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## The Maskil as Folk Hero

The principle of every folk creation  
is struggle.

—S. Ansky

THE AUGUST GROUP OF JEWISH intellectuals and cultural activists who gathered in St. Petersburg on December 27, 1909 to honor S. Ansky's twenty-fifth anniversary as a writer had every reason to celebrate. If they belonged in the nationalist camp, they could point to Ansky, né Shloyme-Zanvl Rappoport, as the prodigal son par excellence. For here was a man who had left home at the age of seventeen to spread enlightenment among the benighted shtetl masses but soon took up the cause of the Russian masses instead; changed his name to Semyon Akimovitch so as to share the miserable fate of Russian miners in the Don Basin; spent a heady year in St. Petersburg as a trusted member of the Russian Populist elite and then followed the lead of other radicals by emigrating to Paris where he worked for the cause in the cradle of the Revolution. But by the time the political amnesty of 1905 brought him back to Russia, this "Old Narodnik" was ready to assume a leadership role in the Jewish cultural and political arena. He began an extensive lecture tour through the provinces under the auspices of the Jewish Literary Society that hosted this very gathering. He was literary editor of the newly founded Russian-Jewish monthly *Evreiski Mir*. He was active in the Jewish Education Society and Jewish Historic-Ethnographic Society, both based in St. Petersburg. In a movement characterized by dramatic conversion experiences, from Moses Hess to Moshe Leib Lilienblum and beyond, Ansky's return to the fold certainly ranked high on the list. Jewish socialists, in turn, applauded the author of their new Bundist anthem and sang more muted praises of his recent novel *In shtrom* that documented the rise of

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their movement. Yiddishists of every stripe took pride in the ever-growing corpus of Ansky's original poetry and prose written since 1901 in the Mother Tongue. Finally and most unusually for this period of rising antisemitism and political reaction, Russian liberals and revolutionaries also joined in the festivities. Ansky had sterling credentials as the protégé of Gleb Uspensky and later in Paris as private secretary to Populist theoretician Peter Lavrov. Attesting to Ansky's lasting commitment to the Socialist-Revolutionary Party was his recent arrest and exoneration for the possession of subversive documents. Here, indeed, was a man for all seasons.<sup>1</sup>

But at a more intimate gathering held in his honor two weeks later at Mikhalevitsh's restaurant, Ansky used the occasion to do penance for his sins. "Bearing within me an eternal yearning toward Jewry," he confessed to his audience in Russian, "I nevertheless turned in all directions and went to labor on behalf of another people. My life was broken, severed, ruptured. Many years of my life passed on this frontier, on the border between both worlds. Therefore, I beg you, on this twenty-fifth year of summing up my literary work, to eliminate sixteen years."<sup>2</sup> Ansky's profession of undivided loyalty to the Jewish masses reads with especial poignancy if one knows what was to come—that from 1912–14 he would lead the Jewish Ethnographic Expedition to rescue the artifacts and the "Oral Torah" produced by the Jews of Eastern Europe; would risk life and limb to aid the Jews of war-torn Galicia; would author *The Dybbuk*, that most perfect distillation of Jewish folklore and mysticism, and would finally be buried alongside Peretz and Dinezon in the Warsaw Jewish cemetery. Was his personal confession the last word in a turbulent career?

The truth of Ansky's life in the decade that followed is that he remained one of the few members of the Jewish literary intelligentsia who could mediate between the warring factions. The same could be said for his large and varied literary output both before and after the festivities. The more fragmented the political and cultural life around him became, the more he tried to encompass, to reconcile, to commemorate through his writing. Nationalists would continue to invoke an either/or scenario that opposed the "Russian" and "Jewish" parts of his career; and socialists would continue to claim: once a radical, always a radical, but Ansky himself strove for a negotiated settlement between his modernist credo and his discarded Jewish past.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the version of his life and work one accepted depended in large measure on what one read.

At the public gathering in December, for instance, the artistic program presented a highly truncated selection of his work. From his early career came *Ksovim* and *Mendl Terk*, two portraits of quixotic shtetl intellectuals. His more recent turn to folk material and hasidic narrative was represented by "Letters from the World to Come," a comic but trivial experiment, and with a folktale in verse. Rounding out the program were

some highly sentimental poems in the manner of Nekrasov. The total effect was to present Ansky as a sentimental satirist of traditional Jewish life.<sup>4</sup>

Looking ahead to Ansky's heroic relief effort during World War I, an altogether different picture emerges. Here the centerpiece becomes his multi-volume memoir *The Destruction of Galicia* that reveals Ansky's face-to-face encounter with the implacable hatred of the goyim, with terrifying scenes of mass martyrdom and with recurrent instances of Jewish betrayal. Amidst this landscape of apocalyptic ruin Ansky discovered the power of Jewish collective memory and ultimately came to a profound identification with the folk.<sup>5</sup>

Somewhere in between the trivial and heroic aspects of Ansky's career is the body of writing he has become most famous for. A close look at Ansky's most "traditional" works—foremost among them *The Dybbuk* itself—reveals that Ansky turned to Jewish heroes, plots and symbols because of what he learned in the Russian cultural sphere. That which he valued as a Narodnik and as a student of Russian and French folklore—the truth of the folk as distinct from that of the intelligentsia; the people's ability to harness physical violence for spiritual ends—he then translated into the particular idiom of East European Jews. Ansky was the boldest practitioner of what I call the "art of creative betrayal."<sup>6</sup>

Yet Ansky resists any attempt to pigeonhole him into this or that aesthetic or ideological scheme. This is why he belongs, after all, in the pantheon of Yiddish "classicists"—alongside Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem and Peretz. For in addition to Ansky the Sentimental Satirist, Ansky the Radical, Ansky the Collective Memoirist and Ansky the Creative Betrayer, there is yet another persona known least of all: Ansky the Revisionist Historian. Through the medium of autobiographical fiction, or what he called the "chronicle," Ansky probed the most complex side of his own personality and in so doing made a lasting contribution to Jewish self-understanding.

To live "on the border between both worlds," as he confessed in 1909, required constant struggle. Struggle was both the symbol and substance of his entire life. Never one to shirk a fight, Ansky took his revisionism back to the source of all modern Jewish beginnings—to the Kulturkampf in Jewish Eastern Europe known as the Haskalah. And the main thrust of his revisionism was to vivify—more brilliantly, in my judgment, than any other modern Jewish writer—the *kampf* part of the equation.

It was in 1909, a few months before his anniversary, that Ansky produced his most warlike fiction on the Haskalah theme. Among its many virtues, Ansky's novella "Behind a Mask" contained this memorable portrait of a maskilic rebel:

Krantz was three years younger than he [twenty-four-year-old Braines], but could already boast a "heroic past." His father was a distinguished rabbi and he had been raised in strictly orthodox surroundings. Yet somehow, by the age of fifteen, Krantz had already become a fiery heretic, seized with the passion of the Enlightenment. One day in the synagogue, in the presence of his father and other worthies, he publicly referred to the prophet Moses in a derogatory manner. The congregants were outraged. His father fainted on the spot. People hurled themselves at the heretic, and he barely managed to escape the synagogue alive. He never returned home again. About two weeks later, several students were caught reading forbidden books and driven out of the yeshiva. Krantz tore into the place and slapped the rabbi, an old and revered teacher. He broke off all relations with his parents, apprenticed himself to a Russian locksmith, donned a red shirt, and in his new garb strolled through the streets in the company of his Christian fellow workers. He used every conceivable means to outrage the older generation, and exhibited a fanatical, passionate hatred for everything that smacked of religion and orthodoxy. The older generation he held responsible for all the evil and ignorance in the world. Small wonder he soon became popular among the maskilim not only of his town but of the entire region.<sup>7</sup>

Part of what made this portrait so compelling is that it drew heavily on the author's own life. From an autobiographical sketch that Ansky wrote a year later and from the memoirs of others, Krantz's debt to the young Shloyme-Zanvl becomes readily apparent.<sup>8</sup>

In "real life" Ansky had been both more and less radical than his fictional stand-in. Less: because Ansky's father was not a rabbi, was not even home most of the time, and later became sufficiently reconciled to his son's radical lifestyle that he considered moving in with him to share Shloyme-Zanvl's meager earnings.<sup>9</sup> If Ansky made Krantz into a member of the shtetl's religious elite, it was mainly for the showdown in the synagogue: writers of shtetl fiction routinely telescoped conflict onto the sacred ground of *shul* and *besmedresh* so as to raise the stakes between fathers and sons, Old World and New. Ansky was merely using a literary convention long since perfected by Ayzik-Meyer Dik and Sholem Aleichem, and more recently, by I. M. Weissenberg.<sup>10</sup>

The ironic quotation marks in Krantz's Curriculum Vitae bespoke yet another convention, from outside the Jewish sphere: only *real* revolutionaries could boast an "heroic past." Judged by (the narrator's) Russian standards, Krantz looked puny indeed. That one could be branded a heretic so quickly was a measure of Jewish insularity. That Krantz escalated so rapidly from one deviant act to another bespoke as much adolescent rebellion as ideological purity.

More: because Shloyme-Zanvl seems to have imbibed a revolutionary consciousness from the very air that he breathed. Too poor to attend the local gymnasium in Vitebsk, he learned Russian on his own and debated Russian radical ideas with his friend Chaim Zhitlovsky. Then, with some

financial assistance from wealthier Jewish students, Shloyme-Zanvl organized a whole support system for local yeshiva boys who wanted to break away. Their headquarters were in the home of one Kuhajde in the Gentile section of town, exactly as described in the novella. Only Shloyme-Zanvl did all this *while still living at home* and without befriending a single Russian.<sup>11</sup> Not content to rest on his laurels, he then left home of his own initiative to spread enlightenment in a godforsaken shtetl, armed only with his knowledge of Russian and a copy of Lilienblum's *Khatot ne'urim* (*Sins of Youth*, 1876). It was here that Krantz's biography deviated most sharply from Shloyme-Zanvl's. In "Behind a Mask," the idea for such a clandestine operation came to Krantz from the quixotic Shekhtl, the youngest member of the commune, and the motive was hunger. The brunt of what followed was taken up with tactics, subterfuge, coded letters, blackmail, and had little to say about the actual *content* of the forbidden teaching.

Why Ansky was intent on making the maskilim appear so brutal and callous; why he chose to dramatize this particular episode from his own life on three separate occasions; and why he waited to do so until the Haskalah had been rendered arcane both by its success and its failure are the questions I hope to answer in the pages that follow. But in order to substantiate my claim that the answers lie in Ansky's historical revisionism, I should first say something about the search for a positive hero in nineteenth-century Jewish literature.

Shloyme-Zanvl came of age just when the Haskalah entered its self-critical stage. By the 1870s, the maskilim of Eastern Europe were still a distinct minority, despite almost a century's worth of literary propaganda and a twenty-year period of reform in Tsarist Russia. As they struggled to gain a foothold, their favored literary mouthpiece was an idealized Young Man of Words sometimes called Mordecai-Marcus whose speech and manners were a visible reproach to his benighted brethren even if they and not he emerged victorious on the stage of actual events. Despite all the effort invested in him, the Young Man of Words never grew into a mature and believable Man of Deeds. This is because the more radical their agenda became, the harder it was for the maskilim to imagine a real-life maskil turning words into action. They began instead to parody the very stereotype of immaculate expression that they themselves had labored so long to create.<sup>12</sup> It seemed that the maskil as positive hero would never rise again from a page of maskilic prose, poetry or drama.

How paradoxical, then, that out of the Haskalah's very failure came its most lasting literary legacy. What actually inspired the next generation of young rebels and eventually transformed the writing of modern Hebrew prose was the one maskilic genre that chronicled its utter defeat:

the confessional autobiography.<sup>13</sup> As the modern autobiography tried to free itself of preconceived models in order to express true individuality, so Moshe Leib Lilienblum created an anti-maskil in the figure of Zelophehad, his fictional cloak in *Sins of Youth*. Zelophehad, who dramatized the failure of his life despite having followed the model to a fault, exemplified the collapse of maskilic ideology.<sup>14</sup> His "days of apostasy, crisis and renunciation" were the precise calendar followed by young Jewish readers in the 1870s. Though Russian literature to which they now had freer access may have outradicalized anything written in Hebrew, it did not express the pain of forging a new autonomous self on the ruins of the Jewish past and present.

The creation of a viable anti-hero did not mean that the search for a positive hero in Jewish literature had ended. Quite to the contrary. The influence of Byron and Nietzsche finally caught up with Jewish writers at the end of the nineteenth century, as did the particular East European blend of romantic nationalism. That, together with their need to legitimate the new secular ideologies of Socialism and Zionism by rooting them in an imaginary Jewish past, lent new urgency to the search. This was when Peretz, Berdichevsky and others discovered in Hasidism whatever they were looking for: a passion for social justice; a repudiation of materialism; a return to myth and nature. The next step in this rescue operation was to dust off the old tsaddikim and their followers in order to lay claim to a new positive hero.

Ansky himself undertook the most systematic search for a positive hero and heroine in every walk of traditional Jewish life. He did this by making a virtue of necessity. Precisely because Jewish life lacked kings, warriors and rebels known for their courage and invincibility, he claimed that in Jewish folklore all forms of struggle were spiritualized. Who were the hasidic rebbes and wonder workers, he asked, if not the Jewish equivalent of knights in shining armor? Hasidic folklore in particular transformed the errant knights into tsaddikim traveling the globe to redeem Jewish captives; turned the chivalrous men rescuing damsels in distress into tsaddikim restoring purity of soul to repentant sinners; made tournaments into theological debates.<sup>15</sup> Postbiblical Jewish heroism, according to Ansky, came cloaked purely in spiritual garb.

And so, in a folk style inspired by Peretz, Ansky extolled such semi-legendary figures as the Ba'al Shem Tov, the Apter Rov, Reb Itshele Monastirshitsiner and Moses Montefiore. The operative principle of the stylized folktales he wrote from 1903–1910 (before his actual encounter with the folk) was idealism. Defined as *mesires-nefesh farn klal-yisroel*, readiness to sacrifice oneself for the sake of the Jewish collective, Ansky found this idealism exemplified everywhere: among hasidim and misnagdim; women of wealth and indigent women; renowned philanthropists and obscure former Cantonists.<sup>16</sup> His catholic approach to rich and poor,

“right” and “left” infuriated the party stalwarts on ideological grounds. On artistic grounds he was more vulnerable still, for there was none of Peretz’s wonderful play of narrative voices to offset the maudlin and flat quality of these secular hagiographies.

Yet unlike Peretz who could live vicariously only through legendary saints, sinners and truth seekers, Ansky wished to rescue a piece of Jewish modernity as well. To plumb his own lived experience for models of heroic action was far more difficult than to idealize a past that never existed. When Ansky drew from the narrow circle of his own adolescent years, the idealism he distilled was alloyed with a high dose of self-delusion. Looking back upon the the young “Pioneers” of the Haskalah in Russia with a sense of wonderment and grief, Ansky now pictured that movement as both the cradle of Jewish freedom and the virtual grave of traditional Judaism.

It happened at the end of the 70s of the last century, at a time when the Haskalah captured large segments of the middle Jewish intelligentsia. This was a remarkable and very tragic era in many ways. A deep breach was made into the fortified walls of the old religious and cultural foundations. A whole generation of intellectuals, throwing off the religious yoke, made a leap for the light, for science, for a new life. Their ecstatic idealism, which did not make allowances for the actual resources or circumstances; their bold leap over a millennial-old culture all exacted a very high price. This primarily destructive movement that lacked a new national creation of its own threatened the very existence of *yidishkayt*, of the people, and left in its wake whole armies, almost an entire generation of broken and bruised survivors who had left one shore behind and never reached the other. But in and of itself, the ecstatic idealism that was unleashed was extraordinarily beautiful with its breadth and boldness. This was the mighty upsurge of a people that awoke to a new civil and national existence.<sup>17</sup>

Delivered in his own voice, in a mixture of academic and purple prose, Ansky’s verdict was informed by a lifetime of revolutionary activity outside the Jewish fold, and by his sober assessment of the present state of East European Jewry. That which he valued most in the Jewish radical legacy—its universalism—and that which he excoriated in the modern Jewish intelligentsia—its self-hate—were both rooted in the glorious but failed revolution called Haskalah. Out of these contradictions and out of the young nihilist he had once been himself, Ansky fashioned a folk hero unique in the annals of Jewish culture.

Ansky’s maskilim resembled their literary precursors in name only. He gave his two-volume “chronicle” the overall title of *Pioneers* (1903–1905) in order to draw a clear distinction between those maskilim who had come before and the real vanguard of the revolution.<sup>18</sup> The latter were runaway boys and ex-yeshiva students living hand to mouth,

debating the merits of Pisarev over Lilienblum and having a whale of a good time. More importantly, they lived as a group. Based on his own experience, Ansky situated his motley crew in their own headquarters at the edge of town, fondly nicknamed their *ir miqlat*, or city of refuge. Within this commune they obeyed a loose hierarchy. The highest rung was occupied by former yeshiva students who had not yet blown their cover. Outwardly they maintained a pious façade either quite literally, by still wearing the traditional peyes and black gaberdine (Hillel, Sheynburg), or by comporting themselves respectfully when in the presence of other pious Jews (Itsikovitsh, Mirkin). These young men lived “between two worlds.” Their profound knowledge of Talmud, gleaned in the Lithuanian yeshivas, stood them in good stead when they mastered an esoteric treatise by Pisarev as if it were a tractate in Nashim; or more precariously, when they “worked over” a potential convert to the cause. The most brilliant of their number, one Zalmen Uler, aspired to know Pisarev *afn finger*; i.e., to have Pisarev so thoroughly memorized that he could point to any place on the closed Russian tome and know what word would appear at that spot on any given page (13:27)! By story’s end, Uler regaled his friends with the following Notariqon on Pisarev’s name:

פ יסאָרעוו  
 י למד  
 ס ברות  
 א מתיות  
 ר או  
 ע ורים  
 ו אָטומים  
 ו יוכרו.

(Pisarev will teach true postulates; the blind and the obtuse will thereby be convinced.)

He also produced a parodic sermon on demand that “proved” that Moses was a critical realist (13: chap. 39).

Next in line were the children of traditional homes who had thrown off everything the moment they left. The only world they were prepared to inhabit, however poorly equipped they were to do so, was the world of Enlightenment. Such youngsters like Eiserman, the newest member of the commune, could not abide by Hillel’s strict code of behavior: never to perform forbidden acts in the presence of strangers. “Why provide someone with a whip he could someday raise against you?” was Hillel’s conspiratorial rule of thumb (13:74). For this group of zealous transgressors, the greatest danger was the lure of conversion. Geverman, fearful of being dragged back into the “mire,” talked of embracing the religion specifically founded in order to liberate Jews from the yoke of the Law (13: 108, 132–35). When, in addition, the talmudic training of these young men was not what it should have been—not to speak of their



Russian—and when they were isolated from the group, their souls went up for grabs. This was the fate of Itsikovitsh, the chief protagonist of *The First Swallow*, who ultimately did convert to Christianity.<sup>19</sup>

On the group's periphery was a third group of young men who occupied the lowest rung. Sons of the middle and upper middle class, they came by their knowledge of Russian through their parents who also paid for them to attend gymnasium. The sons struggled merely to make the grade; their fathers had long since toppled the Orthodox giant. "If you had only lived 25 years ago," exclaimed the father of one such gymnasium student, "when darkness reigned all around. . . . when they could kill you, beat you senseless, give you over to the draft board for the smallest religious transgression! Had you lived then, we'd see how heroic you were!" (13:191) Like category two, above, these "red diaper babies" were tainted, in Ansky's scheme of things, because they did not have to struggle with irrenconcilable loyalties.

How skillfully, then, Ansky turned the maskilic hierarchy on its head in the name of the Haskalah itself! Those on top were declass   by choice; children of the lower and middle classes who took up manual labor for the sake of leading a "productive life" or who hoped to gain admittance to the university by dint of their own effort. Like Ansky himself, these young men had opted out of adult Jewish society altogether.<sup>20</sup> Theirs was a permanent adolescence, a counterculture that knew no compromise with bourgeois respectability or with religious observance. Instead of aping the dress, speech and manners of the German merchant or the Russian university student, they fashioned their own folklore that specialized in parodying sacred rituals and texts; affected a rough exterior and gloried in their vows of poverty. Despite the clubhouse in which they gathered by night and of a Sabbath afternoon, they obeyed a code of non-interference in their interpersonal relations and tried to suppress all erotic desire for the sake of the cause. Their practical work consisted of subverting the faith of other young men under the cover of teaching them Russian. The nineteenth-century maskilim would hardly have recognized these shock troupes of the Jewish revolution. The Young Men of Words had been transformed into the first Jewish youth movement in history.

In order for a group of adolescents thrown together at random and taking their marching orders from no one to appear anything like a modern "youth movement," Ansky endowed them with a folklore of their own. And because no group could invent a folklore from scratch, it was their songs, parodies and secret codes that best revealed the push and pull between tradition and revolt.

While the songs that his fictional maskilim sang in moments of ecstatic camaraderie were mostly in Russian, it was still the liturgy or the melancholy chant of talmudic study that brought them solace in moments of introspection.<sup>21</sup> When they transgressed, they marked the occasion

with parodic blessings. These parodic rites of initiation on shaving off their peyes or on eating treyf meat betrayed the guilt and self-consciousness that these so-called "fence-breakers" tried so hard to hide. Finally, in their speech, those with the requisite background could produce a repartee as Jewishly coded as anything in Sholem Aleichem. Here, for example, is how Eiserman made the acquaintance of Uler:

"A *shtikl goy*?" [i.e., have you thrown off any orthodox practices?]

"A *gantser goy*!" [i.e., I've gone all the way!] Eiserman replied with the same sly tone.

"A *moyser lehakhis*?" [an informer out of spite?]

"A *poyrets-begeder*!" [a fence-breaker!]

"Where you from?"

"From Miloslavke. You've heard of it?"

"Where is it: in this world or in the next?"

"In between: *in kafakele* [purgatory]."

"Well put! Have you come to study [*lernen zikh*, implying secular study]?"

"No, I've come to be ordained for the rabbinate." (13:28)

The last phrase, of course, was the punchline. Later on, the boys used this cryptic super-Hebraized speech to separate the "true" maskilim from the Russified "boors" who just knew how to smoke on the Sabbath and eat treyf.

And that was not all that kept them bound to the past. While the battle lines between rebellious sons and their intransigent fathers had been drawn since the dawn of Emancipation, these youngsters discovered a more intractable enemy in the opposite sex. "Mothers, with their generosity, tears and devotion," lamented Mirkin, the hero of *The Fence Breakers*, "are far more dangerous than the most fanatical fathers" (13:121). This was soon proven true by the example of Geverman's mother who lured her son back home through emotional blackmail. More complicated still were their relations to women their own age. In marked contrast to the fictional maskilim of old, these Young Turks viewed romantic love as mere frivolity, as a dangerous distraction from the rigors of emotional self-reliance. But when young educated women started banging on their doors, our young nihilists were suddenly at a loss for words (13: chaps. 23, 28, 32). There was nowhere to turn for guidance in this matter.

That is because, paradoxically, these youngsters banded together in a loose federation of intellectual outsiders under the banner of radical individualism. Their scripture was Pisarev and Lilienblum. Inasmuch as Pisarev's critical essays were their Talmud, a difficult text in a difficult tongue, Lilienblum's *Sins of Youth* was their talisman, something they carried with them always. Lilienblum's loss of faith, his break with the bonds of family and matrimony, his failure to achieve a viable alternative in the faraway city of Odessa were precisely what justified their adoles-

cent rebellion. His personal odyssey as laid out in such minute and unprecedented detail gave voice to their innermost dreams and gave meaning to their existential struggle.

The same hierarchy that ranked the boys was obeyed for their books as well. The more dangerous and difficult a book, the higher its standing. Thus Lilienblum and other Haskalah tracts ranked highest of all because they were anathema to one's elders. When the rabbi and notables of Miloslavke finally prevailed upon Itsikovitsh to give up his evil ways, the first thing they did as part of his public shaming was to burn all his secular Hebrew books in the bathhouse. When Eiserman fled Miloslavke in order to avoid a similar fate, he came upon a Hebrew book store in the city of M. and ate into his meager savings in order to "redeem" a copy of *Sins of Youth*. The bookseller justified the steep price on the grounds that all his other copies had been bought up and burned. Finally, in the chapter of his memoirs titled "Sins of Youth," Ansky recounted that a single sentence from that book was enough to mobilize the entire shtetl of Liozna against him. The most fervent desire of his fictional maskilim was to produce a Hebrew work that would get Jews just as angry.

Russian radical tracts were next in line, the more inaccessible the better. A copy of Chernichevsky's blacklisted *What Is To Be Done?* or an issue of the more conservative *Ruskii vestnik* immediately did the rounds of all the maskilim. But since Jewish adults rarely could read Russian, some comic errors resulted, as when the word *khrestomatye* on the title page of a Russian primer was mistaken for a copy of the New Testament, *Khristos* being the Russian name for Christ!

As opposed to the dangers that so enhanced the prestige of these Hebrew and Russian works, reading modern Yiddish literature was a laughable matter, fit only for girls. In a welcome relief from their heated debates on conversion, antisemitism and other weighty matters, the young men happened upon a group of girls and young women crying hysterically over the fate of Yankev Dinezon's *Shvartser yungermantshik* (1877). Geverman, pretending that he knew the hero personally, invented a happy ending to the young women's credulous delight (13: chap. 25).

In addition, then, to endowing his maskilim with a folklore and folk speech of their own, Ansky also folklorized their attitudes and behavior. They obeyed the same set of sacred texts; the sons were locked into the same emotional battle with their mothers and betrayed the same awkwardness in the presence of their "lovers." But what kind of action were these new folk heroes capable of carrying out? In a delightful parody of the conventional maskilic plot, Ansky had them try—as a group—to rescue a damsel in distress. After failing to rescue Sonia from the clutches of her wicked father in the very heart of Jewish darkness—her father's store—they were inspired by the example of a young Russian woman named Olga to arrange for Sonia to run away. Olga's last-minute inter-

vention as she literally took over the reins of the rescue operation underlined the comic discrepancy between their bravado and ineptness.

There was one area, however, in which they did excel and which required a maximum level of individual discipline. No one was better equipped to infiltrate enemy turf than those maskilim who had not yet dropped their masks. By maintaining a pious façade they could gain admittance to the synagogue and studyhouse. With their knowledge of Talmud they could win the trust of the yeshiva students. Then, under cover of teaching Russian grammar or mathematics or some other tolerated foreign subject, they could undermine their faith. The ultimate test of manhood was for the maskil to go it alone in the thick of the orthodox jungle.

This became Ansky's archetypal plot: the young maskil from a fair sized town who left home to secretly spread enlightenment among shtetl youth. Though in reality it took only a few months for his clandestine work in Liozna to be flushed out by members of the shtetl establishment, Ansky came to see this adventure as emblematic of living "on the border between both worlds." He circled back to his brief career as an outside agitator in three separate works: *The First Swallow* (1903), his brief autobiographical sketch (1910) and, most skillfully, in his novella "Behind a Mask" (1909).

Krantz, we recall, boasted the highest credentials among the members of his commune. As a rabbi's son he could easily slip back into the role of piety and talmudic learning. But part of his assignment from Shekhtl was to make contact with a secret cell of enlightened radicals in his home town of Boblitseve, even while he milked Shekhtl's parents for hard-needed cash. "When *he* puts on a mask," exclaimed Shekhtl about Khayim-Wolf, the leader of the cell, "it's a real mask all right!" (Y 20, E 226) On the eve of making contact with a member of the cell, Krantz had every reason to await success.

Going over in his mind the many incidents and conversations of the day, he buried his head in the pillow and giggled madly. Had anyone told him that in fact he had spent the day cheating and lying with more malice and treachery than a thief, Krantz would simply have been incredulous, so intoxicated was he by the artistry of his performance. (Y 34, E 235)

While the narrator's harsh verdict never entered Krantz's self-awareness, his confidence was badly shaken at meeting cell-member Leivick. "I just don't trust the big-city maskilim," Leivick began dressing Krantz down.

"They love scandal. They want to show off their powers and their wit, to put something over on the pious, but they don't know how to work in the dark, with a steady energy. What's worse, they love to write long, sarcastic letters about everything that ought to be kept secret, and their letters have a habit of falling into the hands of the rabbi or the head of the yeshiva. And

they feel a constant need to stuff their pockets with radical pamphlets. . . .”  
(Y 37, E 236–37)

As a tutor, Leivick continued, all Krantz could do was teach “a couple of boys and girls to read and write,” but “if someone sees the light, he can learn everything there is to know even without a mentor.” Leivick claimed to have covered the whole eight-year curriculum of the gymnasium in two years, “while pretending to sit over the Talmud.”

What the backwoods shtetl of Boblitseve had to teach Krantz was what every big-city organizer could ignore only at his peril: the extraordinary tenacity of the folk, exemplified by Leivick’s ability to master the foreign curriculum on his own, and by Shekhtl’s mother Krayne who would stop at nothing to win back her son. In Ansky’s gallery of archetypal Jewish mothers, none was more resourceful than Krayne.<sup>22</sup>

At story’s end, Krantz had won the battle but lost the war. His true identity exposed, his friends routed from their headquarters by Krayne, Krantz just managed to save his own skin. And he never made contact with Khayim-Wolf either. A rousing closure, so basic a feature of earlier maskilic fiction, was notably absent in “Behind a Mask” and in both volumes of *Pioneers* as well. Ansky’s last words on the Haskalah were consistent with his first: the movement could destroy but it could not rebuild; it set young men loose from their traditional homes and from the coercive claims of the Jewish collective, but it did not secure their alternate home either from external attack or from internal defection. At best the Haskalah was a testing ground, teaching Jewish young men (and a handful of women) how to negotiate the new frontier. Perhaps the next generation, fated to wage a more dangerous war still on the border between the Jewish and Christian worlds, would learn from their struggle and their failure.

It was Ansky’s exposure to that next generation, to the Russian-Jewish students in Switzerland, that must have triggered his memory of bygone days. Between the years 1901–5 Ansky paid frequent visits to Berne, Basel and Geneva where he felt equally at home among the young Bundists as among the members of Zeirei Zion.<sup>23</sup> It was then that he wrote the Bundist anthem and other revolutionary lyrics so that the young would finally have songs of their own to sing. It was then that he wrote both volumes of *Pioneers* in order to provide the incipient Jewish youth movements with a useful myth of origins. By privileging those of his characters who were yeshiva-educated; by grounding so much of their speech and behavior in traditional texts; by allowing the mothers more influence than the fathers; by granting Lilienblum equal footing with Pisarev, and by fashioning an archetype of shtetl nihilism, Ansky achieved his major goal of laying bare the *Jewish* roots of the revolution. And he did this—it is now the place to reveal—in the Russian language.<sup>24</sup>

When he returned to Russia in 1906, he found a natural home among the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia in St. Petersburg—those, like Dubnov, Zinberg and Tcherikower, who wished to forge a national Jewish culture in three languages but who saw their primary task as mediating the Jewish experience to a Russian-speaking audience. This was an audience caught, like Ansky's young maskilim, betwixt and between, who needed assurances that their enthusiastic embrace of Russian culture was reconcilable with a Jewish national platform. It was for their benefit as well that Ansky undertook the rehabilitation of the maskil as folk hero.

Then came the celebrations of his literary anniversary. Inspired by these festivities where his return to the fold would occupy center stage, Ansky found an added advantage in the sins of his youth. The portrait of the artist as a young radical would bring out his own Jewish roots: that the shtetl had been his first base of operations just as Lilienblum had been his first Bible.<sup>25</sup> If Ansky could present himself as the one Jewish Narodnik and nihilist who found his way home again, then perhaps he had not strayed that far to begin with.

He needn't have worried, for after his death in 1920, only historians and former comrades-in-arms remembered anything about Ansky's radical past, Jewish or otherwise. Nor was it through his maskilic folk heroes that he gained immortality. Instead, Russian- as well as as Yiddish- and Hebrew-speaking audiences thrilled to Khonon and Leah, the star-crossed lovers of his masterpiece, *The Dybbuk* (1914–17). But by neglecting most everything that Ansky had written before, his critics and audiences alike failed to see the essential similarity between the young shtetl lovers and his angry young men. Besides their youth they were all rebels who read an awful lot, and it was their reading that spurred them on to effective action. Together they proved that in medieval as well as modern times there was some correlation between words and deeds. That is why Ansky drafted a prologue to the play that showed every generation with its own legitimate form of rebellion.<sup>26</sup> And that is why he titled the play *Between Two Worlds*, and centered each of its four acts upon another character who tried to bridge them: Khonon, Leah, the Miropoler Rebbe and Rabbi Shimshon. Only the irrational power of love that sundered the worlds could bring them back together: hardly, as one critic recently noted, a "traditional" message.<sup>27</sup>

*The Dybbuk*, then, was a measure of Ansky's success and of his failure. For in Khonon and Leah he finally fashioned positive literary heroes with whom young secular and assimilated Jews could identify. It was surely no accident that the first performance of the play in Palestine was done not by the famed Habimah, itself a revolutionary troupe, but by members of Hashomer Hatsair. At a time of profound crisis for the group of young

pioneers, twenty-two-year-old Yehuda Yaari decided to stage the play in the stone quarry where they worked as a way of exorcizing their own demons.<sup>28</sup> This precursor of living theater performed by the direct heirs of Ansky's "pioneers" was his ultimate vindication as a writer.

But what of his positive heroes taken not from folklore but from life? What of his ambitious attempt to rehabilitate the maskil for modern times? The Haskalah's legacy to Jewish literature of the twentieth century was the chronic split between the dreamers and doers; the young men of words and the mature men of deeds; the writers who peddled their esoteric wares from door to door and the philistines who helped build the nation's railroads. So thoroughly had the naive Haskalah been discredited before its actual demise—by Abramovitch, Judah Leib Gordon, Lilienblum, Smolenskin, Brandstetter and Peretz—that there was no one left to mourn.

Ansky could not heal the rift. But he certainly understood what was at stake. For upon completing his great Enlightened Comedy, he went on to discover the workings of Jewish collective memory in the folklore of living Jews, and after that, in the historical experience of a nation caught up in the maelstrom of World War. He found that every age produced a symbolic language of legendary motifs, plots and heroes that helped it make sense of the present in terms of what had come before. What was at stake, then, was preserving the modern predicament—not the Haskalah per se—for Jewish collective memory. The Haskalah was no more than a mnemonic, a way of originating the present struggle between individual will and collective discipline, religious authority and personal autonomy, rebelliousness and fealty. By retracing his steps thirty years after the fact, Ansky recalled to mind what a new generation of revolutionaries considered totally irrelevant and what the writers of his own generation considered harmful self-delusion. Ansky did what he could to rescue its archetypal meaning for the future.

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## NOTES

1. These, in chronological order, are the major biographical sources on Ansky: (1) the special Ansky Issue (7/8) of Moyshe Shalit's *Lebn* (Vilna, 1920), containing memoirs by Zemach Szabad, Khaykl Lunski, S. L. Tsitron, J. Wygodsky and M. Shalit and a valuable biographical essay by Zalmen Reisen. This issue appeared on December 8, 1920, at the conclusion of the thirty-day mourning period, but was later republished with the full text of Ansky's will (pp. 68–70); (2) Hillel Zeitlin, "S. Ansky's Path in Life" [Yiddish], *Almanakh tsum 10-yerikn yubileum fun "Moment"* (Warsaw, 1921), pp. 49–72, which reacts critically to the published memoirs in *Lebn* and then offers its own reading of Ansky's career; (3)

P. Shargorodskaya, "On An-ski's Literary Legacy" [Russian], *Evreiskaya Starina* 11 (1924): 306–11, an inventory of the Ansky Archive that found its way to Leningrad and may still be there [summarized by Nakhmen Mayzl in *Literarische bleter* no. 20 (1924):5]; (4) Reisen's biography in the *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur*, 3rd rev. ed. (Vilna, 1928) with an extensive bibliography; (5) Moyshe Shalit, "The Ansky Archive: Its Contents and Value" [Yiddish], *Literarische bleter* no. 259 (1929): 313–14; (6) the Ansky Issue of *Literarische bleter* no. 340 (1930) with essays by Mayzl, Shalit and E. J. Goldshmidt; (7) Chaim Zhitlovsky's *Zikhroynes fun mayn lebn* 1 (New York, 1935): 9–114 and passim which are extremely self-serving but offer the only independent version of Ansky's adolescence; (8) extensive and important selections from Ansky's Archive in Moyshe Shalit's *Fun noentn over* 1 (Warsaw, 1937–38) [henceforth abbreviated as FNO]; (9) R. Lichtsztein, "Ansky's Beginning" [Yiddish], *YIVO-bleter* 12 (1937): 443–53, a chapter from Lichtsztein's *aspirantur* essay; (10) Viktor Chernov, *Yidische tuer in der partey sotsyalistn revolyutsyonern* [Jewish Activists in the Socialist Revolutionary Party: Biographical Essays], trans. from the Russian by Viktor Shulman (New York, 1948), pp. 52–90, which offers a completely different perspective on Ansky from any of the Jewish sources; (11) the Ansky Issue of *He'avar* 11 (1964): 53–105, with memoirs by A. Kaufman, Rosa Monoszon-Etinger, Shraga Entobil and David Vardi and Ansky's correspondence with Bialik and Monoszon [the letters to Monoszon written in Russian between 1915–17 reveal Ansky at his most personal and metaphysical]; (12) *An-sky, Jewish Folklorist: Memorial Exhibition on the 50th Anniversary of his Death* (Tel Aviv: Ginza Section for Jewish Folk Art, 1970); and (13) *S. Ansky (1863–1920): His Life and Works*, catalogue of an exhibition compiled by Eleanor Mlotek (New York: YIVO, 1980) [available also in Yiddish].

On Ansky's trial for the possession of subversive documents, see Shalit, FNO, 226–28.

2. As quoted by Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe* (Boston, 1968), p. 305. For the full text of his remarks, translated into Yiddish, see Shalit, FNO, 231.

3. See my "S. Ansky and the Paradigm of Return," paper read at "The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity Since the Emancipation," The Henry N. Rapaport Memorial Conference, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, November 6, 1989.

4. For the full proceedings of the anniversary program see Shalit, FNO, 229–31. The only published editions of Ansky's writings available at the time of his anniversaries were the mock epic poem *Ashmeday* (St. Petersburg, 1905) and *Razkazi* [Stories] (St. Petersburg, 1905). The latter was made up of ten selections, only four of which dealt exclusively with Jewish life; another four revealed Ansky's intimate knowledge of Russian society and two examined the complex interplay between Jews and Gentiles. Thus there was an unmistakably nationalist slant to the program (which may, for all we know, have been Ansky's own doing).

5. See David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 53–54; 135–38.

6. See my forthcoming book *Creative Betrayal: The Art of Modern Yiddish Storytelling* (Harvard University Press).

7. S. Ansky, "Unter a maske (ertseylung fun der haskole-epokhe)," in *Noveln*, vol. 14 of his *Gezamlte shriftn* (Vilna-Warsaw-New York, 1925): 10–11 [henceforth abbreviated as "Y"]; trans. by Abraham Igelfeld & Ruth R. Wisse as "Behind a Mask" in *A Shtetl and other Yiddish Novellas*, ed. Ruth R. Wisse, 2nd ed. (Detroit, 1986), p. 220 [henceforth abbreviated as "E"].

8. Cf. *Khatos neurim* ("Sins of Youth," 1910) in *Zikhroynes*, part 1 (= vol. 10 of the *Gezamlte shriftn*), pp. 5–16; trans. as "I Enlighten a Shtetl" in *The Golden Tradition*, pp. 306–11.

9. See on this Moyshe Shalit, "New Facts About S. Ansky" [Yiddish], *Literarische bleter*, no. 340 (1930); 839–40.

10. See, for instance, Dik's *Habehalah/Di shtot Heres* (1867–68), Sholem Aleichem's *Oysgetreyslt* (1902) and Weissenberg's *A shtetl* (1906).

11. All this is true only if Zhitlovsky's memoirs are to be believed; see *Zikhroynes fun mayn lebn*, pp. 13–28.



12. I have developed this thesis in a separate essay, as yet unpublished.
13. See Alan Mintz, *"Banished from Their Father's Table": Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiography* (Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1989), pp. 16–19.
14. Ben-Ami Feingold, "Autobiography as Literature: A Study of M. L. Lilienblum's *Khatot ne'urim*" [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 4 (1983): p. 110. n. 61.
15. S. Ansky, "Jewish Ethnopoetry" [Yiddish, 1908], in *Folklor un etnografye*, vol. 15 of his *Gezamlte shriftn* (Vilna-Warsaw-New York, 1925), pp. 74–80.
16. S. Anski, *Fun eybikn kval*, vol. 1 of his *Gezamlte shriftn* (Vilna-Warsaw-New York, 1925), esp. pp. 184, 203, 227.
17. S. Ansky, *Di ershte shvalb* [The First Swallow], vol. 1 of *Pionern: a khronik fun di zibetsiker yorn in Gezamlte shriftn*, 15 vols. (Vilna-Warsaw, New York, 1925), 12:19.
18. All page refs. to *Pionern* are to the Yiddish edition in *Gezamlte verk* (Vilna-Warsaw-New York, 1925), vols. 12–13. The individual title of vol. 13 is *Di tsoymen-brekher* [The Fence Breakers].
19. The theme of conversion preoccupied Ansky. In his memoirs, Zhitlovsky revealed the sensational episode of Ansky's personal decision to convert "so as to erase the last barrier between himself and the Russian peasantry." Zhitlovsky claimed to have talked him out of it. See *Zikhroynes fun mayn lebn*, pp. 90–94.
20. According to Zhitlovsky, the young Jewish nihilists of Vitebsk never became part of the adult Jewish community; they saw its inner workings only from afar. See *Zikhroynes fun mayn lebn*, 1:14.
21. *Di tsoymen-brekher*, pp. 53, 184, 198. See also p. 53 for Uler's fond memories of the yeshiva.
22. Among the most notable contenders were Sore, the heroine of "Stepchildren" (1883, 1905), and "Khane the Cook" (1896).
23. See, for instance, A. Kaufman's memoir in *He'avar* 11 (1964): 55–58.
24. Vol. 1 of *Pionern* first appeared as "Pioneri" in *Voskhod*, nos. 1–9 (1904); "Behind a Mask" was first published as "Pod Maskoyu" in *Evreiski Mir*, no. 6 (June, 1909) and the autobiographical sketch "I Enlighten a Shtetl" as "Grekhi molodosti i grekhi starosti," *ibid.*, nos. 10, 11 (October–November, 1910). Vol. 2 of *Pionern*, titled *Pervaya bryozh* [The First Breach] first appeared in vol. 3 of his *Sobranie sochinenie* (St. Petersburg, 1915?), but is dated 1905 and may have appeared earlier in the Russian periodical press.
- Ansky's Russian is a prime example of what Dov Sadan termed *la'az*, the use of a non-Jewish language to communicate with other Jews. The first thing a competent scholar should do is compare the way Ansky mediated Jewish cultural terms and realia when writing for the Russian-Jewish and the Russian Populist press.
25. Zhitlovsky, in contrast, recalled that while Ansky was still in Vitebsk and before he actually knew a single Russian, Russian literature and radical thought replaced the Hebrew Haskalah in his mind. See *Zikhroynes fun mayn lebn*, pp. 11–20.
26. The prologue, published only once, in 1918, was reproduced in *Hasifrut* 35–36 (1986): 189–90.
27. Gershon Shaked, "The Play: Gateway to Cultural Dialogue," in *The Play Out of Context: Transferring Plays from Culture to Culture*, ed. Hannah Scolnicov & Peter Holland (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 11–12, 18–20.
28. See *Kehiliyatenu: qovets 1922* [Our Commune, 1922 Anthology: The Meditations, Trepidations and Desires of Halutsim], ed. Muki Tzur (Jerusalem, 1988), p. 7; Freddy Rokem, "The First Performance of 'The Dybbuk' in Palestine" [Hebrew], *Cathedra* 26 (1982): 186–93. Immediately prior to the rehearsals, one member of the collective committed suicide. Yaari hoped the play would help them exorcise the demon of his death.