

JEWISH ISSUE IN FRIEDRICH GORENSTEIN'S WRITING

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Abstract:

The paper discusses the specific features in the depiction of the Jewish issue in the writings by Friedrich Gorenstein. The nationality of Gorenstein is not hard to define, while his writing is much more ambiguous to classify in any national tradition. The Jewish theme is undoubtedly the leading one in his writing. Jewish issue is a part of discussions about private fates, the history of Russia, the Biblical sense of the existence of the whole humankind. Jewish subject matter as such appears in all of his works and these are different parts of a single system. Certainly, Jewish issues partially differ in various literary works by Gorenstein but implicitly they are present in all texts and it is not his own intentional wish to emphasize the Jewish issue: Jewish world is a part of the universe, it is not just the tragic fate of a people but a test of humankind for humanism, for the possibility to become worthy of the supreme redemption. The Jewish world of Gorenstein is a mosaic world in essence. The sign of exile and dispersal is never lifted.

Key Words: Jewish, Biblical, anti-Semitism

Introduction

The phenomenon of the reception of one culture in the framework of other cultures has been known since the antiquity. Since the ancient times, intercultural dialogue has been implemented exactly in this form. And this reception of another culture does not claim to be objective. On the contrary, it reflects not the peculiarities of the culture perceived, but rather the particularities of artistic consciousness of the perceiving culture.

In this context, the reception of the Jewish world or "the Jewish text" in other cultures is important. With regard to Jews, the traditional (in this respect) opposition "one's own – alien" is activated, which most universally demonstrates the attitude to other peoples in the framework of one particular culture (Belova, Petruhin 2007). Since the 20th century, the Jewish issue appears to be in the centre of attention of Jewish literature itself, which exists in two languages (Yiddish and Hebrew), and of such a specific phenomenon as Russian-Jewish literature (Markish 1997; 185). It is this Russian-Jewish literature that attempts to define the place of Jews in the environment of other cultures. But, taking into account the specific features of the Jewish community in Russia, the opposition "one's own – alien" is correlated: Jews are a part of Russian and Soviet history; the majority of Jews prefer assimilation or choose the Russian language as the basic language of communication. Finally, the particular perception of the Jewish issue is related to the specifics of the Holocaust in the territory of the Soviet Union. In this respect, the creative works by F. Gorenstein is a representation of an original model.

Main Text

Friedrich Gorenstein's writing stands out in the twentieth-century literature as a most distinct phenomenon. However, despite its significance, it has not been thoroughly studied as yet. Mina Polanskaya borrowed for the title of first Gorenstein's biography the writer's expression about himself: "I am an illegal writer" (Polynskaja 2003). This phrase has greatly determined the attitude towards Gorenstein that had long been characteristic of Russian literary circles. Gorenstein was a person of utterly original views about history and fate of humankind. His own fate was also unique and full of dramatic occasions interacting with all the major events of the twentieth-century history: in 1935 his father was arrested and executed, during the evacuation in the years of World War II his mother died and Gorenstein spent some years in children's home, later he worked as an engineer in a

mine, experienced disillusionment about the renewal of the period of Thaw, he as a writer was banned from publication in the Soviet Union, in 1980 he emigrated to Germany, lived up to the return of his literary works to Russia but faced misunderstanding and rejection of his writing by many literary critics. Most obviously, the nationality of Gorenstein also played a certain role in his biography and creative life.

The nationality of Gorenstein is not hard to define, while his writing is much more ambiguous to classify in any national tradition. Following the existing elaborated model, his works may be related to the tradition of Russian-Jewish literature. However, Gorenstein himself was rather critical about the fact of the very existence of such a definition: "First of all, as concerns Russian-Jewish literature. There has never existed such literature and it can never exist. I have written with great precision about this in my pamphlet. It is possible to talk about either Jewish or Russian literature. Belonging to either of these traditions is defined by the language the writer uses and not by his own nationality. Otherwise Joseph Conrad would have been not an English but a Polish-English writer. There are numerous other examples of this kind" (Polynskaja 2011; 144).

Nevertheless, the Jewish theme is undoubtedly the leading one in his writing. Jewish issue is a part of discussions about private fates, the history of Russia, the Biblical sense of the existence of the whole humankind. Jewish subject matter as such appears in all of his works and these are different parts of a single system. Certainly, Jewish issues partially differ in various literary works by Gorenstein but implicitly they are present in all texts and it is not his own intentional wish to emphasize the Jewish issue: Jewish world is a part of the universe, it is not just the tragic fate of a people but a test of humankind for humanism, for the possibility to become worthy of the supreme redemption.

The novel "Letit sebe aeroplan" (The Aeroplane Keeps Flying) is concerned with the fate of the outstanding artist Marc Chagall. In the novel "Iskupleniye" (Redemption) Jewish issues are regarded in a rather fragmented manner but in relation to the theme that is very significant for the writer – that of exterminating Jews in the years of World War II. In Gorenstein's texts the word 'Holocaust' is never mentioned. Yet all his writing strives towards the embodiment of the grandiose idea (unfortunately it was never completed) – creating the documentary "Mesto svalki – Babiy Yar" (The Dumping Place of Babiy Yar"). Gorenstein was actively involved in collecting materials; he planned to put the major emphasis not on the fates of victims but on the search for the murderers and their moral heirs. In another work – the story "Poputchiki" (Fellow-Travelers) the plot line that is more developed depicts the fates of Jews in Ukraine. The story was not published in Russia for a long time because of the author's focus on the historically rooted anti-Semitism in Ukraine. In the whole creative work of Gorenstein, three historical personalities stand out who proposed the ideas of the extermination of Jews: Hitler, Stalin, and Bogdan Hmel'nitski.

In 1975 Gorenstein created two texts that were seemingly very different: the novel "Psalom" (Psalm) and a drama in three acts and eight scenes, 92 scandals, "Berdichev". With all their unlikeness, nevertheless both of these texts are organically related in the framework of different genre structures (novel and drama), built on different material, yet they demonstrate a unified conception of the author about the fates of Jews, fates of Jews in Russia and, consequently, about Russia in general. The vast epic spaciousness of Russia in "Psalom" is replaced by the closed world of the apartment of systems Lutski in "Berdichev"; mythological Dan-Antichrist giving the bitter enlightenment to everybody he meets is replaced by the scandalous Rachel Kapsan nee Lutski. The drama in many senses does not correspond to the claimed genre. "Berdichev", like "Psalom" is closer to an epic narrative.

The novel "Psalom" aroused an upheaval of emotions both in readership and literary scholarship. However, this does not mean that the novel was accepted unconditionally. The specific reflection of the Jewish issue in Russia called forth an ambiguous response that testified to the fact that the novel did not concern the events of the 1970s; it rather concerns eternal problems.

The novel represents a complex interlace of the Biblical and mundane lines united by the common mythological image of Dan-Antichrist. This is a novel about the fate of Russia that is condemned to bear the curse of anti-Semitism. In this world there is a clear division between those persecuted and persecutors. Jewish people have become the persecuted. In everyday life this is manifested in the idea of hostility towards Jews by numerous nations inhabiting Russia (also Soviet Russia). The Biblical context is related to the theme of exile. The fate of the persecuted people of

Israel is in the focus of Gorenstein's attention. Dan Antichrist has come to the earth to defend the persecuted bearing the truth for the persecuted and condemnation for persecutors. Nevertheless the author is distant from the idealization of Jews as a people. In this respect, Gorenstein demonstrates a rather widespread opinion that Jewish people themselves are responsible for being the people of exiles.

The fact of locating Jews in the space of the Soviet Union is essential in the novel. The Soviet Union in the artistic model by Gorenstein is a universal model of space, similar to Babylon, that is a space where the Babylon tower is being erected. The state of Jews in this space is similar to that of Babylonian capture – beginning of life in dispersal, in Diaspora. This is an alien space from the start. In this space one (Jew) is always reminded of being alien. Besides Jews are demanded to become aware of the exceptionality of being allowed to live in the space that has become a certain affinity of the ideological paradise on the earth.

Specific peculiarity of Russian anti-Semitism lies in the fact that it is officially sanctioned by the state (Kostirchenko 2011; 15). Anti-Semitism coming from seemingly individual people is actually a state-inspired doctrine with a legal status. Poet Somov is sure of his joining the Institute of Literature because those are mostly Jews who wish to join it but Russians who have a reference are always welcome there. In some episodes of the novel the guards of the order slightly rebuke the transgressing anti-Semites because they are brethren Slavs, and if they are also former front-line soldiers like Pavlov, no one is ever going to punish them. A whole range of anti-Semitic characters become heralds of the official standpoint (stakhanovets, old woman Veselova). Anti-Semitism is coming from the bottom, it is supported from above and enters the minds of people, even Jews themselves arousing in them hatred towards their own nation. The brightest example to this is the Ivolgin-Kats family that from generation to generation demonstrates striving to dissociate from being Jewish. But the wish not to be a Jew is a wish of individual persons that is not taken into consideration and is suppressed by state ideology. Alexei Ivolgin is reminded by the state of his being Jewish in the form of arrest and absurd murder during interrogation. It must be added that the fate of Ivolgin is just a private episode in a large case of national importance – the case of doctors and that of disclosure of Jewish anti-soviet activities.

From Gorenstein's point of view, Russian consciousness is dominated first and foremost by the idea of collectivity: "Russian forest-steppe character since times immemorial has developed in a collective and up to this day has remained such. This is the reason why individualism is so weak in it, why this character is atheistic, collective, and Russian church even by its external look proves this." (Gorenstein 2001:377) Human turns out to be subject to the opinion of the majority and with this majority is ready to give up spiritual values, everything native and close. Heroes of all tales bear evidence by their fates to the pressure of the collective opinion: they gather in public places (tea-house, bazaar, fair, tenant apartment-house, meeting), they are ready to sacrifice their relatives. Children are easily given over to children's homes or left in the street for someone to collect them, someone to help. The pressure of the collective is capable to cause fear (Ivolgin starts fearing arrest long before a case is actually drawn against him). Anti-Semitism is a manifestation of the totalitarian, the collective. Jews become the necessary sought for victims – the guilty ones who are constantly chased using their success to motivate others' failures and defeats: in the tea-house of the kolkhoz "Krasny pakhar" (Red Ploughman) it is very convenient to see a saboteur in Jewish adolescent Dan, Sulamith is hated for her looking for something on the ground and often finding, the majority of inhabitants in the town of Bor hate Dan and his foster-daughter Rufina because they are Jews and have much money, Claudia constantly reproaches Ivolgin for his Jewish descent, Vasya Korobkov becomes anti-Semitic because many people take him for a Jew by his appearance. Anti-Semitism in Russia becomes a kind of national mass idea that has been cultivated in various historical epochs, on the basis whereof rich folklore with tales, songs, beliefs was formed. Jew was massively treated as alien, yet this alien is just necessary because only through this figure one's power and might could be demonstrated. Anti-Semitism turned out to be a universal phenomenon encompassing all layers of society: peasants and workers, adults and children. Hatred to Jews became a consolidating force that facilitates the sense of unity of the nation.

The issue of interaction and opposition of Christianity and Judaism is one of those paid special attention to by the author. Gorenstein did not consider himself to be a religious person but, according to Mina Polyanskaya, he was a believing person. In his philosophical searchings there was

an attempt at reaching religious synthesis. In one of his letters he wrote as follows: “As concerns culture, I belong to Judaic-Christian culture, Biblical culture including evangelical. Yes, there is no such religion but there is such a culture. The issue of the relationship of Judaism and Christianity is complicated and I cannot give a simplified account of it in a letter” (Polynskaja 2011; 144). In the novel “Psalom”, the theme of relation of Christianity and Judaism appears regarding the theme significant for the whole of Gorenstein’s writing – that of relations between generations, of children: “When an orphan child – Christianity – has lost its Jewish mother because of the eternal rivalry between those who are erecting the Temple and those who are erecting the Babylonian tower, he first came into the hands of those who knew about his mother everything or much but were hostile to that” (Gorenstein 2001: 327). The relations between generations are defined as follows: Christianity is an infant and Judaism – its mother. They are in blood relation where the parental function, the function of the senior and origin is the determining one. The image of Christianity as an infant registers a conceiving, disciple stage. In the couple of infant and parent there is neither the right nor the one to blame, the essence of their break-away from external intrusion lies in the fact that the world as such has lost its unity and has split into two camps. It is true that this opposition already betrays the value position of the author: the Temple is the symbol of spirituality, striving for the eternal and divine, while Babylonian Tower is a symbols of disparity, transience. The image of infant Christianity is endowed with additional symbolism ascending to the image of Jesus Christ, his birth, his cradle – the crib has become a point of departure for the development of Christianity as religion. Similar symbolism makes it possible for Gorenstein to perceive Christianity as religion in its initial stage of infancy. Jesus in the very first pages of the novel is called “Infant, Child, Son”. In Gorenstein’s conception, the bond between parents and children is a sign of eternity. The whole Biblical world is saturated by the idea of continuous bond of generations.

Drama “Berdichev” is far from Biblical problems. Yet exactly this drama is in the context of Gorenstein’s oeuvre a specific version of family saga. On the list of dramatis personae of the drama there are 32 characters, besides even more appear in the course of the action. However, the basic line of action is related to the world of sisters Lutski and people surrounding them (they represent the model of Berdichev world and through it the model of the Jewish world of Russia). Rachel is in the focus of action. Her central role is emphasized also on the list of dramatis personae that she opens. All other characters appear in relation to her: her daughters, grandchildren, nephew, elder sister. She, though being far from Biblical Rachel, is the foremother of the family.

Being the core of the family, Rachel is first of all concerned with the welfare of her family. Her image is closely bound with the opposition of *one’s own/alien*. Despite her pride in being a communist, Rachel does not excel with a sense of collectivism. The joy and sorrow are personal (she can joke about other people’s sorrows). Rachel’s partiality bears an explicit feature of Jewish identity: outcasts as aliens constantly recur in her speech. Within the opposition of *one’s own/alien*, the variation *Jewish/Gentile* occupies the central place. Both worlds do not clash on the basis of conflict, pogroms happen only in memories. Nevertheless the isolation of Jews is given special emphasis. In the perception of Gentiles, Jews are considered to be yids. Outside their home (outside the apartment of Lutski), Jews are in the situation of outcasts (the case near the brethren grave when Mamatyuk pronounces the phrase that outraged Rachel: “Here lie buried all nations that defended their homeland. All nations apart from yids”.) In this respect the majority of characters in the drama choose for themselves to leave the world of Jews (i.e. the world of Berdichev). A situation of a reversed myth ensues.

Two characters of the drama commit exit to Moscow from the world of Berdichev: Vilya and Bronfenmakher. Their exit demonstrated two poles in the evaluation of Berdychev world. Bronfenmakher, relating his fate with Moscow Jews Ovechkis, gives up the Jewish world. Vilya, on the contrary, starts realizing the essence of Berdychev world from distance and, like Rachel (“We are so much like each other with Vilya, aren’t we?”), predicts its future. In his childhood Vilya proved to neighbours that he was a “хуский еврей / russian jew” (“I do not resemble a Jew, do I?”), whereas having grown up he comes to the conclusion: “You may renounce your ideological presumptions but you may not renounce your own nose” (Gorenstein 1991; 389).

The world of Jews and that of Berdichev is the world devoid of any interior bonds. The house of sisters Lutski is the model of this world that has lost the authentic Biblical basis but has not lost its Jewish identity. The apartment of the sisters is a mini-model of Berdichev, a specific model of the Old

Testament space through which the flow of time runs. The apartment remains an island that has sustained the signs of the old Berdichev world. This is ascertained by the relations of people to this apartment. "Freeing" the apartment means freeing it from alien people who do not belong there. Only Rachel and Zlota are its constant abiders. All others come to it temporarily, as visitors to a museum: to look at Vilya who has come from Moscow (also temporarily); these are Bylya (pretending to come for fitting a dress), Makzanik, Ovechkis, Ruzya, and Milya. All of them leave the apartment as aliens. Only the two sisters are its eternal abiders, that is proved by the closing remark: "The big room is dark and empty. The light falls only from the kitchen where the sisters' voices are heard" (Gorenstein 1991; 401).

In the story "Poputchiki", the author again takes up the world of Berdichev and associates this town with the universal model of the Jewish world: "Berdichev is a ghastly town, a town dispersed all over the country, the world, a town inhabited by people who have never stepped upon its streets: a professor from Moscow, a lawyer from New York, an artist from Paris <...> Berdichev is not a usual geographical name but the name of a living being calling forth hatred, derision, fear, shame." (Gorenstein 2011; 345)

Conclusion

The Jewish world of Gorenstein is a mosaic world in essence. The sign of exile and dispersal is never lifted. In the finale of the novel "Psalom" there is a call for return addressed to everyone. These are the words by the prophet Isaiah: „You who remind the Lord, take no rest for yourselves script writer“ (Is. 62:5). For Gorenstein, this is just the supreme sense of life – the calling of creation. But for an artist the fate of an individual human is more interesting than that of a nation. This position is very clearly demonstrated by the hero of the story "Poputchiki": "Human personality is a mystery. It yields only to artistic study, while national and people may be scientifically analyzed and there is nothing mysterious about them" (Gorenstein 2011; 333).

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