

“A Double Burden, a Double Cross”

Andrei Sobol as a Russian-Jewish Writer

JEWS OF RUSSIA & EASTERN EUROPE AND THEIR LEGACY

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*“A Double Burden,
a Double Cross”*

Andrei Sobol
as a Russian-Jewish
Writer

VLADIMIR
KHAZAN

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Preface

If a history of Russian-Jewish literature in the twentieth century (or, at least, a history of its authors and texts) were ever to be written, it would reveal a number of puzzling lacunae. One such lacuna is Andrei Sobol, a truly significant writer who, paradoxically, has not received due scholarly attention. This can easily be demonstrated by the fact that Sobol's name goes virtually unmentioned in some of the most representative and authoritative studies dealing with the Russian-Jewish literary discourse (see, for instance, Nakhimovsky, 1992; Kornblatt, 1992; Sicher, 1995; Katz, 2008; Murav, 2011, et al.); even the seemingly most comprehensive recent work—a four-volume collective monograph titled *Yehudei Rusya ba-Mea ha-Esrin* [Russian Jews in the Twentieth Century], which was published in Hebrew in 2014—passes over him in silence.

This is not to say that Sobol, as a Russian-Jewish writer, has been completely forgotten; in fact, several authors have touched on this subject. These range from the well-known contemporary critic Vasily L'vov-Rogachevskii, who discussed him briefly in his book *Russko-evreiskaia literatura* [Russian-Jewish literature] (L'vov-Rogachevskii, 1922: 160–61), to several modern scholars: Rytman, 1993; Prat, 1996; Prat, 2000; Gantseva, 2001; Geizer, 2001; Hetényi, 2006; Hetényi, 2008 (according to the index, pp. 196–200; 279–81 in particular); in addition to those, see our own works: Khazan, 2005a; Khazan, 2008a; Khazan, 2014; Khazan, 2015. Nevertheless, we still lack a comprehensive and exhaustive account of Sobol's public, literary, and artistic activities as a purely Russian-Jewish phenomenon—either in the form of a biographical description or as an analysis within the framework of cultural studies. It is this scholarly gap that has prompted me to write this book.



Figure 1. Andrei Sobol in 1911

In reality, the problem lies not in the lack of a complete study of the Russian-Jewish element of Sobol's literary legacy, so much as in the failure, rather startling in itself, to identify this element on the part of many of his would-be interpreters. Sobol, in his literary works, touched on some of the sorest spots in Russian-Jewish relations, was braver than most in entering the "danger zones" of this relationship, showed a keen interest in the numerous manifestations of the Jewish spirit in Russian culture, worked as a translator and editor of Jewish authors, engaged with Jewish theater in his capacity as a critic,

and, finally, made an important contribution to the gallery of Jewish fictional "types," thereby significantly enriching the Russian-Jewish literary stock—and yet, despite all this, it seems that neither his dauntless and unflinching civic stance nor the ideas and images that are expressed in his writing have yet been adequately perceived and analyzed by critics and scholars.

Sobol's impact on the Russian-Jewish press is both broad and diverse. Before the Revolution of 1917, his articles appeared in most of the key Russian-Jewish periodicals: *Khronika Evreiskoi Zhizni* [The Chronicle of Jewish Life], *Evreiskaia Zhizn'* [Jewish Life], *Novyi Put'* [New Way], *Novyi Voskhod* [New Sunrise], and *Evreiskaia Nedelia* [The Jewish Week]; after the Revolution, he wrote for the single-issue newspaper *Evreistvo i Palestina* [The Jews and Palestine] (Moscow, 1918), and for the *Safrut* collections (1918, 1922; edited by Leib Iaffe, a well-known Jewish poet, journalist, and public figure). He also edited an anthology entitled *Evreiskii Mir* [The Jewish World] (1918; originally, at least six issues were projected, but the Bolsheviks banned it after the first issue). During the Civil War, he

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wrote for the Odessa-based anti-Bolshevik newspaper *Evreiskaia Mysl'* [Jewish Thought]. All in all, Sobol's numerous contributions—to Russian-Jewish literature; to the social, intellectual, and spiritual life of Russian Jews in the 1910s and the first half of the 20s; and, more broadly, to the national-cultural identity of Russian Jewry—are varied and highly significant. And yet, when one reads certain studies dealing with the history of Russian-Jewish literature in the twentieth century, one gets the distinct impression that such a writer was never a part of this literature.

The response to Sobol's oeuvre in general, and to the "Russian-Jewish" component thereof in particular, tends to be characterized by a peculiar sloppiness, an unwillingness not only to go into details, but even to attain even a cursory understanding of some of the most basic aspects of these works. This negligent attitude is typical of even the most authoritative critics. Here is just one illustrative example. In the collection *Evreiskii mir* [Jewish World], which was compiled by the Union of Russian Jews during World War II, Mark Slonim, who authored the article on Jews in Soviet literature, unequivocally relegated Sobol to the category of authors whose works "despite ... the obvious assimilation into the Russian environment, are characterized by occasional infusions of Jewish themes and motifs" (Slonim, 2001 (1944): 156). Slonim also wrote:

In his nervous, frantic works, one could sense that painful ambivalence, that mental imbalance of a dreamer and a visionary, which was commonly attributed to those consumptive Jewish youths who used to be the favorite protagonists of many a writer. Although Sobol wrote almost exclusively about the Russian intellectuals with their troubled conscience and about the "superfluous men" of the bohemian intelligentsia (the novel *Pyl'* [Dust]), there are occasional passages that, both in terms of subject matter and in terms of interpretation, attest to his Jewish origins (ibid.).

Almost all the claims made in this quote are factually wrong, and they arouse a sharp feeling of protest that borders on bewilderment: by no means all of Sobol's works can be characterized as the writings of a "consumptive Jewish youth"; the Jewish theme is far from marginal in his oeuvre, and the novel *Pyl'* (1915), which

depicts revolutionary terrorists and deals unflinchingly with the question of anti-Semitism in the revolutionary milieu, cannot in any way be described as a novel about the “bohemian intelligentsia” — if Slonim had actually bothered to read it, he would never have made such a claim.

This entry is all the more puzzling in light of the fact that Sobol, both as a human being and as a writer, was much more closely connected to Jewry, had a far deeper and more nuanced view of the actual dramas, needs, and problems facing the Jews, than those latter-day critics who would presume to judge him with varying degrees of severity. Suffice it to say that, at different times in his life, he was interested in Zionism, and this was no mere “passing youthful fad”: he really shared his people’s millennial yearning to return to their ancestral homeland, and this conviction stayed with him in later years. In an article published in the single-issue Zionist newspaper *Evreistvo i Palestina*, appropriately titled *Son tysiacheletii* [The Dream of Millennia], he addressed this subject clearly and unambiguously:

We sleep uneasily. The nightmares are ever at our bedside, both by night and by day; we often wake to the light of a candle stub; just as often, we wake to utter darkness; our life is harsh, and all our paths and roads are arduous. And yet, there are also healing dreams, wonderful dreams—and, if they come to us, I know one such golden dream.

The dream of a millennium, the dream of yesterday, the dream of tomorrow—it is unchanging, eternal, and captivating.

It is within the soul of the people, it is with me. Ask me not whether I believe in dreams—I see it with my own eyes.

Oh, how poor—yet how rich—we are! (Sobol, 1918).

If we are to comprehensively analyze the subject of “Sobol and Jewry,” we must take account of a whole range of facts that are not merely understudied, but completely unknown. Thus, we know virtually nothing about Sobol’s activities in the Crimea during the Civil War, where he, together with Osip Mandelstam and the Yiddish-language poet and pamphleteer Elisha (Abram

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Moiseevich) Rodin (1888–1946), was a member of a Jewish literary circle named *Unzer Winkl* [Our Cozy Nook] in Feodosia. To the best of our knowledge, no details of these activities have survived, and the circle itself is very sparsely documented.¹ Another rare bit of testimony can be gleaned from the Yiddish-language memoirs of the Jewish author Chayim Tamarkin, who writes that, in the early 1920s, Sobol was the head of a Moscow-based Jewish theater studio (named in honor of Sholem Aleichem), and was later succeeded in this position by the prominent Yiddish poet David Hofshstein (Tamarkin, 1985: 126–27, 130–32).²

Sobol's biography contains many other such little-known and understudied facts.

The very notion of "Russian-Jewish literature" is rife with ambiguities, contradictions, and vacillations, and, in the consensus of readers and critics alike, it does not refer to a fictional historical-literary phenomenon. Its boundaries, content, forms, functions, and the like, cannot be easily defined. As is made abundantly clear by a large number of empirical facts, Russian-Jewish literature was a kind of cultural "experiment," which, on the one hand, conformed to the general laws of artistic systems that operate within broader cultural contexts ("How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"), and, on the other hand, possessed its own unique attributes that have remained understudied and underexplored to the present day. In our opinion, the major source of all the ambiguity and vacillations surrounding the category of "the Russian-Jewish literary tradition" is not the extreme difficulty in selecting the right criteria and building an adequate model of its actual functioning, but, rather, the fact that most of the truly *significant* authors fit this category poorly, or not at all. This conclusion is borne out by a scrupulous historical analysis. The very attempt to combine the "Jewish" and the "Russian" elements into a single and cohesive whole inevitably results in a certain contradiction. In the actual practice of literary work, this contradiction leads to a state of *liminality*, and, in its most extreme manifestations, it can result in a rupture of this internal symbiosis. As a consequence, Russian-Jewish literature gives birth to a "multifocal" view, where the interpretation of the depicted phenomena largely depends on the

line of sight and the reference point, and where the same artistic facts can be seen (and, ergo, interpreted) with both “Jewish” and “Russian” eyes. This is the reason why, for instance, the dialectics of Isaac Babel—a writer who was both “Russian” and “Jewish”—presuppose not a confrontational and mutually exclusive “either/or” scenario but, rather, peaceful coexistence. In the words of Shimon Markish, one of the most serious students of Russian-Jewish literature, this points not to a “duality” but to a “duplication” (Markish, 1994: 165).

The contradiction between the “Jewish” and the “Russian” elements—which, in the phenomenon discussed here, are both inseparable and “unmergeable”—is an extremely complex ethical, psychological, and cultural problem. The Hungarian scholar Zsuzsa Hetényi has already pointed out the dichotomy in statements made by Andrei Sobol and Lev Lunts, who described themselves as being torn apart by two elements—“Russianness” and “Jewishness”: both elements have equal rights, and both coexist within the soul of the Russian Jew, who is unable to reconcile them, yet simultaneously unwilling to prefer one over the other (Hetényi, 2006: 71–2).

Undoubtedly, there exist Russian-Jewish writers who fully belong to this category and never leave its boundaries (at least, the externally drawn ones). One such writer is Semyon Iushkevich. But there is a curious tendency: the more homogenous any given Russian-Jewish writer is, the harder he tries to obey the unwritten rules and commandments of his “native” element at the expense of the universal one; the narrower his creative horizon becomes, and the stronger the possibility of him turning into a mere ethnographic painter who is doomed to be a “prisoner of time” as a substitute for the loftier role of a “hostage of eternity.” This type of writer has been aptly defined by the Soviet critic Abram Lezhnev as a “Jewish author *under* Russian literature,” and this definition was obviously formulated with Iushkevich in mind. In Lezhnev’s view, Iushkevich is of interest primarily as an “ethnographer, a chronicler of mundane details,” and not as an “artist.” Comparing Iushkevich to Babel, Lezhnev adds that only under the latter’s pen does “the everyday life of Odessa acquire artistic value” (Lezhnev, 1927: 125).

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The indeterminacy of the boundaries of the “Russian-Jewish” sphere (or, at least, the elasticity and mobility of those boundaries) and the relative ease with which one can enter this space and then just as easily leave it, turning one’s attention to other issues that are far removed from Jewish concerns—these features are so blatant and obvious that they can easily be perceived by a casual glance, with no need for detailed study. Take, for instance, the case of Valentin Parnakh, a translator, dancer, and one of the pioneers of Russian jazz, who wrote the heart-rending poem “Vyslannye” [The Expelled] (1915–1920), dealing with the plight of the many thousands of Jewish expellees from the near-front zones during World War I, and who even intended at one point to settle in Palestine. Despite this, he cannot in any way be characterized as a Russian-Jewish writer. And yet, he did author an article about Jews in Russian literature, which betrays a depth of knowledge and which, moreover, was written from the point of view of a Russian-Jewish writer (Parnakh, 1926). This fact once stunned Aleksandr Bacherac, a Russian critic of Jewish origin and a close acquaintance of Parnakh: he simply refused to believe that Parnakh could have authored such an article, and even assumed that the author must have been a different person named Parnakh.³

Setting aside for the nonce the theoretical aspect of this problem and leaving it out of the discussion, in this book we would like to focus our attention on a specific historical and literary phenomenon: the artistic career and oeuvre of the Russian-Jewish writer Andrei Sobol.

Yisrael (Iulii; as a child, he was known under the nickname “Tusia”) Moiseevich Sobol (Sobel) was born in Saratov on August 1 (Old-Style July 20), 1887—this is the date entered into the registry book of the Jewish community of Saratov⁴ and into the case file of the Military District court of Wilno that convicted Sobol in 1906 for his revolutionary activities. The source of another date that crops up in reference works—May 25 (13), 1888 (see, for instance, Grigor’iants, 1971: 993; Kazak, 1988: 713; Karpov, 1998: 372; also, Karpov, 2005: 374, and others)—is unclear. In his autobiographies—or, as the critic Dmitry Gorbov termed them, his “breakneck itineraries”

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Figure 2. Andrei Sobol's parents: father Moisei-Yitzhak (1870) and mother Mina (1891)

(Gorbov, 1926: 197)—Sobol does indeed refer to 1888 as his year of birth. However, he was also convinced that his date of birth was January 22; see his letter to Rakhil Bakhmutskaia, his bride-to-be at that time (sent from the Caucasus front on January 31, 1917):

Richichik, I've completely forgotten to tell you: I received your telegram yesterday. Thank you, darling! Believe it or not, I'd forgotten that it was my birthday. And now you've reminded me of it. [...] Actually, [January] 22 was the day I moved from Sarik[amış] to Erzurum.⁵

Sobol's mother, Mina Sergeevna (Sigizmundovna) (née Berman; 1866–1927), who had an affinity for acting and performed at an amateur theater, gave birth to him at the age of twenty-two. Iulii's oldest brother, Solomon (Monya), had been born three years earlier, in 1884—at that time, the mother was barely past her eighteenth year. Her second son, Leib (Lev; nicknamed “Liolia” by his family), was born on October 18, 1885. After the birth of Iulii, on August 19, 1892, she gave birth to another son—Yitzhak, whose name would later be changed to “Volodia.” A few days after the birth of the

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Figure 3. Andrei Sobol's parents: father Moisei-Yitzhak (1885) and mother Mina (1915)

last son, on August 22, 1892, the Sobol family—a young, 26-year old woman and her four sons—was dealt a fatal blow: the head of the family, Moisei-Yitzhak Zelmanovich (Solomonovich) Sobol (b. 1859), succumbed to the cholera epidemic that was raging at the time, leaving his widow virtually penniless. The older children were taken in by their aunts, the father's sisters, whereas Iulii and Yitzhak (Volodia) stayed with their mother, who took them to the town of Shavli (nowadays known as Šiauliai) in the Kovno Governorate, where she had some relatives. Undoubtedly, the disorderly nature of Sobol's future life owed much to this early trauma of losing the family breadwinner.

In Shavli, where Iulii attended a free Jewish public school, the Sobol family eked out a meager existence that was truly intolerable. The mother—apparently, a woman of little worldly wisdom and life experience—was crushed even further by the loss of her bread-winning husband, and proved totally unable to cope with the challenges that had befallen her. Berta Faivush, who had known her since childhood, would later recall her as a person of unstable temperament:

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[...] She would smoke cigarettes, sing songs, and laugh a lot, even though their life at the time was far from cheerful (Faivush, 1928: 135).

Sobol never received any systematic education, and displayed all the characteristics of an autodidact. Later, when filling out various forms, he would always write in the “Education” box: “homeschooling” and “ext[ernal] student at the University of Berne.” However, like a typical member of the Russian intelligentsia, a parvenu of humble origins, Sobol was “indiscriminately well-read” (to use B. Pasternak’s pithy phrase), and this quality would manifest itself in various ways in his future career—both as a journalist and as a writer.

At the age of sixteen, Sobol fell in with the revolutionary movement. Like many of his contemporaries, he had been shaped



Figure 4. Andrei Sobol and his brothers

by lofty revolutionary ideals and took an inner vow of renunciation of the “old world.” After joining the socialist Zionists, he adopted the nickname “Rachmiel” (this fact can be gleaned from police documents) and began to engage in revolutionary agitation in Wilno, Kovno, Marjampol (Marijampolė), Orsha, and Chereya (a small town in the Mogilev Governorate).⁶ Later, when recalling this period of his life, Sobol wrote:

I travelled between Jewish towns and *shtetls*, filling the ears of very pretty girls with tales of the French Revolution, “explaining” the ideas of Engels, quoting from the works of [W. J.] Bloss [*sic*] (Sobol, 1922a: 38).

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In the morning of the New Year, 1906, the young agitator was arrested, and then held in custody for six months in various prisons—in Grodno, Wilno, and Smolensk. On July 5, 1906, Sobol was convicted by the Military District Court at Wilno on the basis of Part 1 of Article 101, “for the possession of arms with the aim of procuring funds for an unidentified criminal organization whose goal is armed rebellion against the sovereign power,” and sentenced to four years of hard labor. During the trial, Sobol did not admit guilt and refused to give any explanations. Nor did he plea for pardon. The sentence took effect on September 18, 1906 (Baum, 1927).

After the sentencing and the discharge of various legal formalities, Sobol was subjected to the familiar routine that had been honed to perfection by the police apparatus: he was dressed in a prisoner’s jacket, stripped of his civil rights, and sent to the Siberian wilderness—a land where, as he would later put it in one of his newspaper articles, “some of the wolves were softer and more squeamish than the men” (Sobol, 1919/1920). He began his long trek through the circles of the hell of the tsarist penal labor system: the Alexander Central (a jail near Irkutsk); the Amur Cart Road (“Kolesukha”), which would be described in many of his texts; and, finally, the Zerentuy Penitentiary (Gorny Zerentuy).

In the end, Sobol did manage to win a reprieve: after coming down with tuberculosis, he was examined by a medical committee, which sent him to Barguzin in August 1908. He escaped from that settlement, and managed to reach western Europe in early 1909. There, being



Figure 5. Andrei Sobol in Cavi di Lavagne

under constant surveillance by the Foreign Department of the Russian secret police and moving from place to place (Bern—Paris—Cavi di Lavagne (a small seaside town in Italy), he drew close to SR (Socialist Revolutionary) circles (I. I. Fondaminskii, the Paris salon of Mikhail and Maria Tsetlin, P. M. Rutenberg, K. K. Pamfilova-Zilberberg, etc.). His political inclinations pushed him toward the proactive, terrorist wing of the movement (B. V. Savinkov), and even further leftward—toward the group of Free Socialists of E. D. Nikitina-Akinfieva and her husband, A. P. Bessel-Vinogradov.



Figure 6. Rakhil Bakhmutskaia (Dvinsk, left—1911, right—1908)

In April 1912, at Easter, Sobol traveled to the French Alps, where, in the town of Saint Joseph de Revière, he met his future wife, Rakhil' (Raisa) Saulovna Bakhmutskaia (1893–1979), who was at the time a student at the University of Grenoble. Their marriage would produce a son, Mark Sobol (1918–1999), who would go on to become a well-known Soviet poet. Sobol's numerous extramarital affairs would prove fatal to his family life: his first marriage would