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## 'We Lived Side by Side': Ethno-Cultural Stereotypes and Living Tradition<sup>1</sup>

Slavs and Jews have lived side by side in regions of ethno-cultural contact such as Podoliya, Galitsiya, Polesye and Ponemanye for several centuries. In this lengthy period of time a unique mechanism of ethno-cultural co-existence, which unites ethnographic reality and an entire complex of folkloric or mythological stereotypes relating to 'us' and 'them', has been worked out. The multi-ethnic and multi-confessional population has played a significant role in the development of the social and cultural life of small towns (*shtetls*). At the beginning of the twentieth century the proportion of Jews in some *shtetls* reached 80%. Until the Second World War, Jews formed the basic population of the *shtetls*, and it was they who determined both the way of life and the prosperity of the inhabitants of the surrounding villages.

Whilst the Slavonic (Ukrainian, Belorussian and Polish) heritage of these regions has been looked at in some detail, and is described in the classic studies by Chubinsky, Dragomanov,

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Levchenko, Volk, Shcherbakovsky, Federovsky, Romanov, Shein, Kol'berg and others, the 'Jewish component' of the local traditions has long remained outside the scope of researchers' interests. For this reason, the results of An-sky's expeditions to Volyn and Podoliya in 1912–1914 are of unsurpassed value to specialists in the fields of Jewish and Slavonic studies. Sadly, however, until now An-sky's data has not been made widely known in academic circles, and detailed study of the mechanism of ethnographic co-existence in the unique cultural structure that is the East European *shtetl*, of the specifics of intercultural dialogue, and of the mythology of co-existence, so to speak, remains to be done.

There is also much of interest to the researcher of ethno-cultural and ethno-confessional links between the Slavs and Jews in the classic study by Zelenin *Opisanie rukopisei Uchenogo arkhiva Imperatorskogo Russkogo geograficheskogo obshchestva* [A Description of the Manuscripts in the Archive of the Imperial Russian Geographic Society] (1914–16). But the starting point for the present article is not these published works, but a case study from fieldwork.

In summer 2001, on a field trip to the former *shtetls* of southern Podoliya, a recording was made of a story about an unusual ritual which is said to have taken place in Medzhibozh, a famous *shtetl* associated with the life of the founder of Hasidism Baal Shem Tov. Information about this ritual was provided by Oleg Nikolaevich Grabovsky, the principal architect of the Khmel'nitskarkhproekt project, and himself a native of Medzhibozh.

Grabovsky's narrative about the custom of 'ransoming' a place for the deceased, and about the unusual ritual which accompanies it, is based upon the tales of his grandmother, who was born in Medzhibozh and lived there all her life.

*The ritual was that they [the Jews] would come running up; it was called 'a ransom'. [In Medzhibozh the Jews would hire a Ukrainian who had to stop the funeral procession at the entrance to the cemetery and demand a ransom for a place.] They come running, running up to the gates, the gates are closed, and he opens the gates from the inside and they beg him, 'Open up, we're burying the last one. We're not going to bury any more; no-one else is going to die.'* [The gatekeeper answers,] *'There's no room', he says.* [In order to secure a place, the Jews would give him a ransom. On one occasion] *they come running up, give him some money, he opens the gates and says, 'There's enough space for everyone!'* [Recording by Sokolova].

Elements of the ritual dialogue which is typical of 'magic against death', and the significant figure of 'the other' (a gentile), taken on in the role of Charon of the *shtetl*, are clearly present in the above account. Is this to be regarded as a local anecdote, or a remnant of

a forgotten tradition, however? It was not possible to verify the evidence: most of the *shtetls* have become villages with a monoethnic population. There have been no Jews in Murafa, Verbovets and Satanov for a long time. A few dozen Jews live in Shargorod, and in neighbouring Kopaigorod in 2001 there was resident a single Jewish lady — Dora Iosifovna Yatskova-Kreimer (b. 1924). Jews have once again begun to appear in Medzhibozh in recent years as a result of the resumption of pilgrimages to the place where Baal Shem Tov is buried, but they are incomers, not locals, and in many respects they are similar in cultural terms to the numerous tourists who visit the grave.

Sources cast some light on the matter. Zelenin's 'Description', to which we shall now return, contains a similar example from the neighbouring region, the Rovensky district of Volyn province.

Abramovich, author of the study *Etnograficheskie svedeniya o Rovenskoy uезде* [Ethnographic Information about Rovensky District] (manuscript from 1854), remarks, 'In the cholera outbreak of 1853, the Stepansk Jews [i.e. those from the *shtetl* nearby] hired a retired soldier to sit by the gates of the cemetery at night (their cemetery at Okypys'ko is fenced in and has only one gate, which is secured with a lock). If people brought a body at night and asked him to open up, he had to answer, 'I can't, because there isn't any room', and when they asked again, 'I'll find somewhere just this once, even though it's crowded, but don't bring any more, because there isn't any space and there won't be any for a place with cholera!' and he should have sworn in the name of the Christian God. But the soldier, who had had a bit to drink, deceived the Jews and responding to their demand saying, 'Come on in; by God, I'll bury the whole *shtetl*!'" [Zelenin 1914: 312].

This material, dating back one hundred and fifty years, contains the following details which are worth noting: the reference to cholera, the fight against which demanded concerted efforts, irrespective of confessional allegiance; the 'magic of the word'; and the use of a sacral concept (swearing) belonging to 'the other' as a means of driving away illness.

Generally speaking, themes relating to cholera provide striking examples of collective efforts to combat disaster within the cultural space of the *shtetl*. In 2001, the present author made a recording in the settlement of Satanov in the Gorodoksky region of Khmel'nitsky province of a story about a miracle-working icon in the local Orthodox church, and about what happened in the *shtetl* at the time of a cholera epidemic.

*My mother saved the icon when the church was destroyed in 1935. The icons [in the church] were very valuable, all gilded. Here we celebrate*

*Mary Magdalene's Day; it's a really big celebration. Because here, in Satanov, there was cholera. And no medicines helped. A person goes outside and that's the end of him. He's as good as dead. And folks couldn't be doing with medicine. They got the icon — it's big and is said to have healing powers — and four widows started carrying it. And then they changed round. It was in a frame, under glass, heavy.*

*They carried it all round Satanov and along the river, singing religious, church-type songs. And there was a little bridge there, they stood the icon on the bridge and the cholera stopped straight away. It disappeared into the forests.*

*When they brought the icon into the church, it was just like it was alive. I was only little, and I could practically see the icon breathing! It was ever such a pretty icon, and the cholera went away.*

*Absolutely everyone came outside, the Jews too. And they prayed; they were religious people. We brought [the icon] and everything stopped all at once. There's a cemetery, it's behind the Jewish cemetery, and it's called 'the cholera cemetery', lots of people who died of cholera in Satanov are buried there. And that's why we have the celebrations, the big celebrations; they'll be in a month's time.*

*And this icon that mother saved: when the police went round the houses — we lived near the church — the town elder came and said, 'Hide the icon, because the police are going to check people who live by the church; hide it.' Mother said, 'No, let them cart me off to prison in Khmel'nitskii.' Me and the kids will go to prison, she says, but I'm not handing the icon over. But in the end the police never came, so the icon was saved. And mother died in 1973 when she was 95 and she said to me [before she died], 'Look after the icon till the day you die.' And lots of people come to us to see the icon, such a big icon. The priest has just had big frame made for it. Yes, she gave it to the church, and now we have celebrations.*

*[Who took part in the procession with the icon?] The Jews didn't go, only the Orthodox [Christians]. And widows carried it. It took four of them, and then they changed round. All Satanov went round and went down to the [river] Zbruch, and they shouldn't have — there were Poles there, Poland, they didn't allow it, there were barriers up. So they were carrying it along their side and everyone was coming and looking. And then they went straight onto the bridge, began to sing like in church, and straight away the cholera disappeared into the forest. It went right off into the forest, stopped there and then. They'd tried praying, having church services, everything — nothing helped. But all they had to do was carry the icon through Satanov. And now it's very valuable, there's no other icon like it anywhere [Field recording made 23 June 2001 from A. A. Skibinskaya, b. 1915].*

The question about who took part in the procession is a potentially provocative one. The fact is that a few testimonies do survive about magic rituals performed in times of crisis (drought, epidemics) with the participation, willing or otherwise, of 'others', who essentially function as catalysts. For example, during a drought the inhabitants of the Belorussian part of Polesye threw pots stolen from their Jewish neighbours into wells, or they poured water over a Jew (in the village of Barbarov, Mozyr district, Gomel province; recording by Belova 1983). According to archive material, in Mogilevsk province in 1889 during a smallpox epidemic Jewish women took part in the rite of ploughing round the village together with the Belorussian peasant women [Archive of the Institute of Ethnography and Anthropology, OLEAE collection, 382/27].

The following example highlights the unusual features of Jewish funerary rites as seen by their ethnic neighbours; to be precise, it concerns the practice of seeing a dying man off on to 'the other side'.

People believe that Jews helped the dying depart this life more quickly by asphyxiating them, sometimes with the assistance of gentiles. *'Folks said that before, if a Jew couldn't die, then you had to smother him so that he didn't suffer for a long time. They'd hire some Slav chap and tell him to go and finish him off. This chap could kill six men, but come the seventh, it was him who had to die; that was their tradition. They'd find some strapping Jew and send the Slav chap in, saying, 'Go on, lad, that Jew needs finishing off; he can't die.'* *'Right you are. [He goes off to do his task, not suspecting that he is being tricked.] For an hour and a half there's no sign of him at all, then he comes out: 'He was a tough one. If it hadn't been for me, he would have lived for another hundred years!'* [N. A. Kovalsky b. 1951, Verbovets, Murovanokurilovetsky district, Vinnitsky province].

The motif of asphyxiating the dying is also found in material collected in the Ukrainian Carpathians. *'The Jews had a rule that when someone was dying, when it was obvious that he was close to death, they would get a pillow and help him [die], and then they'd wrap him up in cloth, in his bed-sheet, and he'd lie there in his sheet. And they'd bury him in his sheet. They didn't make a coffin, because it wasn't allowed; that was their rule, not to use nails, but to put in planks and a bag of clay under the head'* [Grushevo, Tyachevsky district, Zakarpatsky province; Carpathian Archive of the Institute of Slavic Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, 1988].

Thus, according to folk beliefs, Jews assist in the process of dying by hiring someone — sometimes a gentile — to asphyxiate the dying man with a cushion. The present paper is not concerned to examine how this account corresponds to 'objective reality', nor to uncover the origins of this mythological motif. Suffice it to say that rumour sometimes associates similar rituals with the Russian Old Believers,

too, and thus the theme is by no means restricted to regions of contact between Jews and Slavs. According to evidence from Kineshma, recorded at the beginning of the twentieth century, Old Believers from sects in the White Sea region used to summon a *dushila* ('smotherer') to a dying man. The *dushila* would come with a red pillow which he put over the face of the dying man and asphyxiate him. There are various explanations for this mode of death: 'So that the soul suffers less'; it is thought that dying in this way redeems sins [Vi. B. 1904: 161]. Developing this theme, Zelenin noted that similar rumours about 'red death' by means of suffocation with a red pillow, supposedly practised by Old Believers, were also rife in the Sarapulsky district of Vyatsky province. He noted further that belief in the existence of a specialist asphyxiator had wide currency, but that the task could be performed by one of the dying man's relatives — a son or daughter [Zelenin 1904: 68]. Suffocation with a red pillow was also practised by religious dissenters (*beguny*), according to the local records: seriously ill people 'are baptised and smothered with a red pillow' [PK 1901: 98–9]. That said, 'red death' was always voluntary. In Zelenin's opinion, the red pillow is most likely to be a secondary symbol which came about because of the similarity between the words for 'red' and 'beautiful, fine' (resp. *krasnyi* and *krasivyi*) [Zelenin 1904: 68].

At issue, then, is a cultural phenomenon which is not genetically linked to Jewish tradition, but which has a number of typological similarities with Jewish rites as perceived by the Slav neighbours of the Jews.

In certain situations, stereotypes involving those of another religion can be projected onto opposing factions of the same faith; the perceived similarity between them inevitably results in rumours that members of rival Christian sects are in fact Jews, and that their religion is Judaism. Foremost amongst groups thought of as 'pseudo-Jews' by members of the Russian Orthodox church are Old Believers, Baptists and *Khlysty*, members of a flagellant sect.

There are two possible reasons why Jewish funerals should have attracted so much attention and comment from the Slav communities: because they were the most obvious of the Jewish rites (the typical location of a Jewish cemetery some distance from the *shtetl*, very often on a hill, meant that for every burial the funeral procession had to make a lengthy journey); or because the appearance of the Jewish cemetery (closely packed headstones with no resemblance to Christian ones) served constantly to reinforce superstitious beliefs concerning Jewish ritualised practices.

The most distinctive feature of Jewish funeral rites as seen by their ethnic neighbours is burial without a coffin; the body is lowered into the grave in a sitting position. (These beliefs are widely held by

Ukrainians, Belorussians and Poles; see [Belova 2003: 66–7] on the folkloric interpretation of this method of burial). There is evidence that Russian communities hold similar beliefs about the funeral rites in religious sects. In the Zaonezhye region, for example, it was said that dissenters (*beguny*) buried the deceased not in cemeteries, but in distant fields, without a coffin; the body, wrapped in a home-made rug, was lowered into the grave in a sitting position [Loginov 1993: 167].

Also relevant in this connection is the custom of 'baptism in death', practised by the priestless communities of religious dissenters (*bespopovtsy-beguny*) in the north of the province of Perm: a man who is about to die is immersed in a well and the hair on his head is shaved in the shape of a cross; when he dies, he is placed in a grave [Source: E. M. Smorgunova]. Thus, similar burial rituals are ascribed both to neighbouring ethnic communities and to denominational 'opponents'. An 'objective' description of Jewish funeral rites is to be found in the material published by Zelenin.

In N. A. Markevich's manuscript *Otryvki iz putevyx zametok* [Extracts from Travel Notes], dated 1848, there is a fragment entitled, 'Jewish Funeral Rites in the Town of Priluki'. The commentaries which accompany the text include accounts given by representatives of the Jewish tradition; this sets it apart from other evidence, typically told from the observers' point of view, where ethnographic reality becomes confused with mythologized constructs.

'It's easier on the deceased when he's carried by relatives and friends rather than being taken by horse' [Zelenin 1916: 1124]. There is also evidence from Transcarpathia about how Jews were taken to the cemetery by horse (the horse as a traditionally unclean animal): 'You can't harness up horses to take a dead man to the cemetery, you can only use oxen. That's the rule. They take Jews on horses, but for Slavs you have to use oxen. Only Jews are taken on carts. You can't transport a Slav like that because his body will get shaken around and will start to reek' (Prislop) [Bogatyrev 1971: 265]; 'It's bad to take the dead to the cemetery by horse like the Jews do. Horses are unclean animals. Oxen are the cleanest animals' [Bogatyrev 1971: 265]; 'Horses don't breathe, they don't believe in God. That's why the dead mustn't be moved with horses and carts, but with oxen and sledges instead. You can't harness oxen up to a cart, there isn't such a harness' [Bogatyrev 1971: 265, recording of gypsy Pelageja Slavita made in Prislop]. These stories about Jewish funerals told by their Slav neighbours contain a whole set of standard mythological motifs: the other community's congenital uncleanness, their distinctive smell, the belief that breaking the funeral traditions established in one's own community is to treat the deceased like a foreigner, like 'the other'.

‘You can’t bury a dead man where there’s no water; in places where there isn’t a river or a lake we dig wells for the cemetery’ [Zelenin 1916: 1124]. This remark ties in with a joke about the Jewish cemetery in Satanov. At the roadside at the foot of the mountain where the cemetery is located there is a well with fine water. People travelling past often use the well, though not always as they should. One of the local residents has devised a way of putting outsiders off. He says that the water is so fine because ‘it flows from the Jewish cemetery and rinses the bones’ [V. F. Babiichuk, b. 1946; recording by Belova, Petrukhin 2001].

The reason for burial without a coffin is said to be that ‘it’s better for the dead to turn to earth more quickly’; bodies are placed ‘facing the rising sun’ [Zelenin 1916: 1124–5]. The pieces of plank with which a dead woman’s body was covered in the grave were also thrown into a pit: ‘It isn’t our tree,’ said the Jews. ‘It’s all hers’ [Zelenin 1916: 1125]. These reports can be compared with the aforementioned evidence from the Transcarpathian region: Jews were buried without a coffin, and certain items (planks, a bag of clay under the head) were placed in the grave. The same motifs may be found in material from Podoliya and bear similarities to data from Polesye (burial without a coffin) and Poland (according to accounts of the funeral rites of Polish Jews, the dead man is given sticks in the grave, so that he can lean on them when the Messiah comes; shards of pottery are placed on his eyes [Lilientalowa 1898: 278]).

Thus traditional beliefs (stereotypes, superstitions) concerning neighbouring communities in regions of close ethno-cultural contact show remarkable longevity.

Evidence shows that superstitions persist regardless of whether or not another ethnic group is actually present. Memory of interethnic contact lives on in folklore and mythology even when the contact itself has become a thing of the past.

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