya b oddav
Zhyttya i volyu i dushu!

Farewell, my Ukraine,
I must leave you,
Although for you I would give
Life and freedom and soul.

⁴ The translation appeared in *Literaturno-Naukovyi Vistnyk*, no. 37 (1907), pp. 495-496.

⁵ “Novyi rik,” *Literaturno-Naukovyi Vistnyk*, no. 41 (1908), p. 187.

⁶ Petrovsky-Shtern, pp. 222-223.

Ale ya pasynok tobi,
Na zhal, tse dobre znayu.
I promizh druhykh diteyi tvoyikh
Ya ne zhyvu – strazhdayu.

Ne syla znesty vzhe meni
Hlumin tykh ponad miru
Zate, shcho ya i tvoyi syny
Ne odnu mayem viru.

Tebe zh, Ukrayino moya,
Ya budu vik kokhaty:
Bo ty khoch machukha meni,
A vse zh ty meni – maty!

But I am only your stepson
Unfortunately, I know this well.
Among your other children
I do not live, but suffer.

I can no longer bear
That mockery to excess
Because I and your sons
Have different faiths.

You, my Ukraine
I will love all my life:
Because although my stepmother,
You are, after all, my mother.

Published in 1908,⁷ the poem presents in a memorable and moving way the situation of Jews who would like to see their Ukrainianness accepted, but who sense that the obstacles to the development of a Jewish-Ukrainian identity are perhaps insurmountable.

“Monopoliya” (Monopoly, 1902), another poem by Kernerenko on a civic theme, was placed by Franko on the first page of *Literaturno-Naukovyi Vistnyk*.⁸ It deals with the prohibition against Jews selling alcohol. They had originally received this right from Polish kings in previous centuries. It was taken from them in 1882, in the wake of the pogroms of 1881-1883, by Nikolai Ignatev, the tsar’s Minister of the Interior, who blamed Jews for the violent disturbances, banished them from villages, and introduced a state monopoly on alcohol production. The poet takes an interesting position. He makes the point that the stereotype of the Jewish innkeeper no longer has any validity, and that therefore no one has the right to insult a Jew with the word *shynkar*, or innkeeper. The prohibition, in other words, has succeeded in drawing Ukrainians and Jews closer together by removing an obstacle that divided them. Aware of views within both communities, the poet is able to express sympathy for both sides and to provide a perspective that transcends the divide:

I khto poviryv by, shchob ottake pryishlos,
Shcho panskyi rid uves znivechyvsya do shchentu:
Shcho panstvo za shynky teper uzhe vzialos,
Ne tilky za shynky – vzyalos i za protsenty!

⁷ Published in *Rada*, 6 (1908); also *Ab imperio*, no. 1 (2005), p. 241.

⁸ *Literaturno-Naukovyi Vistnyk*, no. 18, (1902), p. 5.

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And who would have thought that such a thing would come to pass,
That the lords would grow so feeble,
That they would need to take up tavern-keeping,
Not just tavern-keeping, but money-lending too!

Propyly vse, yak ye, dobro svoye pany!
Vidkryly yim kredyt, pryishly na pomich banky ...
I te ne pomohlos: i zemlyu, i zhupany –
Propyly chysto vse pany ta polupanky.

They drank everything, their whole inheritance!
They took loans, the banks came to their help ...
That did not save them: the land, their fine coats,
They drank it all, the lords and lesser lords.

A krov v nykh ne prosta – vony-zh taky pany,
Ne to shcho ti Zhydy – vsesvitni.
Odezha chysta v nykh, z lampasamy shtany,
Na kurtkakh hudzyky i yaki blyskuchi blyakhy!

Their blood is not common - they are, after all, gentry,
Unlike those universal Jews.
Their clothes are clean, with stripes down the sides,
With buttons on their jackets and such brilliant medals!

I chysta krov taka povynna biduvat!
A Zhyd v shynku sydyt i hroshi zahribaye ...
I zveleno v Zhydiv shynkarstvo odibrat
I posadyt paniv – vony khayi zapravlyayut!

And that such blue blood should go poor!
While the Jew sits in the tavern hoarding money ...
And so it was decided to take tavern-keeping away from Jews
And put the lords in their place, let them manage it!

Chy pravlyat tam vony sami, chy mozhe pyut,
To dilo ne pro nas, to vremyachko pokazhe ...
Zate-zh horilky vzhe Zhydy ne prodayut,
I Zhydovi “shynkar” nikhto teper ne kazhe!

Are they managing it, or drinking it themselves,
That's not our business, time will tell.
However, Jews are no longer selling liquor,
And no one can call a Jew “tavern-keeper” again!

In his day, Kernerenko's exploration of a hybrid or hyphenated
identity was treated with sympathy by Mykyta Shapoval and Khrystia Al-

chevska.⁹ Recently, his identity has been given a new but entirely fanciful interpretation by David Markish, whose Russian-language novel *Poliushko-pole* (1991) portrays Kernerenko as a supporter of Nestor Makhno's anarchist movement. In Markish's interpretation, Makhno is not a criminal or an anti-Semite, but a man with egalitarian ideals who tried, with the assistance of Jews like Liova Zadov, his chief of counter-intelligence, to unite Ukrainians and Jews. The novel portrays Kernerenko as supporting the revolution financially and writings songs in its praise, although there is no historical evidence to support such a depiction.

Petrovsky-Shtern has emphasized the fact that the choice of Ukrainian as a literary medium was in itself a strong statement — anti-colonial, pioneering and visionary. Knowing that it predestined him to a marginal status within the empire, the poet nonetheless chose this language and used it to fashion a Jewish-Ukrainian identity. Kernerenko's attitude toward the language went against all received imperial Russian opinion: the poet sees the language as a universal medium of great sophistication, and as one that is open to other, "small" nations — such as the Jews — because it is saturated in the discourse of national self-determination.¹⁰ This sentiment clearly brings him close to the views of Jabotinsky and other Jewish intellectuals, who in the early 20th century were then aligning themselves with the Ukrainian national movement. Kernerenko, according to Petrovsky-Shtern, "was among the first, if not the first, to discover that the Ukrainian language suits Jewish political, social, and cultural concerns."¹¹

The critic has "hardly any doubt that he was the first to move toward a Ukrainian-Jewish literary identity. By doing this, Kernerenko underscored similarities between the national agendas of the Jews and Ukrainians. He seems to have elevated the Ukrainian language, making it into a medium suitable for the expression of national concerns of non-Ukrainians. [...] Not only did Kernerenko's verse surpass the obstacles of mutual Ukrainian-Jewish animosity but it also created a language of cultural rapprochement."¹²

⁹ Petrovsky-Shtern, pp. 230-232.

¹⁰ Petrovsky-Shtern, p. 237.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 236.

¹² Ibid., p. 237.

Leonid Pervomais

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Leonid Pervomaisky

After the collapse of tsarism, the Ukrainianization policy — first promoted by the UNR and then by the Soviet regime — brought many Jews to Ukrainian culture. Pervomaisky is the greatest talent in the large cohort of Jewish writers who entered literature in the twenties, worked alongside Ukrainians and assimilated into Ukrainian life. More than most, however, he was to share the long Soviet experience with its many dark periods, partially adapting to and reflecting the political requirements of each decade. In spite of his stature as a major writer, many aspects of his career are still shrouded in mystery. His life and work await a fuller assessment, since many of his early works have not been republished — and those that were, often went through a substantial re-editing. Some of his writings, and much of his archive, have never been made available.

The early works reveal a gentle spirit, and are reminiscent of Stepan Vasylchenko's stories in their sympathy for the downtrodden. His "Parasolka Pinkhusa-Moti" (Pinkhus-Moti's Umbrella, 1926) serves as a good example. It describes a poor old Jewish carpenter who lives according to the stoical philosophy that everything is for the best: "A simple mixture of fatalism and optimism kept the old man on the earth."¹³ When the Red Army evacuates the town, he remains behind and is beheaded by some White Guards. The focus is on the simplicity and defenselessness of the victim and, as in Klym Polishchuk's stories on similar themes, on the senselessness of the killing. The old man's faith in God is not portrayed with reverence. He says: "There are many Gods: I have one, you have another ... Do not pray either to yours or mine, but to God! Dream one up and pray ... If your God betrays you, drive him out of your heart and search for another!"¹⁴

However, neither is religious faith portrayed as a negative force: it provides the old man with courage and dignity in the face of danger and evil. This passage also suggests that all ideologies can and should be examined if they prove to be harmful or mistaken — a message that can be turned against all fanaticisms, including revolutionary ones. The original 1926 text describes the killing of the old man in a much more brutal, graphic and disturbing manner than later editions. Some specifically Jewish references disappeared in the 1958 version and subsequent republica-

¹³ Leonid Pervomaisky, *Tvory v semy tomakh* (Kyiv: Dnipro, 1985), vol. 3, p. 219.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

tions: the all-powerful Hebrew God became "nature"; religion became philosophy; the *Reb* became a good man. The impact of these changes here, and in other works, was to downplay the importance of the Jewish context for an understanding of the main protagonist's identity.¹⁵

The heavily autobiographical story "U paliturni" (In the Bookbindery, 1928) describes the transformation of young Faivel, who works in the traditional Jewish trade of bookbinder, into a Bolshevik. Jews and Ukrainians work together in the enterprise and are radicalized each in their own way. Faivel joins a Bolshevik cell and has to leave town. The Ukrainian Panko discovers Shevchenko's verse, which he then carries with him everywhere. Mobilized by the tsarist army, he is eventually shot for spreading revolutionary agitation at the front: "he read Shevchenko and other books to soldiers."¹⁶

Events are viewed through the eyes of the narrator, who was a young boy at the time. He loves to read, and develops a friendship with Panko. However, when the latter is drafted, his place is taken by the supervisor Andriy and the ruffian Manka, a bully and boor, who can be violent when drunk. The latter makes the young narrator's life a misery at work and prevents him from reading at night. Since the story appears to be autobiographical, most readers assume that the young narrator is Jewish. Indeed, the original version of the text, which appeared in *Molodniak*,¹⁷ makes this autobiographical element explicit, and reveals the author's deep connection both to his Jewish background and to book culture.

The story suggests a broad spectrum of Jewish-Ukrainian relations. Panko is a runaway from a poor village, much as the narrator is a runaway from a hateful schoolmistress: they learn from one another's experience and become allies. Manka, on the other hand, is a narrow-minded, insensitive villain, who has assimilated the authoritarian behavior around him. Treated badly by his supervisor Andriy, a distant relative, he in turn mistreats his underlings. Although news of the revolution seems to change everyone's mood for the better, holding out the promise of a new social solidarity, the continued presence of drunkenness, indiscipline and violence in society suggests that the revolution will be a mixed blessing.

¹⁵ For a comparison of both editions, see "Obzor dokumentalnykh istochnikov po istorii evreiskoi literatury v fondakh arkhivokhranilishch Kieva," www.jewish-heritage.org/sea6.htm

¹⁶ Pervomaisky, *Tvory*, vol. 3, p. 247.

¹⁷ Pervomaisky, "U paliturni," *Molodniak*, no. 4 (1928), pp. 71-80.

One of the Pervomaisky's attempts in the story *Zemlya obitayushchaya*, he shows the impact of the revolution on the reader of the story as an "estrangement" of the grotesque. In this story, the character escapes from the story. The Jewish father, and the narrator returns, but only to understand "that his father is not the traditional, vengeful, degenerate Jew that other Jews have been." The *kadish*, the prayer for the dead, has refused to place his hand on the ground. It is very good. It rises and shakes the ground. The man, accompanying

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¹⁸ It was and no. 2 (1927),

¹⁹ Pervomaisky, *Tvory*, vol. 3, p. 247.

²⁰ Ibid.,

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One of the most important works for an understanding of Per-
vomaisky's attempt to articulate a Jewish-Ukrainian identity is his long
story *Zemlya obitovana* (Promised Land, 1927).¹⁸ Here, as in the previous
story, he shows the point of view of children or young people. The effect
on the reader of this adolescent perspective, as in Vasylchenko's stories, is
an "estrangement" from events that makes any cruelty or fanaticism appear
grotesque. In this story, Pervomaisky portrays a boy, Ierukhym, who es-
capes from the stifling atmosphere of the *shtetl* and his alcoholic, abusive
Jewish father, and takes up with young thieves in the city. Eventually, he
returns, but only to leave again, striking out on his own. He begins to un-
derstand "that his escape was a kind of protest," against the synagogue,
"the traditional, conservative spirit," and "the implacable Jehovah - a
vengeful, degenerate old man."¹⁹ And yet, in the final pages, when all
other Jews have turned their backs on him, an old man who has read the
kadish, the prayer for the dead, over his father's grave (something Ieruk-
hym has refused to do), turns to the boy in a gentle and friendly way, and,
placing his hand on his shoulder, says: "You are stubborn ... That is very
good. It is very good to be stubborn. You will reach your goal." Ierukhym
rises and shakes the old man's hand warmly. "Good luck," says the old
man, accompanying him to the cemetery gates.²⁰

The story shows that — for the new generation of urbanized and
assimilated Jews — the break with their former identity is a painful one.
The message is that the Promised Land of Israel is being supplanted in the
mind of young people like Ierukhym by the "promised land" of building
socialism in contemporary Ukraine, even though the substitution of one
goal by another will be a difficult and tentative process. Another signifi-
cant element in Ierukhym's evolution toward joining the Komsomol has
less to do with politics than with his move from the village or small town
to the city, and into a Ukrainian cultural environment. Pervomaisky signals
the difficulties of this transition to a new urban and cultural environment
by portraying a character torn between worlds. The emphasis is on the dif-
ficulty of breaking with the past, and on the marks that the old world must
inevitably leave on the individual. As a result, this early work is tinged
with ambiguity and a subtle, tragic irony. It is a tone that also comes

¹⁸ It was also published in the journal *Molodniak*, no. 1 (1927), pp. 11-35,
and no. 2 (1927), pp. 3-18.

¹⁹ Pervomaisky, *Zemlya obitovana* (Kharkiv: Derzhavne Vydavnytstvo
Ukrayiny, 1927), p. 98.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

through in his play "Komsomoltsi" (Komsomol Youth), which was published in *Hart*.²¹

At the end of the decade, as a ruthless and deadly-serious spirit made itself felt in literature, Pervomaisky's communist heroes and heroines began to make brave, uncompromising speeches, as in the verse play *Nevidomi saldaty: Trahema* (Unknown Soldiers: Tragic Drama, 1930). This is the most controversial part of Pervomaisky's oeuvre, and least discussed — if that is not a contradiction in terms. It is avoided in many surveys of his achievement. Like most Soviet-Ukrainian authors, he moved away from an emphasis on the possibility of human understanding at this time.

His "Trypilska trahediya" (Trypillian Tragedy, 1929) describes the death of a Komsomol detachment from Kyiv in July 1919, in a battle with Zeleny's army. Zeleny's forces are generally known as "the Greens," or peasant anarchists drawn from the countryside, but in reality they are supporters of the UNR. The list of names makes it clear that the majority of Komsomol youth are of Jewish background: Liuba Aronova, Betia Palei, Olena Birk, Orlykova, Zaverukha, Burshtein, Polonskyi, Sheinin, Mykhailo Ratmansky, Dymerefs. Ratmansky was a well-known leader of Komsomol troops. This singling out of Jews for special honors disappeared from Pervomaisky's later work. In 1929, however, such a gesture, coming during an attempt to assert a "Stalinist" hard line, was bound to rekindle antagonisms and stir conflict between Ukrainians and Jews. The poem is a Bolshevik call to arms. It recognizes the presence of lawlessness and gratuitous violence within its own ranks, but ascribes these to Ukrainian peasants and former nationalists. Some of the Red Army soldiers used to be fighters with Hryhoriev, and have only recently come over to the Soviet side. These men are described as undisciplined, drunken and "hardened through thieving and rape."²² Moreover, Pervomaisky characterizes the countryside as entirely anti-Bolshevik:

Obdurene selo bucho krychalo slavu
.....

Obdurene selo, ty yshlo, zelene, -
I tilky krov chervonu ronyt den.²³

²¹ Pervomaisky, "Kommoltsi," *Hart*, no. 5 (1930), pp. 55-106.

²² Pervomaisky, *Poezii, 1924-1935* (Kyiv: Derzhavne vydavnytstvo Ukrainy, 1947), p. 72.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

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The duped village loudly cried "glory"
.....

The duped village, you went with the greens,
And only the blood was red, left by the day.

Along with Bagritsky's "Duma about Opanas," this poem was of-
ten anthologized until 1949, when it was strongly criticized as being hos-
tile to the countryside, and from that time was rarely republished.

Like most Soviet writers, Pervomaisky was drawn into the atmos-
phere of the thirties, a time when literature was often called upon to glorify
violence, hatred and passion directed against enemies of the state. In a
poem like "Iamby" (Iambs, 1933), the writer's former gentle persona has
disappeared; a conscious break has been made with the past. He cuts his
ties not only with the village, but also with all tradition, including, by im-
plication, his Jewish roots:

Nenavydzhu v sobi stare
Vid davnikh dnv hanby y nevoli
Shcho vmerty musyt i pomre.²⁴

I hate the old in me
From ancient days of shame in captivity
That has to die and will die.

In 1934, he published his collection *Zbroya*. In the poem "Letter
from Kyiv" (1933) from this collection, he considers himself a member of
the *Osnaz*, special troops of the secret police, and writes how he laughs
along with other Chekists while the "ugly mug" of the "savior" cracked
("V avtokefalnogo spasa repalas morda pisna. / Smiyalys do mene cheki-
sty," and continues:

Ya ne boyusya skladnoho nevidkladnoho zhyttya.
Ya ne boyusya nudnoho zhabyachoho vyttya.

U mene odna doroha. Meni nema vorottya.
Ya tverdo znayu, shcho khochu, y, robyvshy, - roblyu do puttya.²⁵

I am not afraid of complex undelayable life
I am not afraid of boring frog-like howling

I have one road. There is no turning back
I know firmly what I want, and in doing it do it purposefully.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 205.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 223.

These uncompromising words of the Cheka-identified poet were written during the worst years of the requisitioning and famine. He turns to his enemies and detractors:

I choho vy na mene dyvytes z vashykh petlyurivskykh nir?
My proydemo nashu dorohu vsim pidstupam naperekir.

And why do you look at me from your Petlyurite nests?
We will travel our road in spite of all deceptions

Ya znayu vashu pryrodu – v mlosnyi khutorskyi nochi
Vas vystruhaly stolypintsi z kurkulkamy na pechi.

I know your nature – in the feeble khutir nights
You have been fashioned in warmth by Stolypinites with
their rich peasants

A potim vy vyrostaly y vertaly v svyi temnyi kut,
zakinchyvshy komercheske ta ahrovetinsytut.

And later you grew up and returned to your dark corner
Having completed commercial and agroveterinary institutes

A potim vy pid Trypillyam vbyvaly moyikh brativ ...
Ta my taky nadavaly vam povnu pelku chortiv!

And then by Trypillia you killed my brothers ...
But we filled your gut full of devils anyway!

.....
My znayem. Choho my khochemo. Osnazivskyi nash zahim.
Ya v nomu soldat vid poeziyi. Zvychayinisinkyi ryadovyi.²⁶

We know. What we want. We are an Osnaz detachment.
I am a soldier of poetry in it. An ordinary private.

The poem, which is dated March 1933, appears to represent his complete support for the party campaigns then under way, and to tolerate no resistance. In the same cycle, another poem, "Syn partiyi" (1933), describes the role of the party:

pidnyaty tsilynu i rozoraty mezhi
i znyshchyty dykunski pochuttya –
zhadobu vlasnosti, zhadobu nahromadzhen,
zhadobu: dayi! Meni! Moye! Ne smiy! –
zhadobu zhyty za rakhunok inshykh,

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 223-224.

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²⁷ Ibid., p. 22

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 22

³⁰ Ibid., p. 23

³¹ Ibid., p. 23

na spyni inshykh! – zhyty u bahni
odvichnoho idiotyzmu selyshch,
rozyednanykh zhadoboyu bahatstva ...²⁷

turn the virgin lands and plough over the boundaries
and destroy savage sentiments –
the thirst for possessions, the thirst for accumulation,
the thirst: give! Me! Mine! Don't dare! –
the thirst to live at another's account,
on the backs of others! – to live in the morass
of eternal rural idiocy,
divided by the thirst for riches ...

Here the individual farmer is portrayed as backward, driven by selfish greed, with no claims on human sympathy. Collectivization (and indirectly the violent requisitioning and destruction that accompanied it) can, therefore, more easily be justified as a progressive act. The world is simplistically divided into two camps: "two worlds, two classes, two elements - / water and fire! Fire and wind! A Storm! – / in the deadly struggle for life, / for bread, for the world."²⁸ The village represents "the savage and the stupid [tupe] desire for ownership, which has eaten its way deeply into the eternal nature of the peasant, like a sharp piece of shrapnel into a wound that cannot be healed."²⁹

In "Stolytsya" (Capital, 1934), another poem in the collection *Zbroya*, the poet once more insists that those who died in the Revolution have sealed the fate of the republic ("Nema povorotu z mohyl!" There is no return from the graves!)³⁰ Although he was born in 1908, making him nine years old when the Revolution broke out, and only published his first poem in 1924, he claims:

Ya borovsya za tebe pisnyamy, vohnem i bahnetom,
V bilshovytskykh zahonakh – tse povni upertosti lavy!³¹

I fought for you with songs, fire and bayonet,
In Bolshevik platoons – ranks full of stubbornness!

²⁷ Ibid., p. 228.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 229.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 235.

³¹ Ibid., p. 235.

The early parts of Pervomaisky's *Molodist brata. Roman u virshakh* (Youth of Brother. A Novel in Verse, 1933-1956-1968), which deals with the Revolution, also contains brutal scenes in which village resistance is suppressed. The violence is justified by providing an unsavory picture of the *kurkuli* or rich peasants and their leaders. In this, as in his other works from the thirties, the Cheka leaders are eulogized (one is described as a "merciless" [*nevblahannyi*] local Marat), and the nationalists who fought the communists are demonized. The last section of the poem, written decades later, depicts the hero as a Soviet army commander advancing on Berlin in 1945 in order to take revenge for Babyn Yar (Baby Yar), Maidanek and Auschwitz. All the USSR's enemies are in this way homogenized into one fascist camp.

Much of Pervomaisky's work in the thirties reflects the flesh-to-metal imagery typical of pro-Bolshevik poetry of the day. It constructs the individual as a machine, part of an enormous collective that feels and thinks as one, and that is completely disciplined and ruthless in action. Readers understood the militant attitude toward the peasantry and non-Russian national movements manifest in this kind of pro-Cheka literature as a reflection of Stalin's aggressive designs. The Bolshevik cult of violent action became increasingly linked to a youthful virility.

In her study of rhetoric and ideology in Italy in the 1920s, Barbara Spackman linked the rhetoric of virility to the cults of youth, duty, sacrifice and heroic virtue, stamina, obedience and authority, physical strength and sexual potency. All these "characterize fascism" and "are all inflections of that master term, virility."³² These features also characterize the "Bolshevik" virtues propounded by "aggressive" and widely read writers of the late 1920s and early 1930s. One master trope of the Italian pro-fascist writings is "the creation of a scenario in which the virile leader "rapes" the feminized masses."³³ Such a scenario is also the underlying trope in much of the pro-Cheka writing. The following description of Italian writing could be applied to many Soviet works: "The positing of non-verbal violence gives meaning to the rhetoric, while the rhetoric gives new meaning, as performative threat, to violence already committed."³⁴ The "turning" of virgin lands, and "ploughing over of boundaries" in the above poem can be seen as a typical use of this trope.

³² Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. xii.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

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Petrovsky-Shtern has indicated that Pervomaisky's writings from the thirties, like much of literature of this period, reveals the influence of Rudyard Kipling, or at least the Soviet version of the English writer that was then in vogue. Kipling provided a useful all-conquering, "imperial" framework and the requisite optimism and unbending faith in a global cause.³⁵ The influence of the English writer also allowed for a slightly gentler version of the militant writing of the thirties, one that focused more on personal virtues of courage and steadfastness.

Pervomaisky both accepts and departs from this flesh-to-metal imagery in another way. He underlines his Ukrainian patriotism. The play *Mistechko Ladeniu* (The Small Town Ladeniu, 1935), which was widely performed in the thirties, shows Jews becoming collective farmers and socialists, and integrating fully into Ukrainian culture. They discover that they have already entered the Promised Land.

In the late thirties and forties, Ukrainians participated in the shaping of a "Soviet patriotism" that allowed them to express to a limited degree a love of their own country. Pervomaisky's war stories, which appeared in the collection *Ataka na Vorskli: Opovidannya ta narysy* (Attack on the Vorskla: Short Stories and Sketches, 1946), contribute to the cautious elevation of then-popular Ukrainian traditions. He finds analogies to current acts of sacrifice and heroism in the glories of the national past. The opening story, "Zhyttya" (Life) contains the following description of the wind in the steppes:

"Perhaps it is searching for a place to sleep for the night, like a tired Kozak returning from a campaign? Perhaps it is flying like a messenger from a Kozak girl, looking in the dark for her friend, to embrace him, to whisper in his ear a barely audible word, the echo of a dear name, to awaken a sad memory, and to then fly further without tiring, silently, without trace, and so swiftly that it cannot be caught on a fast horse?"³⁶

"Virna krov" (Faithful blood) contains the following passage, describing an ancient *kurhan* (burial mound) in the steppe:

"The years like herds of sheep, like flocks of cranes, sailed over its top. Kozak guards built their fires here, giving the signal to distant settlements about the approach of danger. A Tatar horseman on a short horse waves a cracked *kamcha*, raced up the steep slope and dropped into the

³⁵ Petrovsky-Shtern, "Being for the Victims: Leonid Pervomaiskyi's Ethical Responses to Violence" (manuscript in print), pp. 26-27.

³⁶ Pervomaisky, *Ataka na Vorskli: Opovidannya ta narysy* (Kyiv: Radyanskyi pysmennyk, 1946), p. 3.

grass pierced by a hot Kozak bullet. The steppe eagles pecked out the eyes of the corpses. The grey wolves tore their yellow flesh with their sharp fangs, the bones of unbidden guests were washed by rains and dried out by the sun, the wind whistled a menacing song in the empty bones as on resonant pipes ... Under the *kurhan* lay the remains of faithful Kozaks, those who defended the steppe from unexpected enemies, those who took the first blow and stood firm in uneven combat with the enemy, until regiments arrived from the depths of the native land."³⁷

Another passage, this time the opening of "Ohnenna dusha" (Fiery Soul), was dropped from the later republications of this story:

"There is in our people a powerful force, which reawakens each time danger threatens the people's existence. This force, hidden in the breasts of millions, can be called heroism, although it is not only heroism. It can be called love of the source of human happiness, of the native land, but it is not only love. All the best that has been born, that has matured in the human spirit over centuries of labor and the struggle of a people, is fused in this force, the name of which is the greatness of the national spirit."³⁸

This collection, like Babel's *Red Cavalry*, follows the advance of the Red Army from east to west. The narrator describes incidents near the Don, then in the Carpathian mountains, and finally in Hungary and Austria. Throughout, he aligns himself not only with the Soviet soldier, but also with the Soviet Ukrainian patriotism of the war years. Portraits of devastated Jewish communities and Jewish suffering occur in the last story, "Z uhorskoho shchodennyka" (From a Hungarian Diary, 1944-1945), in which he describes two destroyed synagogues, with the goods of executed Jews piled to the ceiling, and meets Holocaust survivors.³⁹ In 1946, Pervomaisky was awarded the Stalin Prize for his books *Den narodzhennya* (Birthday) and *Zemlya* (Earth).

Then, suddenly and dramatically, as it seemed to many, a campaign against "rootless cosmopolitanism" — and directed principally against Jews — was launched by the Soviet authorities. In January 1948, Solomon Mikhoels, the chairman of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, was killed, and in November the Committee was disbanded. It had only been required by Stalin as a propaganda tool, the more so since he hoped to set the newly created state of Israel against the U.S. and Great Britain.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 25.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 63.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 184-185, 194.

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When Israel demonstrated pro-American sympathies, Stalin decided to pay back Jews for their ingratitude. Moreover, the Committee had become the unofficial organ of the Jewish community and a focus for a Jewish revival. As such, it became a threat to party monopoly.

First came a statement by the Ministry of State Security on 26 March 1948 that the committee was conducting anti-Soviet and nationalist work. On 20 November 1948, the Politburo called it a "center of anti-Soviet propaganda that regularly gives anti-Soviet information to organs of foreign secret services."⁴⁰ By January 1949, a campaign of persecution was launched against Jewish writers. Those arrested in Ukraine included Moisei Altman, Riva Baliasna, Iosyp Bukhbinder, Abram Velednytsky, Davyd Hofshstein, Aizyk Huberman, Veniamin Hutiansky, Irma Druder, Natan Zabar, Abram Kahan, Isaak Kipnis, Iukhin Loitsker, Note Lurie, Moisei Myzhyrytsky, Mykhailo Pynchevsky, Hryhorii Polianker, Matvii Talalaievsky and Mykhailo Shmushkevych.⁴¹ All publications on Jewish themes, with the exception of anti-Semitic ones, were forbidden. The last Jewish institution in the Soviet Union, the Cabinet of Jewish Culture of the Academy of Sciences in Ukraine, was closed in 1949 and most of its workers arrested. On 12 August 1952, a large group of Jewish cultural and literary figures — the best of Ukraine's Yiddish writers — were shot, among them David Bergelson, Perets Markish, David Gofshtein, Leib Kvitko⁴² and Itsik Fefer.

Pervomaisky was directly affected by this campaign. A "case" was mounted against him in the press. It drove him to attempt suicide in 1953. The writer found himself attacked both as a Jew (for "cosmopolitanism" and lack of patriotism) and as a Ukrainian writer (excessive nationalism). Both the anti-Jewish and anti-Ukrainian campaigns were conducted simultaneously at this time. Pervomaisky in many ways embodied the rapprochement of previous years, when individuals working for the cultural autonomy of Jews (at least in a secular Yiddish version) and Ukrainians (in a partial Ukrainianization of public life) had given one another mutual support. Both autonomies were now under attack.

⁴⁰ Yuriy Shapoval, *Lyudyna i systema (Shtrykhy do portretu totalitarnoyi doby v Ukraini)* (Kyiv: Instytut natsionalnykh vidnosyn i politolohiyi NANU, 1994), p. 218.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁴² Miron Petrovsky, "Lev Kvitko v krugu ukrainskikh pisatelei," in Wolf Moskovich (ed.), *Jews and Slavs* (Jerusalem-Ljubljana, 1999), vol. 5, pp. 238-254.

Sava Holovanivsky has described how, during these years, almost every week an article would appear in the press, or an investigation of some personal case would take place, or there would be a lecture by a party leader in which Jews were accused of Zionism and a lack of Soviet patriotism.⁴³ Finally, in January 1953, *Pravda* published an announcement that a plot by Jewish doctors to kill the leaders of the USSR had been uncovered. This was the signal for many Jews to be thrown out of work — and for preparations to deport the entire Jewish population to the eastern regions of the USSR.

Mass campaigns of persecution and killing were always preceded in the Soviet Union by the spreading of a bloodthirsty hatred for the targeted group, class or nation. Disgust for the victim group was consciously stimulated. This happened in the case of the Ukrainian and Belarusan Jews in the late forties and early fifties, just as in the thirties Stalin had orchestrated campaigns for the extermination of “the *kulaks* as a class,” of the “Trotsky-Bukharin monsters,” and of other populations. The political decisions of the communist party in Moscow were, of course, mandatory for the Ukrainian authorities, and the all-union campaign against cosmopolitanism, Zionism and the Jewish religion was immediately implemented in Ukraine. As part of the hate campaign inspired and directed by the government, the press informed of “dissatisfaction with the Jewish people” and the demand that Jews be deported to “distant parts of the Soviet Union.”

In January 1953, anti-Jewish leaflets were distributed in parts of Kyiv. Those who distributed them were never found. “One can assume that they were distributed by volunteers (not without the knowledge of party organs) for the inspiration of an anti-Semitic hysteria in Ukraine. The anti-Semitic leaflets and calls stopped appearing in Ukraine when the ‘doctors’ plot’ was dropped in April 1953.”⁴⁴ Stalin’s death put an end to the campaign. On 6 April 1953, *Pravda* published a note stating that the “doctors’ plot” had been a fabrication. The arrested doctors were freed.

After the post-Stalin thaw, Pervomaisky began writing again in the humane, generous and optimistic spirit that had characterized much of his work in the twenties. He produced a collection of short stories with masterful psychological portraits, *Materyn solodkyi khlib* (Mother’s Sweet

⁴³ Sava Holovanivsky, *Memorial: spohady* (Kyiv: Radyanskyi pysmennyk, 1988), p. 22.

⁴⁴ Viktoriya Khiterer, *Dokumenty po evreiskoi istorii XVI-XX vekov v Kievskikh arkhivakh* (Moscow: Mosty kultury, Gesharim, 2001), p. 146.

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⁴⁵ Moisei Dovira, 1996), p. 2

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.

Bread, 1960) and *Dykyi med* (Wild Honey, 1963), one of the best novels of the Soviet period. At the end of his life, he wrote his best lyric poetry, and published superb translations of Heine and other writers. Fishbein has written:

"Some of my friends are not well disposed toward Pervomaisky, and cannot forgive him some public statements and the 'Osnaz attitude' that the poet had in his youth. [Osnaz refers to the Russian term *Chast osobogo naznacheniya*, used for special military sections created to combat "counter-revolutionary forces".] Some even tried to convince me that Pervomaisky was hostile to Ukraine almost from childhood, to its history, to any expression of Ukrainian national awareness."⁴⁵

When, at Mykola Bazhan's insistence, Fishbein met Pervomaisky in 1972, he was charmed by the older poet's erudition and his sensitivity to poetry and art. Fishbein feels that: "At the end of his life he began to understand and see much (or maybe, he understood and saw much earlier, but raised in the damp vault of the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, did not allow himself to open his eyes widely so as not to lose his eyesight. His last, wise and transparent books, *Uroky poeziyi*, *Drevo piznannya*, and the posthumous collection *Vchora i zavtra*, testify to this. They are markedly different from his early, 'osnaz' works and from his boring poems of the 1940s. Pervomaisky has a wonderful play, 'The History Teacher, or The One-Legged Soldier on Leave' — in my opinion one of his best works."⁴⁶

Pervomaisky's great post-war books of poetry are *Uroky poeziyi* (Lessons of Poetry, 1968) and *Drevo piznannya* (Tree of Knowledge, 1971). They contain moments of revelation, when memory and desire mix. Lucid imagery, measured rhythms and a wise economy of expression provide the reader with a powerful aesthetic experience. This is the poetry of a wise old age that has now experienced and understands much, but is still full of passionate feeling. The poet's great consolation and love is poetry itself; in it alone he sees the possibility of reaching self-understanding. He looks back upon life from a philosophical distance and attempts to speak simply and lucidly of the essential, human experiences (youth, love, old age, approaching death), and of the great 20th century tragedies (war, Babyn Iar, Maidanek, idol worship, and lack of self-knowledge). "Piznannya" (Understanding) opens *Drevo piznannya*:

⁴⁵ Moisei Fishbein, "Vidstan piznannya" in Fishbein, *Apokryf* (Kyiv: Dovira, 1996), p. 224.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

Vin mih by isnuvaty bez lyudyny,
 Bezmezhnyi vsesvit, milyardy lit,
 I zhynuty vin mih, yak prytmom hyne
 V prostorakh nochi meteora slid,
 I znovu viyty na shlyakhy zabuti
 V kosmichnykh peretsorennnyakh novykh, -
 Ale sebe v svoiy taemniy suti
 Piznaty bez lyudyny vin ne mih.

It could exist without humanity,
 This boundless universe, for billions of years,
 And could die like the tail of a meteor
 Dies headlong in the spaces of time,
 And could again come out onto forgotten paths
 In new cosmic transformations,
 But itself in its hidden essence
 It could not understand without the human being.

Lyudyna dovho isnuvala v sviti
 Bez radosti, bez bolyu i stremlin,
 I miliony lit byly prozhyti
 V postiynyi zmini lyudskykh pokolin.
 Vona navchylas zvira polyuvaty,
 Vse vynayshla: i koleso, y veslo, -
 Ta dovho ne mohla sebe piznaty:
 Poeziyi u neyi ne bulo.

Human beings have long existed in the world
 Without joy, without pain and striving,
 And millions of years were lived
 In the constant changing of generations.
 Human beings learned to hunt the beast,
 Invented everything: the wheel, and oar,
 But long could not understand themselves:
 They did not have poetry.

He has a quiet, optimistic faith in the life force animating all things. The phenomena of the natural world (spring, rebirth, storms) provide subject matter for many of these last poems, but they are ultimately about the earth's powerful cyclical forces and the mystery of human life:

Ye syly smerti y syly sotvorinnya,
 Vohka zemlya i neba teplyi zvid, -
 Vidrozhuyetsya v pahoni korinnya,
 I v ranniy kvittsi chuty piznyi plid.

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Koly b, koly b
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Ty chesno pra
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There are forces of death and forces of creation,
The moist earth and the heaven's warm vault,
The root is reborn in the young offshoot,
And in the early blossom senses the late fruit.

Darma, shcho z smertyu dozrivannya skhozhe,
Shcho v nomu ye vzhe z nebuttyam zlyttya, -
Spokiynyi bud: nishcho ne peremozhe
Novoho v kvittsi zarodku zhyttya.

Forget that maturation resembles death,
That it already contains the fusion with non-existence,
Be calm: nothing will overcome
The new embryonic life in the flower.

The writer also writes poignantly at this time of the mistakes he and his generation committed. This was taken by many to refer to the grim period of Stalinism, when many young people had been fanatical supporters of the repressive regime, and when writers had often played a deplorable role in justifying, however indirectly, murderous policies. In another poem from *Drevo piznannya*, he strikes a tone of both forgiveness and repentance in "Munuloho ne pereboresh" (The Past You Will Not Overcome):

Mynuloho ne pereboresh.
Teper mynulo chy davno –
Ne za plechyma i ne poruch,
Zavzhdy v tobi zhyve vono.
Vsi dni svoiy – i dalni, y blyzhni –
Ty pamyatayesh khybnyi krok,
Nenache lysh na tomu tyzhni
Toyi davniyi trapyvsya urok.

Koly b, koly b zhe mih teper ty
Yedynym pomakhom ruky,
Nemov z shkilnoyi doshky, sterty
Svoiy porazky y pomylky –

Vsi muky y zastarili boli,
Shcho ne nasnylysya tobi,
Ale i z voli y mymovoli
Zavysly v tebe na horbi.

Ty chesno prahnesh sertsem chulym
Do pervisnoyi chystoty,

The past cannot be overcome.
Recently gone or long –
Not behind you and not alongside you,
But always inside you it lives.

All your days – far, and near –
You remember the false step,
As though it was only last week
That ancient lesson occurred.

If only, if only you could today
With one sweep of the hand,
As though from a school blackboard, clean
Your failures and mistakes –

All sufferings and pains grown old,
That still crowd into your dreams,
And willingly or unwillingly
Hang on your hunched back.

You honestly strive with sensitive heart
For that initial purity,

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the mystery of human life:

Ale z usim svoym mynulym
Povnyen u maybutnye yity.

I pizniyi sud tvoho sumlinnya
Ne vypravdaye y ne zvilnyt
Tebe vid temnoho tremtinnya
V ostannyu nemynuchu myt.

But have to travel into the future
Carrying all your past.

And the late judgement of your conscience
Will not justify or release
You from dark tremblings
In the last inevitable moment.

Pervomaisky's work captures the complexities and contradictions of the Jewish writer's entanglement with Soviet reality throughout six decades. It remains one of the best sources for understanding how the 20th century Jewish identity was negotiated in Ukrainian literature. Unlike Natan Rybak, another prominent Jewish Ukrainian writer, who throughout his life became an increasingly conformist Soviet writer, steadily eliminating almost all Jewish references, Pervomaisky's evolution was in the opposite direction: he began as a communist neophyte — but gradually eliminated almost everything "Soviet" about himself.

At the end of his life he presented himself as simply a Ukrainian writer, whose literary persona encompassed his Jewishness, but without emphasizing it. His poetry was addressed to all humanity, and, as the last lines of the above poem indicate, it was often concerned with revealing the workings of his own conscience and the judgment not of critics, but of the Creator.

Moisei Fishbein

One of the most prominent contemporary Ukrainian poets is the Israeli citizen and "émigré from Ukraine," Moisei Fishbein. He represents a generation of Jewish writers who made their debut in literature in the 1970s. Fishbein was born in 1946 in Chernivtsi (Chernovitz), a city with an unusual mixture of cultures: German, Ukrainian, Jewish, Romanian, Polish and Russian. It produced the German-language writer Paul Celan (Paul Antschel/Ancel). More importantly, it has for centuries had a strong, rooted, self-confident Jewish population — one that has lived on good terms with its Ukrainian neighbor and become Ukrainianized, not Russified. Fishbein's first collection *Iambove kolo: poeziyi, pereklady* (Iambic Circle: Poems, Translations, 1974) was published with the help of Bazhan, and Mykola Lukash, the great translator and polyglot, was an inspiration for the poet.

After leaving Soviet Ukraine in 1979, Fishbein worked and lived for a number of years in Germany for *Radio Svoboda's* Ukrainian section,

and then moved to the United States. His Ukrainian, and his English, books include *Chernivtsi* and *Apokryf* (Apocrypha). His Jewish experience is reflected in his Jewish and Ukrainian poetry. His natural manner is that of a Chernivtsi, "Pervomaisky's" on his interaction with the world (Distance of Reality).

He does not deny the Holocaust and the Holocaust. Yet he is a poet of the language and culture. He is a forcible marginalization of the language itself. "Ukrainian violence" (Ukrainian violence).

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and then moved to Israel. Although translated into Hebrew, he writes in Ukrainian, and is a prominent figure in 20th century Ukrainian poetry. His books include *Iambove kolo* (1974), *Bez nazvy* (Without a Name, 1984) and *Apokryf* (Apocryphal Writing, 1996). His poetry is influenced by the Jewish experience, but Fishbein lives with considerable ease in both the Jewish and Ukrainian worlds, combining identities and patriotisms in a natural manner. This also comes through in his essays on post-war Chernivtsi, "Povernennya do Merydiyana"⁴⁷ (Return to the Meridian), and on his interaction with literary figures in the 1970s, "Vidstan piznannya" (Distance of Recognition), which were published in his *Apokryf*.

He does not avoid the tragic experience of the Second World War and Holocaust: one of his most moving poems, "Yar" deals with Babyn Yar. Yet he is also moved by a profound respect for the Ukrainian language and culture. His visceral connection to them and his dismay at their forcible marginalization is one of his strongest sources of inspiration. The language itself is described in terms of a raped child in his "Netorkani y gvaltovani" (Untouched and Raped):

Nedotorkani y gvaltovani, zuzhyti
Y nedotorkanni, nache polova
Nevlovna i nezayimana u zhyti
Melodiya, - nasnylysya slova,

Untouched and raped, used
And untouchable, like the field's
Inexpressible and unblemished melody
In the rye, the words came to me in dreams.

I temryava klubochetsya zymovo,
I dushi nam prosotuye slota.
Hornys do mene, movenyatko, Movo,
Netorkana, gvaltovana, svyata.⁴⁸

The dark thickens wintry
And our souls are drenched with sleet.
Rely on me, my little language, my Speech,
Unblemished, raped and sacred.

Petrovsky-Shtern feels that "Fishbein has borrowed the concept of the sanctity of the Holy Tongue from Judaic religious tradition, trans-

⁴⁷ "Povernennya do Merydiyana," in *Apokryf*, pp. 185-211.

⁴⁸ Fishbein, *Apokryf*, p. 12.

formed it into the sanctity of the Ukrainian language – and placed it at the gravitational centre of his Jewish-Ukrainian symbolism.”⁴⁹ In this respect, he is a disciple of Lesya Ukrayinka, whose verse he greatly admires and who has influenced him profoundly. Like Ukrayinka, he infuses the power of Biblical tradition into Ukrainian sentiments. Petrovsky-Shtern sees the key to Fishbein’s verse in a messianism with which he has endowed the redemptive and uplifting powers of a despised language and a postcolonial nation.⁵⁰ It is significant, however, that the influences of the bible and of Ukrayinka are blended such that they are indistinguishable.

Whether he lives in Israel or in Kyiv, Fishbein writes in Ukrainian. He continually examines aspects of his Jewish-Ukrainian identity and meditates on its path of development. Significantly, in “Ya vbytyi buv shistnadtsyatoho roku” (I was killed in 1916), he suggests a return to the failed rapprochement of the pre-Revolutionary years. In this poem, he portrays himself as having been killed during a pogrom in 1916, a fatal turning point — but also foresees a time when he will be resurrected.

The poet combines and reconciles the two aspects of his identity in a number of ways. One is by mixing Christian and Old Testament imagery. Another is by marrying the cities of Jerusalem and Kyiv, as does Arkadii Anin, another writer who also lives in Israel and has written a collection of Ukrainian poems entitled *Dotyk. Virshi ostannikh rokiv* (Touch: Poetry of Most Recent Years, Kyiv, 1997). The critic Volf Moskovych (Wolf Moskovich) has described the poetry of both Fishbein and Anin as the product of a syncretic world-view — one that is typical for Ukrainian Jews who were born and grew up in Ukraine.⁵¹ This world-view mixes Jewish patriotism, “an imperfect knowledge of Judaic religious dogmas and Jewish religious customs,” and “an attachment to Ukrainian language and culture.”⁵² Fishbein’s return to Israel, according to Moskovich, is never comfortable, nor does it bring peace of mind. However, he, like other émigré Ukrainian poets in Israel, succeeded in creating “a living bridge that links the two countries.”⁵³

⁴⁹ Petrovsky-Shtern, “The New Moses: A Ukrainian-Jewish Poet in the Making,” *East European Jewish Affairs*, vol. 34, no.1 (Summer 2004), pp. 16-17.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁵¹ V. Moskovych, “Vis Yerusalym-Kyiv u tvorchosti ukrayinskoho poeta-emihranta Moiseia Fishbeina,” in Moskovich (ed.), *Jews and Slavs*, vol. 6, *Jerusalem in Slavic Culture*, p. 396.

⁵² *Ibid.*

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Another critic, Vadym Skurativsky, has emphasized Fishbein’s
borderline and “paradoxical” position.⁵⁴ It would perhaps be more accurate
to speak about the poet’s remarkably successful fusion of identities.

Fishbein is a Ukrainian writer who happens to be a Jew. In this re-
spect, he might be compared to the New York group of poets, who consid-
ered themselves Ukrainian writers who happened to be “Westerners.”
They wrote on all available themes and experimented with all available
forms, often going against accepted imagery and models. Skurativsky, in
fact, senses the successful integration of perspectives when he writes: “In
the poetry of Moisei Fishbein Judaism speaks, for the first time in its his-
tory, in Ukrainian.”⁵⁵ It is precisely for this reason that the poet has be-
come a symbol of pluralism and tolerance in the post-independence period.
During Viktor Yushchenko’s 2004 presidential campaign, he even agreed
to accompany the candidate on a pre-election tour.

However, Fishbein’s best poetry rises above contemporary con-
cerns and transports the reader to a realm where a deep peace reigns,
where the mind can concentrate on the details of human perception and
sensation. In this world, the image of whiteness represents the “immacu-
late, divine and nurturing.”⁵⁶ It is the product of a poetic language, that
great writers have crafted. In poems like “Zdaleka” (From Afar), “Rika”
(River) and “Krym. Lito” (Crimea: Summer), the focus is on poetry’s abil-
ity to convey the purely physical experience of living in the moment. His
ultimate themes are eternity, existence and non-existence, the imprint left
by a life and a consciousness.

Yuriy Shevelov has written that Fishbein’s landscapes are “ab-
stract”:⁵⁷ they are the meeting place of a neoclassical form (the sonnet,
iambic structure, careful selection of imagery, limiting of colour imagery
to black or white) with the associativeness of a Celan or a Neruda.
Whereas the poetic form imposes order on the world, it still leaves room
for various interpretations and the play of whimsical imagination.

It is entirely likely that the creative tension between Jewishness
and Ukrainianness has worked its way into the poet’s language and charac-
teristic literary devices, such as the imagery of white and black, and the

⁵⁴ Vadym Skuratovs'kyi “Na perekhrestyakh dushi,” *Suchasnist*, no. 12
(1996), p. 86.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁵⁶ Petrovsky-Shtern, “The New Moses,” p. 21.

⁵⁷ Yuriy Shevelov, “U sprobi nazvaty,” in Fishbein, *Zbirka bez nazvy:
poezii, pereklady* (Munich: Suchasnist, 1984), p. 9.

love of rhymes that are homonyms and paronyms. These rhymes, of course, draw attention to the phonetic similarities of two words while simultaneously revealing their different meanings. Whether one concludes from this, as does Petrovsky-Shtern, that "in his universe Ukrainian and Jewish identities are similar only on a superficial level but are dramatically incongruent in substance"⁵⁸ is a debatable point. One might also argue that this tension between aspects of a single identity, the force that spurs him into song, is satisfyingly integrated into a unity.

Jewish and Ukrainian

The three writers surveyed are key figures in a century-long discourse on the Jewish-Ukrainian identity. Each in his own way reflects reveals the difficulties faced in articulating this identity during his time. Together, these writers describe a trajectory or evolutionary dynamic: from orphanhood, through the struggle for self-definition as a "Soviet" Ukrainian, to an almost seamless fusion of Jewish and Ukrainian components. Or, in another way of thinking, they model three possible ways of self-perception: as an outsider, as a partially visible but uncomfortably positioned insider, or as a fully visible insider.

⁵⁸ Petrovsky-Shtern, "The New Moses," p. 19.

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