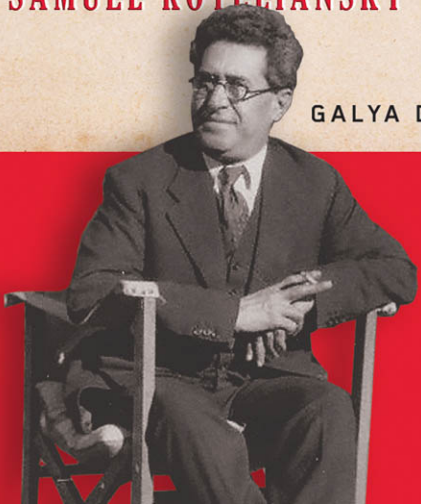
a RUSSIAN JEW of BLOOMSBURY

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF SAMUEL KOTELIANSKY

GALYA DIMENT



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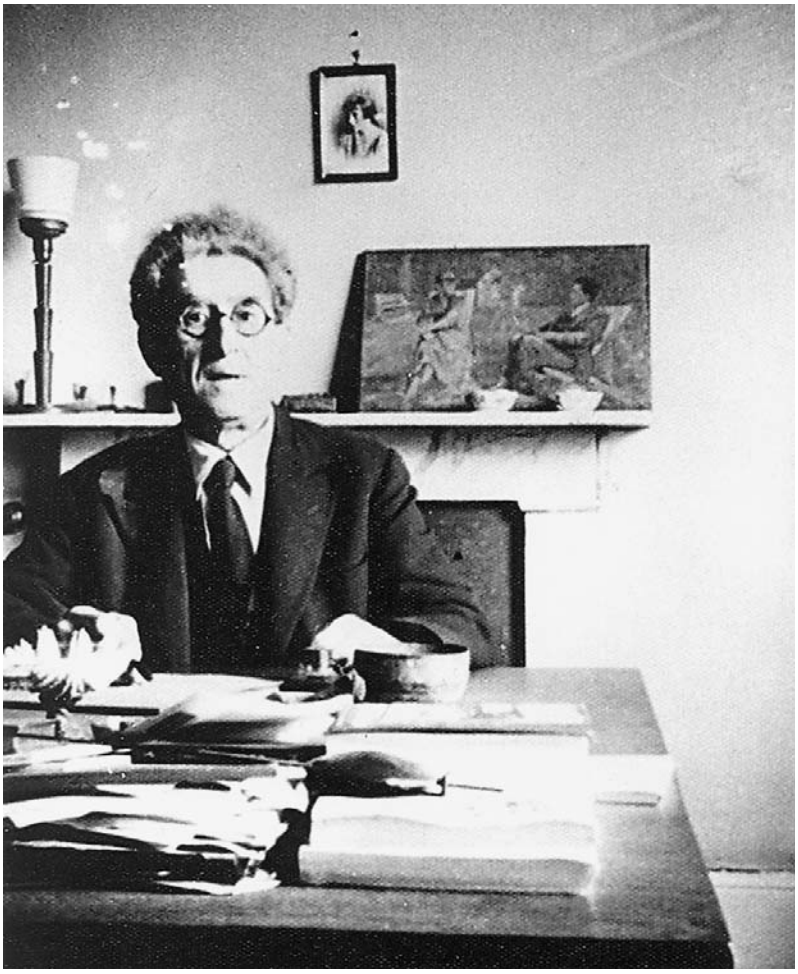

A RUSSIAN JEW OF BLOOMSBURY

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF

SAMUEL KOTELIANSKY

GALYA DIMENT

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Frontispiece: Kot in his study in the 1940s. Behind him, on the wall, is a portrait of Mansfield, while on the mantle is a painting by Lady Glenavy (see 1.14). (CSA.)

To my father, Shleime Itzkhak Diment, and to the memory of his father, Mordekhai Diment, a Pale of Settlement rabbi

To my mother-in-law, Zdenka Bienenstock Grunbaum, a hidden child of the Holocaust, whose entire family perished at Auschwitz

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George Zytaruk, who at one time had planned to write his own biography of Koteliansky, generously shared with me all the materials he had accumulated. His archives contain interviews with people no longer alive by the time I started my book, as well as copies of pictures and letters which are still not in any archive. George also became my first expert reader of the manuscript, and his comments and encouragement were priceless. His *Quest for Rananim* continues to be a valuable source of Lawrence's letters to Koteliansky, even though it has been superceded by the eight-volume Cambridge edition of Lawrence letters. I found his volume more convenient and expedient to use for my purposes, which is reflected in my endnotes (the CUP edition pages are given there as well but in parentheses). I am also enormously thankful to George Zytaruk's daughter, Dr Maria Zytaruk, for her initiative and assistance, and to his wife JoAnn for all her help and support, as well as for willingly becoming herself one of my first readers and proofreaders.

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I would also like to thank Martin Packman, whose grandmother was Kotelianisky's first cousin, for sharing the family lore with me; Natalie Wexler, who allowed me to use her unpublished interview with her uncle, Harry Wexler; Paul Wexler, who gave me information about his trip to Ostropol, as well as some of the pictures he took; my University of Washington colleagues Barbara Henry and Naomi Sokoloff for helping me with Yiddish and Hebrew; as well as very competent and helpful staff at numerous archives that I visited or contacted, and in particular that of the Manuscript Collections and Archives at the British Library, and Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin, places where I spent many days doing my research. I am also very grateful to Trevor James Bond, Interim Head of Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections at the Washington State University, who opened the collection for me during the weekend to accommodate me while I was in Pullman.

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A RUSSIAN JEW OF BLOOMSBURY

Ah, what a man! … He would say something, and there were depths that I have met nowhere else! What was it? A deep suffering for humanity.
~ Esther Polianowsky Salaman, 1967 interview

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INTRODUCTION

RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME

> Those years from 1915 onwards saw the real spread of Russian literature in England. Constance Garnett had been a forerunner; alongside her Herculean labours on the great Russian writers, Koteliansky's output was slight. But … Koteliansky did as much by his influence as by his work.
> ~ Oliver Edwards, "Talking of Books"

> The most elementary remarks upon modern English fiction can hardly avoid some mention of the Russian influence.
> ~ Virginia Woolf, *Common Reader*

One of Samuel Koteliansky's closest friends, the Irish poet and novelist James Stephens, once said that "the greatest book never written about English literature was by Koteliansky."[1] He did not mean that Koteliansky, a transplant from a small Ukrainian shtetl who in England became a literary translator, was an exceptionally perceptive or sophisticated critic. Evidence suggests that he was not – he was always more a man of ideas than a man of style and finesse. What Stephens meant was that Koteliansky intimately knew so many people who were creating the English literature of his era. This book is enriched by their personal voices for, wherever possible, I tried to let their correspondence with him, both previously published and not, resonate through the narrative.

It was his friendship with D.H. Lawrence that would prove to be Koteliansky's most lasting legacy. As a personality and as a translator, Koteliansky had a substantial imprint on two of Lawrence's novels: *Kangaroo* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Lawrence wrote more letters to him than to anyone else outside of his family, and his letters to Koteliansky are crucial for our understanding of him as a writer, a philosopher, and a person. Koteliansky was also an intimate friend of Katherine Mansfield and shaped her awareness and knowledge of Chekhov, who

was the most influential presence in her art. In the 1930s, after he lost both Mansfield and D.H. Lawrence to tuberculosis, Koteliansky became very close to Ottoline Morrell, one of the most colourful personalities of the Bloomsbury set. Among the other friends with whom he frequently corresponded were H.G. Wells, Esther Polianowsky Salaman, Dorothy Richardson, and May Sarton, a rare American in his orbit.

Given that he was already in his thirties when he came to London, a seemingly provincial Russian Jew not at all known for any particular talents or achievements, it is truly stunning that he was able to befriend so many by now legendary people. Much of it had to do with the intense interest that Great Britain manifested toward Russia prior to the Russian revolution of 1917 and says more about England at the time and, in particular, Bloomsbury, one of the collective protagonists of this book, than it does about Koteliansky.

Vladimir Nabokov's uncle, Konstantin Nabokov, was appointed counsellor at the Russian Embassy in London in 1915, and he immediately took notice of how "Sympathy with Russia was manifested in every direction, in all classes of society. A long series of books appeared … Anglo-Russian Societies were founded all over the country … In several Universities chairs of the Russian language were established … Broad circles of British educated society were beginning to realise that Russian literature was not limited to the works of Tolstoi, Dostoyevski and Tourgenev."[2]

London's literary and artistic circles were in particular abuzz about all things Russian. Frances Partridge, one of the second generation of the Bloomsbury artists, summed up her experience as a child catching the Russian "bug" as follows: "Everything Russian was fantastically moving to me. I was thrilled by the novels, translated by Constance Garnett, who was known to be the best … And at the same sort of time I got taken to Diaghilev's ballet and we sat in a box and saw *La Boutique Fantasque* in the Coliseum … and I remember someone brought a Russian Prince to our country house in Surrey, and of course he wasn't really very glamorous, but anything Russian was so marvellous …"[3]

Bloomsbury's fascination with Russia indeed had two major components: the Ballets Russes and Russian literature. The Imperial Russian Ballet first came to London in 1911, the same year Samuel Koteliansky arrived there. The 1911–14 seasons of the Diaghilev Ballet were so influential that the bohemian crowd in London started decorating their houses in the bright colours they saw on stage, leading the famous cartoonist and art critic Osbert Lancaster to dub these years the "First Russian Ballet Period."[4] "[N]ight after night," Leonard Woolf would remember, "we flocked to Covent Garden, entranced by a new art, a revelation to us benighted British, the Russian Ballet in the greatest days of Diaghilev and

Nijinsky … The Russian Ballet became for a time a curious centre of both fashionable and intellectual London … In all my long life this is the only instance in which I can remember the intellectuals going night after night to a theatre, opera, concert or other performance."[5] Lydia Lopokova, a Diaghilev ballerina who became a permanent fixture in Bloomsbury after marrying John Maynard Keynes, astutely summarized some of the reasons for this remarkable success and staying power when she wrote in an obituary for Diaghilev in 1929 that he "had the cunning … to combine the excellent with the fashionable, the beautiful with the chic, and revolutionary art with the atmosphere of the old regime."[6]

The blossoming of a fuller awareness of Russian literature was greatly nourished by recent translations by not only Constance Garnett but also Louise and Aylmer Maude. Prior to Garnett and the Maudes, translations from Russian were often bad renditions from French.[7] As a result of better translations, now directly from Russian, most members of Bloomsbury regarded Tolstoy and Dostoevsky more as contemporaries than writers from the previous era. Tolstoy, in particular, hit the spot. Virginia Woolf considered him simply "the greatest of all novelists." "Nothing seems to escape him," Woolf mused in her 1925 essay "The Russian Point of View." "Nothing glances off him unrecorded … Even in a translation we feel that we have been set on a mountain-top and had a telescope put into our hands. Everything is astonishingly clear and absolutely sharp."[8] Woolf found solace in rereading *War and Peace* during the first dark months of the Second World War. "War and Peace is the greatest novel in the world," she informed Leonard's niece Philippa in 1939, "and if I'm not bombed I shall read that and Anna Karenina this winter."[9]

Ottoline Morrell remembered how she and Katherine Mansfield used to lose themselves "in scene after scene of *War and Peace* – especially [Katherine] loved the chapters where the young girls washed and dressed themselves with excitement for a ball, or went on masquerading expeditions in sledges, and then the scene where Natasha slipped off the slippers from her little feet and jumped into her mother's bed while her mother was reciting her evening prayer."[10] "Dear Madam," Mansfield wrote to Constance Garnett in 1921, "As I laid down my copy of War & Peace tonight I felt I could no longer refrain from thanking you for the whole other world that you have revealed to us through these marvellous translations from the Russian … [M]y generation … and the younger generation owe you more than we ourselves are able to realise. These books have changed our lives, no less. What would it be like to be without them!"[11]

The World War I era was, in short, a very opportune time to be *any* Russian in London. Therefore Samuel Koteliansky, neither glamorous nor a Russian prince, was seen as a true marvel by his new English friends. While Koteliansky

had nothing to do with the Ballets Russes, since he had never seen any good ballet performances in Russia (having never been allowed to travel to Moscow or St Petersburg), like many in Bloomsbury he did worship Tolstoy. "In the hierarchy of creation," he liked to say, "there is God Almighty and Leo Tolstoy."[12] He also loved Chekhov, whom the English intelligentsia were just happily discovering. So, unsurprisingly, it was Tolstoy and, more specifically, Maxim Gorky's reminiscences of him that served as Koteliansky's entrée into the very heart of Bloomsbury: Virginia and Leonard Woolf's Hogarth Press; and it was Chekhov who kept him collaborating with them for several years to come. Translations from Russian classics would become a staple of the Woolfs' press. Richard Kennedy, who worked there in the early 1920s, echoed the sentiments of many Bloomsbury readers when he wrote in his diary: "I like the Russian books better than any others we publish."[13]

While he was born in Ukraine, then a part of the Russian Empire, Koteliansky always considered himself "a Russian Jew." He was not alone in that. Since living in the Pale of Settlement was not their choice, and Jews largely felt that they truly belonged nowhere, many in the turn-of-the-century better-educated and more secular younger generation usually strove to speak, in addition to Yiddish, fluent and educated Russian and devoured Russian literature.[14] Having escaped the worst of both Russian and Ukrainian anti-Semitism, Koteliansky came to England and might have hoped for a haven. The move most likely did save his life. Had he stayed, he would have probably been killed, either by Bolsheviks, like his brother-in-law, or by Nazis, like many other Jews who remained in Ukraine. Or, like his father and sister, he could have died during the devastating epidemics following the revolution. But in England he still had to contend with plenty of anti-Jewish prejudices. Even Lawrence – long after he and Koteliansky became close – often sounded virulently anti-Semitic.

Not surprisingly, Koteliansky would form one of his closest friendships with Mark Gertler, a young painter who had a very similar background and for whom Koteliansky became a stern but very loving surrogate older brother. Since one of the main themes I am pursuing is how it felt to be a Jew in Bloomsbury, Gertler, a fellow Jew from Eastern Europe who was even more of an integral part of the group than Koteliansky ever was, likewise receives a major share of attention in this book. When Koteliansky himself needed moral support, he would turn to yet another Bloomsbury Jew – Leonard Woolf. Koteliansky also befriended other prominent London Jews, among them David Eder, an early Zionist and an influential English psychoanalyst; Sydney Schiff, a novelist and a gracious social host; and Sidney Bernstein, an arts enterpreneuer. In the 1930s, Koteliansky was given a job by another powerful English Jew: Dennis Cohen, a publisher and

director of the Cresset Press. The discussion of their interactions with him, as well as their own experiences, allow me to further probe the position of Jews within the English cultural elite in the first half of the twentieth century.

In his attitude toward people Koteliansky was Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. People either mattered to him a lot, or not at all. With those he disliked, and they were legion, he could be quarrelsome, petulant, unjust, and insulting – "intransigence personified," as one of his friends described him.[15] Even his handshake hurt. "I always had a secret hope," Leonard Woolf remembered, "that this devastating handshake meant that Kot liked one … and so it was worthwhile enduring the pain."[16] To Virginia Woolf this handshake was truly emblematic of the man that Koteliansky was: "His clasp of the hand crushes the little bones: his hand though inches thick is hard as bone, & typifies that dense, solid, concentrated man."[17] Koteliansky often signed his letters with a typical Russian ending, "Krepko zhmu ruku," which he translated as "I grip your hand firmly," probably making his correspondents wince just imagining it.[18]

In his typically categorical way, Koteliansky once advised Esther Polianowsky Salaman – a writer and another transplanted Russian Jew who even hailed from the same province as Koteliansky – that "the most cardinal point" about writing was that "a writer always selects certain things only to write about, dismissing or ignoring all complexities and confusions, that life, the life of everyone, represents."[19] In his own life complexities and confusions truly abounded, but I would be loath to take his advice and dismiss or ignore them for the sake of artificial clarity and cohesion.

I have to admit that while writing this book I often did not know whether I liked Koteliansky enough to wish I had known him personally. I found myself at times siding with people whom I thought he treated unfairly – like his niece Polly, whose early life was tragic beyond human endurance but who, despite it all, managed not only to survive but create a large loving family in Canada. She worshipped her uncle, sought his advice in everything, constantly sent him packages and money – while he, more often than not, berated her for placing too much value on material possessions, writing to him about things that he found meaningless, or not bringing up her four children properly. I also found him exceedingly harsh not just with his enemies but also with people who were very generous and kind to him, like Sydney Schiff.

And yet, when he truly loved someone, there was no friend more loyal, helpful, or concerned. He was particularly generous with warmth and tenderness toward the younger women in his circle – Dilys Powell, Juliette Huxley, Marjorie Wells, and May Sarton. With them he played the role of a loving older brother or uncle, but then could also rely on their nurturing and compassionate natures

when he was sick or growing old. One of them, Marjorie Wells, essentially took care of him, almost on a daily basis, for the last fifteen years of his life.

"Some people have a capacity for writing, painting," he wrote to Ottoline Morrell in 1936, "mine is a capacity for friendship. Were I to be found wanting in every other way, – there's one thing that should be counted as merit: my capacity of being a true friend."[20] "[Y]ou misunderstand my character," he once told Virginia Woolf when she was prodding him for gossip. "I do not find fault with the people I really like – I never discuss them."[21] In a society where rumours were routinely traded like valuable commodities, he was indeed a great person to confide in. "Entirely safe," according to Juliette Huxley. "You knew that nothing would pass his lips."[22] His "most precious gift of all," Dilys Powell wrote in the *Times* of London obituary, "was his personal friendship, at once fierce and incorruptible, demanding always the absolute honesty it offered. Of not many it is said 'I am proud that he liked me.'"[23] He did like her, and many of the letters he wrote to Powell in the 1930s, when she was an aspiring young writer, were so fatherly and warm, they bring tears to one's eyes. Koteliansky placed such an immense value on human relationships because he believed they alone could allow one not only to survive in the brutal century he lived in but also to remain, in the words and language of his father, a "mensch." That through it all he indeed managed to remain one is reflected even today in the unique fondness with which people who knew him well – like H.G. Wells's granddaughter and Marjorie Wells's daughter Catherine, and Esther Polianowsky Salaman's daughter Nina – remember him.

His English friends would invariably call him a "rabbi" or an "Old Testament prophet." For a secular Jew, Koteliansky was indeed interestingly rabbinical in the way he conducted his life in England. Bookish and authoritative, he paid little attention to anything that was not directly related to cerebral matters, spending most of his life worshipping "sacred" books – in his case Tolstoy and Chekhov, rather than the Old Testament.[24] Virginia Woolf saw it very clearly. "It struck me," she wrote once in her diary after a dinner in his company, "he lives in what he reads: makes it do instead of living. Then fabricates what he calls a theology."[25] He once suggested to Ottoline Morrell that the best thing for him, even in England, might have been "settling down as an obscure rabbi."[26] People who came to him for advice did so not because his knowledge of the society they lived in was great – it was not – but because they felt that his wisdom and honesty transcended that limitation. He functioned as their moral compass; they came to him for his pronouncements of what was right and what was wrong, and his approval somehow meant much more than almost anyone else's.

Toward the end of writing my book, as I traced Koteliansky becoming more feeble but also more humble and humane, I made my peace with him. I suspect a reader will also go through mixed emotions reading this book. This complexity of emotions is an understandable reaction to not only Koteliansky's personality but to the entire age he embodied as well as to the two cultures he inhabited – one that firmly shaped him in his youth and the other that he stubbornly helped to shape in his later years.

Beila Koteliansky (née Geller) (1852–1930), Koteliansky's mother, who financed his move to England in 1911 and whom he was not destined to see again, despite several attempts to obtain the necessary papers to go back to Russia (CSA).

The wooden synagogue in Ostropol as it appeared at the time Koteliansky was born. The synagogue, which may have been featured in the early twentieth-century play *The Dybbuk*, was destroyed soon after the 1917 Bolshevik revolution.

"Shmilik" Koteliansky at the age of fourteen or fifteen (CSA).

The remnants of a flour mill in Ostropol that the Kotelianskys may have owned.

The river "Sluch," where Koteliansky's niece, Perl (Polly), almost drowned.

Koteliansky at the time he was leaving Ukraine in 1911. He made postcards of this photo and gave them to his English friends. The reverse side of this postcard says "To Sullivan from Kot." (Courtesy of Barbara Sullivan.)

Koteliansky standing between Grisha and Sonia Farbman, his housemates at 5 Acacia Road. Most likely taken in 1915, when Koteliansky and the Farbmans were moving into the house they agreed to rent from Katherine Mansfield and J. Middleton Murry. Koteliansky will stay there for the rest of his life. (The identity of the man with a broom standing next to Sonia Farbman is unknown.) (CSA.)

5 Acacia Road.

D.H. Lawrence in the late 1910s (National Portrait Gallery, London).

Katherine Mansfield in 1913, a year before Koteliansky met her (National Portrait Gallery, London).

Koteliansky circa 1918 (CSA).

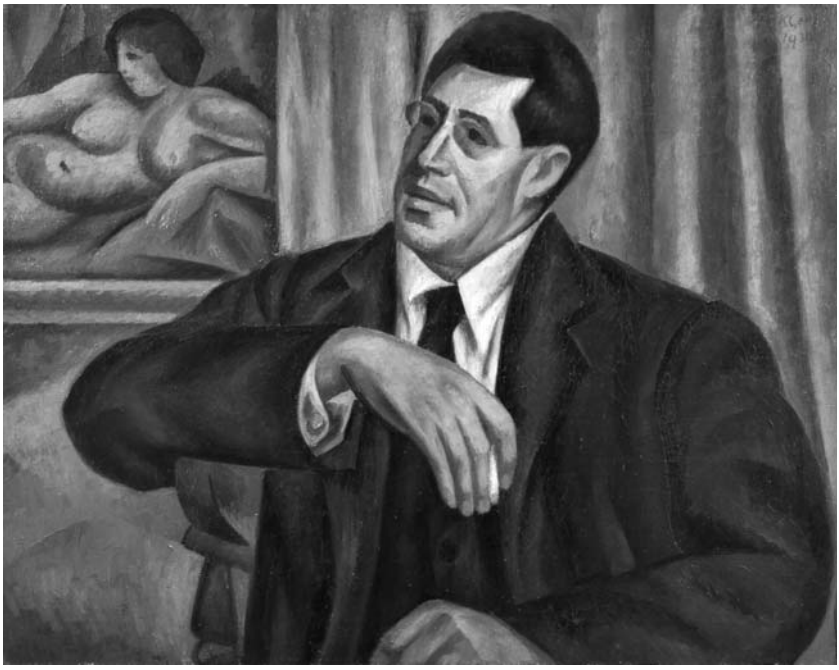
Katherine Mansfield and S.S. Koteliansky in the Garden, by Beatrice Campbell. Early 1920s. Kot was very fond of this painting. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. (Courtesy of Hon. Bridget Campbell and the Estate of William Holden.)

A very young-looking Mark Gertler in the early 1930s (courtesy of Luke Gertler).

Mark Gertler, *Rabbi and Rabbitzin* (1914). Watercolour and pencil on paper. Ben Uri Gallery. (Courtesy of Luke Gertler.)

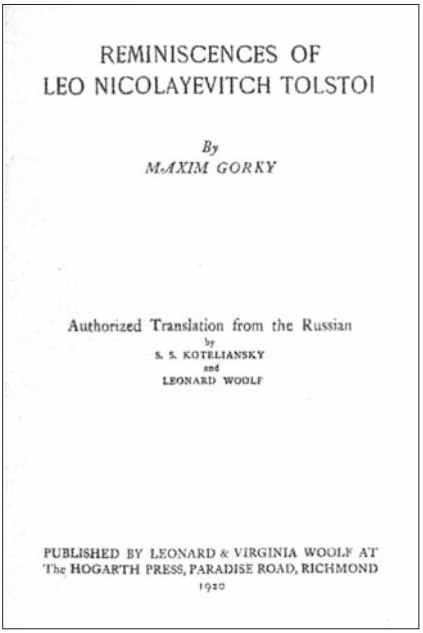
Mark Gertler, *Artist's Mother* (1913). Oil on canvas. Glynn Vivian Art Gallery. (Courtesy of Luke Gertler.)

Mark Gertler, *Portrait of Koteliansky* (1921), as it appeared in his 1925 catalogue. Oil on canvas. The painting was owned by Lady Glenavy and her heirs until 1990. Current location unknown. (Courtesy of Luke Gertler.)



Mark Gertler's 1930 portrait of Koteliansky. Oil on canvas. Placing Kot, who was not known to have much interest in female bodies, next to a representation of a voluptuous nude must have struck Gertler as a fun idea. The painting in the background is somewhat reminiscent of Gertler's "Queen of Sheba" (1922). Anonymous owner. (Courtesy of Luke Gertler.)

Virginia and Leonard Woolf (with their dog, Sally) in the late 1930s. Kot's work for the Woolfs' Hogarth Press and his collaboration with the couple on several translations were the highlights of his career as a translator. Kot would seek Leonard out in the most trying moments of his life, including while on his deathbed. (Courtesy of Estate Gisèle Freund/IMEC Images.)



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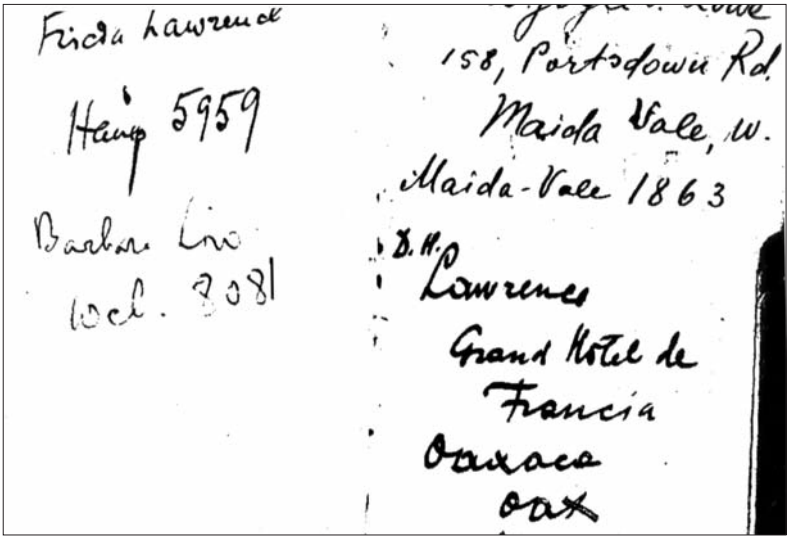
The HOGARTH PRESS, PARADISE ROAD, RICHMOND
1920

The title page of Gorky's reminiscences of Tolstoy. The book became the first bestseller of the fledging press.

J. Middleton Murry in 1917, in a photograph taken by Ottoline Morrell. Kot and Murry never had a smooth relationship despite occasionally collaborating on translations. It became irreparably broken in 1924, after they could not resolve their differences over the future of *The Adelphi*. (National Portrait Gallery, London.)

The first issue of *The Adelphi*.



A page from Kot's address book. The entries for Frieda and D.H. Lawrence are from 1923, when they split up and Frieda came to London while Lawrence went to Mexico. (CSA.)

"Kot … took a piece of paper out of a drawer, on which a few bars of music had been written by some musical friend. He asked me if I could sing it. I could not manage the Hebrew words but I sang the notes …" (Lady Glenavy). Inspiration for Lawrence's notion of utopian "Rananim." (CSA.)

D.H. Lawrence and Frieda Lawrence in 1928.
The picture was probably taken by Ottoline Morrell.
(National Portrait Gallery, London.)

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PART 1

FROM SHMILIK TO KOT

1880–1930

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1

"SHMILIK"

If you are too bitter, the world will spit you out. Too sweet, and it will gobble you up.
~ Hershel of Ostropol

He often talked of you all, and of Ostropol and the horse which took you to the station, and of the little synagogue and so on, and the flour mill.
~ Marjorie Wells to Koteliansky's sister Rokhl, 28 April 1955

"Kot was not a comfortable man," Leonard Woolf wrote in Koteliansky's obituary in 1955.[1] He was definitely not, and his environment was not particularly comfortable either. In 1918, when Koteliansky was already in England, Russian-Jewish writer and historian Simon Dubnov wrote a story called *History of a Jewish Soldier: A Confession of One of Many*, in which the narrator lamented: "I was born in 1881. Later I understood the full symbolic meaning of this fateful date of my life, for it was the year when the era of pogroms began, and a pogrom in a variety of incarnations has accompanied me from my cradle to my grave, at the edge of which I now find myself."[2]

Koteliansky was born in 1880, a year before Dubnov's soldier, and he, too, felt that the pogroms, both literal and metaphorical, followed him everywhere. While he left the horrors of the anti-Jewish violence and discrimination physically behind him once he came to England, he could never shake off many of the consequences of this experience, including the effect it had on what he called his "black moods," long and painful bouts of severe depression when for weeks he would stay indoors and see no one. There are very few documents from his early years in Russia, and some of the unique elements of his childhood and youth are irrevocably lost, yet it still behooves us to start there because these were, for better or for worse, his truly formative years.

Samuel (Shmul) Koteliansky was born in the region where most Russian Jews of that period were born – the notorious Pale of Settlement, far away from the central parts of Russia from which Jews had been barred ever since Catherine the Great decreed it so in 1791. Koteliansky's family lived in the small Ukrainian town of Ostropol (now Starii Ostropil). Prior to the annexations at the end of the eighteenth century due to Catherine's successful wars, Ostropol and surrounding territory belonged to Poland. The town is believed to have been founded in 1576, but archaeological digs routinely find traces of much earlier habitation, as far back as the pre-Christian era (fourth to eighth centuries CE).[3] While the centre of the town was heavily Jewish, Ostropol's overall population was, according to the all-Russian Census of 1897, more mixed than that of many nearby towns, with only 37 percent of its 7,300 inhabitants being Jewish.[4] Ostropol was about 300 kilometres from Kiev, and in order to go there to study Koteliansky, as a Jew, would need to obtain a special permit.

The family name of Koteliansky is very rare and all Kotelianskys are believed to be direct relatives. The name itself most likely comes from a small town less than 30 kilometres from Ostropol called "Kotelianka," and it simply means that the bearers of that name were originally from there. Many Jews in this part of Ukraine shared their last names with the villages and towns their ancestors inhabited at one point or another.[5] In the 1880s a Russian historian who visited Starokonstantinov, a larger town 20 kilometres away, complained that the area was "full of yids ['polon zhidami'], wherever you go you see their houses, near which there are lakes of garbage."[6] Martin Packman, whose grandmother was Samuel Koteliansky's first cousin, remembers his parents telling him that Ostropol "was the classic shtetl, with all of the grubbiness and none of the romanticism."[7] Another former citizen of Ostropol, Harry Wexler, who lived there until he was twelve, told his grandniece that his most vivid memory of Ostropol were its dirt roads: "[T]he mud [was] about a foot deep, more than that. Sometimes the horses and the wagons couldn't get out … In winter it used to freeze. That was a blessing. You could use sleds."[8] These descriptions, however, do not do Ostropol full justice. Now reduced to a small village with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants (and virtually none of them Jews), Ostropol, carved out by the curly shores of a plentiful river and surrounded by luscious forests, can still conjure images of a very attractive place in its heyday.

The river Sluch is one of Ukraine's liveliest. It originates not very far from Ostropol and continues for almost 200 kilometres north. The river figured prominently in the lore of the Koteliansky family. Koteliansky told his friends in England that his earliest childhood memory was of "a night when a man had been drowned. The people of his village had no knowledge of present-day

methods of artificial respiration. The drowned man was put on a horse, in front of a rider, then the horse was galloped as hard as possible; apparently breathing was sometimes restored by this process." He could see "the gleaming white face of the drowned man bobbing about and hear the wails of the people as the horse thundered past, going round and round the village. Each time it returned there was the white face and the wailing."[9] And then the Sluch almost claimed Koteliansky's niece, Perl, who would remember later how as a very little girl she went to the river with her father, who instructed her to hold onto a boat chain fastened to a rock while he took a swim. Feeling bored, after a short while she let go of the chain and was immediately swept away by the current. Fortunately, her father saw it and rescued her. She recalled that once she was saved, "there was a great celebration … in Ostropol, the kind of celebration where they threw money on the street."[10]

Celebrations were common in Ostropol. The town was, in fact, considered by residents and visitors alike to be a very joyful and vibrant place, and even, according to some, "the merriest of all shtetls."[11] Abe Koosis, who was born in Ostropol in 1904, remembered it, especially during summer time, with much fondness: "The air was perfumed with the fragrance of lilac. The woods and orchards around us were beautiful. We kids used to go in the woods and pick wild strawberries that grew in the tall grass beneath the trees … We'd go frolicking in the river which was behind the house, to the disgust of the people trying to fish."[12] As one of his friends tells us, Koteliansky, too, cherished the memories of the fragrance in the Ostropol air when winter would finally give way to spring: "It was marvelous to hear him tell of spring in Russia, how after the dark and terrible cold, suddenly the air was full of the scent of violets and people went literally mad with joy."[13]

Ostropol owed its reputation as a merry shtetl to a legendary character of Jewish folklore, Hershel ("Gershele") Ostropolier, a wandering beggar ("schnorrer") and local wit. Ben Richman, who lived there as a child at the turn of the last century, told his grandchildren that everyone in Ostropol felt an intimate connection with the mythical jester: "[He] clowned around for Hasidic Rabbis about 150 years before I was born. Legend gave him a site in the marketplace where he was buried. And the Jews were paying tribute to him …"[14] Often penniless and without food, the Hershel of Jewish lore never allowed cold, hunger, and social injustice to destroy his high spirits and keen sense of humour. Among the witty aphorisms attributed to him are such gems as "God must love poor people. Why else would He make so many of them?"; "How to get rid of someone for good: If he's rich, ask to borrow money. If he's poor, lend him some"; "Never wish the doctor or the undertaker a good year."

Hershel was esteemed as much for his integrity as for his jokes. "Better an honest slap than a false kiss" was one of his celebrated statements, something that Koteliansky would both say and, to the chagrin of many of his friends, ruthlessly practice during his years in England.[15] "He always speaks the truth," Virginia Woolf recorded in her diary in 1920, "& laying waste many a fair garden."[16] "Kot's condemnations were terrific," wrote Leonard Woolf. "[Y]ou felt that his vehemence had blown away all screens, disguises, veils, and uncovered the nakedness of some wretched sinner."[17] Not even his closest relatives were spared Koteliansky's denunciatory slaps, especially when it came to what he perceived as lack of honesty. Hershel was also credited with saying: "Better a whole lie than a half-truth," and that was another maxim Koteliansky definitely believed in.[18] "I told you on a number of occasions, throughout the years," he would characteristically berate his niece in Canada, "that I hate and abominate tricks, diplomacy, and lies. If one does not tell the complete truth, or is silent about matters that need an answer, this person can never be trusted by me, whatever happens … In writing you either tell me the truth, or better not write at all."[19]

Koteliansky's parents were Avrum-Shloima Koteliansky and Beila Geller. One of Koteliansky's closest friends in England, Marjorie Wells, daughter-in-law of H.G. Wells, remembered being told by Koteliansky that his father "was a [wheat]-merchant, among other things, who collected wheat from various parts of Russia and sold it to the French firm of Dreyfus."[20] He also may have at some point owned the very mill that was in the town centre and whose ruins are still in evidence today.[21] Beila Koteliansky, who was considered the real business brains in the family, ran a very successful fabric store from their house.[22] The reason we know it was successful is because it was even listed in *The All-Russian Business Directory*.[23]

Beila hailed from Annopol, which was very close to Ostropol. We learn more about her early years than her husband's because of the autobiography she wrote at the request of her son when Koteliansky was already in England. Entitled "The Life of a Simple Woman" and written in Yiddish, the document provides an interesting glimpse of Beila's life prior to the marriage:

> My father hired people to work in his factory and in his fields, only Jews. He was very good to his workers … When a worker had a daughter, he didn't have to worry about having to find a spouse for her. My father would pay the dowry, and they would pay him back slowly after the wedding. If someone couldn't pay him back, my father would not ask for the money … My father and brother travelled together to see the Rebbe. We kids were

> jealous of my brother. The people who couldn't travel, women, the infirm and children were not happy to be left home for the holidays. We asked those travelling to ask the Rebbe for a blessing … My father saw that the girls were jealous, but he couldn't do anything because you don't take girls to the Rebbe. Our mother cooked fish for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and we hoped that our father and brother would return home before Sukkoth.

She also left a nostalgic description of a Passover celebration in their household:

> My father came home from prayers and wished everyone a Kosher Pesakh. My mother began to bake Matzahs. The baker had new tables. Everyone washed their hands. It took time to bake Matzah … We had a big room we only used for Pesakh. We all dressed up in new clothes and went into the Pesakh room. A big silver samovar stood on the table with delicious food kosher for Pesakh … My father and brother would lead the Seder. After they read the Hagaddah, we ate … The meal went on for a long time, even after the Haggadah. I remember I liked to stay up late, until after singing Khad Gadya.[24]

If the wedding of Beila and Avrum-Shloima took place in Ostropol, it was probably similar to the ones described by Ben Richman: "Weddings in Ostropol lasted a minimum of six days. The families each vied to have a day of celebrating in their houses – with food, drinks, and music and dancing. The last day of the wedding a parade went through town, music blaring and leading to the supposed grave of Hershel. The dancing there was particularly wild and all passers-by joined in the festivities."[25] The Kotelianskys would have, all in all, three sons and two daughters.

Ostropol had a busy marketplace near the main road (which led to Starokonstantinov), a sizable wooden synagogue with several structures under separate roofs connected together (it now exists only in old photographs and drawings), and at least three water-powered flour mills, one right below the market square. Richman also left a description of "market Mondays," when "wagons with merchandise … gathered next to all centre highways and displayed their wares. Customers paraded back and forth among wagons looking, inspecting, bargaining …"[26] Koteliansky's parents must have been among the regular customers there, since, unlike the majority of the Jewish population in the Pale, they were quite prosperous. Their granddaughter Perl would remember that, while outside their house it was only mud, inside it was "pure Paris."[27]

Avrum-Shloima was twenty-seven and Beila twenty-eight when the son they lovingly called "Shmilik" was born.[28] The references to his parents in Koteliansky's letters are not frequent, but they do give a hint of their personalities. He wrote to his niece that Avrum-Shloima liked to say "Well, my son, be a mensch!" whenever Koteliansky found himself in a difficult situation, while his mother admonished him to be humble and always remember "that there actually are people so very much better than oneself."[29]

According to the Russian passport he brought to England with him, the date of Koteliansky's birth was 28 February. His English documents, however, including the passport he was issued upon his naturalization in 1929, list 1 April as his date of birth. The discrepancy is hard to account for, since the difference between the Russian old calendar and the Gregorian calendar is less than two weeks. One tends to believe the Russian passport more since it was presumably based on the original birth certificate, in which case 1 April would be Koteliansky's self-deprecatory joke. It allowed him to share his made-up birthday with, among others, Pushkin's Ivan Belkin, whose being born on April Fool's Day was meant to signal to the readers of *The Tales of Belkin* all they needed to know about Belkin's intellectual and narratorial abilities. Koteliansky apparently confessed to his English friends that he simply did not know when he was actually born because "around Kiev at that time they only remembered such things by the season," so one date was almost as good as any other.[30]

Self-depreciation aside, Koteliansky was quite proud of his heritage. He traced it back to a celebrated Talmudic scholar of the seventeenth century, Yom-Tov Lipman Heller (1578–1654), author of the famous *Tosafot yom tov* Mishnah commentary, and a disciple of the legendary Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague. Even among the most celebrated Jewish Talmudists and rabbis, Heller, whom Koteliansky once characterized to his niece as "not only a great scholar, but a fine man,"[31] was one of the truly distinguished. He was further acclaimed for his poem, written in Hebrew, about the Jewish massacres of 1648, which took place in Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania, killing, according to some Jewish sources, more than 100,000 Jews while destroying more than 300 Jewish communities.[32] Little had changed more than two hundreds years later. Pogroms, indeed, accompanied Koteliansky from his cradle. A year after Koteliansky's birth, the region witnessed a series of particularly violent ones that were occasioned by the 1 March 1881 assassination of Alexander II. Some members of the terrorist wing of "Narodnaia volia" (People's Will) were Jewish, and as *The London Jewish Chronicle* reported on 6 May 1881, the role of Jews in the assassination became one of the foci of the investigation: "The Czar's assassination happened on a day that is kept up festively by the Jews in Russia [i.e., Purim], and after the event they were charged

with having made merry in anticipation of what was going to happen."[33] The intensity of pogroms increased further toward the turn of the century. In April 1903, Russian Jews in Kishinev were subjected to one of the bloodiest massacres of all. *The New York Times* described it as "worse than the censor will permit to publish": "The mob was led by priests, and the general cry, 'Kill the Jews,' was taken up all over the city. The Jews were taken wholly unaware and were slaughtered like sheep. The dead number 120 and the injured about 500. The scenes of horror attending this massacre are beyond description. Babes were literally torn to pieces by the frenzied and bloodthirsty mob. The local police made no attempt to check the reign of terror. At sunset the streets were piled with their corpses and wounded. Those who could make their escape fled in terror, and the city is now practically deserted of Jews."[34]

In 1905 and 1906, according to a commission appointed by the Zionist relief fund in London, approximately 690 anti-Jewish pogroms took place, principally in the southern and southwestern provinces, and in Kiev and Odessa.[35] The 1905 pogroms in the southern provinces of Russia, which bordered on Volhynia, accounted for 62 percent of all Jewish deaths there that year.[36] By the end of 1906 more than 3,000 Jewish lives were lost. Ivan Bunin, whose famous story "The Gentleman from San Francisco" Koteliansky would later translate with the help of D.H. Lawrence, was in Odessa at the time. "At about three o'clock," he wrote in his diary on 22 October 1905, "I ran into an acquaintance who told me that … Ukrainian men and lads were going down the streets with scythes and daggers … They were beating the Jews mercilessly, savagely on Moldavanka … The Cossacks soon arrived but they passed by the scene with smiles on their faces." A nurse at a local hospital reported to Bunin that "on Romanov Square children's heads were being bashed against the wall, and that the soldiers and Cossacks stood idly by, shooting their guns in the air…."[37]

Koteliansky's English friend, Lady Glenavy (Beatrice Campbell), probably got the story of his early education somewhat wrong when she recorded in her memoirs that "At the age of nine years he told his parents that he no longer believed in the Jewish faith and he wished to learn Russian and go to a Russian school."[38] Sending him to a Russian school, in addition to a Hebrew one (a "heder"), was most likely his parents' idea; it was routinely done by well-off Jewish parents throughout the Pale in order to assure that their children spoke good Russian and could therefore succeed in the wider world. It was also a good preparation for gymnasium, where children of well-off Jews were expected by their parents to enroll later. Koteliansky probably attended the same Russian elementary school Ben Richman would attend fifteen years later. "The school I went to," writes Richman, "was a gov[ernment] school and Jews [unlike Russians] had to pay tuition.