

## A MAN OF HIS COUNTRY AND HIS TIME: Jewish Influences on Lev Semionovich Vygotsky's World View

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Lev Semionovich Vygotsky created the cultural–historical school of psychology, yet all too few of those writing about his work take into account the family, education, and cultural tradition from which he came. The authors contend that the Jewish nature of these elements was of some importance in forming his personality and his consciousness. The 1st part of the article traces his early upbringing, describes the Jewishness of his environment, notes 3 instances in which his “otherness” was imprinted on his consciousness, and points to the sources of his determination to forge a harmonious synthesis with his environment. The 2nd part examines his writings, both earlier journalistic and mature psychological, and points to evidence of the influence of his Jewish upbringing and environment on his work.

*Keywords:* Lev Semionovich Vygotsky, cultural-historical psychology, Jews in Russia, Soviet psychology

Lev Semionovich Vygotsky, the psychologist widely recognized as a foremost theoretician of childhood development, was a man of his country and his time (Rosa & Montero, 1990). Although this may appear to be a shallow truism, applicable to each and every one of us, it is particularly fitting for an appraisal of Vygotsky,<sup>1</sup> who had a sharp appreciation of cultural and historical factors and wove them into his theory of human development. In addition, the locale and period in which Vygotsky grew up were complex and dynamic. He was born into an actively Jewish intelligentsia family in the Russian empire at the peak of its Silver Age of culture and into an autocracy caught up in a whirlpool of revolutionary violence and regime brutality, reform and reaction, and repeated unsuccessful wars. We may call this a systemic–dynamic approach to the understanding of Vygotsky, a framework that we believe that he, and certainly his colleagues and pupils, would have approved.

Why examine Vygotsky's Jewishness and its role in forming his consciousness? There are three reasons for our discussion. First is that Vygotsky's Jewishness was an integral part of his early life and identity. He embraced it wholeheartedly, absorbing Jewish language, history, philosophy, and culture, alongside those of Russia and of the world. We show that Jewish cultural as well as

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<sup>1</sup> The original family name was Vygodsky. Lev Semionovich changed it, substituting a “t” for the “d.” A number of explanations, none of them substantiated or conclusive, are offered for this change.

moral–philosophical elements found expression throughout his work. Excluding Jewish elements from Vygotsky’s early life means ignoring the crucial influences of family and close social surroundings in the formation of personality, and this is simply impermissible. We cannot fully appreciate Vygotsky without considering the Jewish nature of his family, of Gomel’, and Jewish elements in his early education.

The second reason is that, despite lip service to the importance of family circumstances and cultural–historical environment in the formation of personality, there is little attention paid to Vygotsky’s Jewish background, and it is all too often either ignored or willfully suppressed (see, for instance, Newman & Holmanh, 1993).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a full issue of the journal *Voprosy psikhologii* celebrating the centenary of Vygotsky’s birth makes no mention of his Jewish background in any of its 15 articles, although many of these emphasize the importance of social and cultural origins in the formation of personality.<sup>3</sup>

David Joravsky, doyen of the scholars studying Russian and Soviet science, expressed a sharp awareness of both the importance and thorniness of the question of ethnic or class identity, writing, “We are entering a field of sensibilities that are maddeningly vague, yet powerful” (Joravsky, 1989b, p. 69). Regarding Vygotsky, he touches succinctly on his complex identity, commenting, “Vygotsky was obviously Jewish and defiantly superior to ethnic labeling” (Joravsky, 1989b, p. 254). This is all the more worth our attention because, in an earlier version, he used the phrasing “defiantly indifferent to the ethnic fact” (Joravsky, 1989a, p. 191).<sup>4</sup> We understand the two changes in Joravsky’s formulation as bringing him close to our own understanding that Vygotsky never rejected or ignored his Jewish origins and background but subsumed them under his universal humanism. We argue that throughout his mature work Vygotsky demonstrated an appreciation of Jewish sources in keeping with the outlook he learned at home, using these as one building block in the complex of sources from which he drew his inspiration. We suggest that his life was, as Rene van der Veer and Jaan Valsiner so aptly put it, a lifelong “Quest for Synthesis” (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991).<sup>5</sup> Vygotsky sought to blend harmoniously all the interacting elements of the world in which he lived, to define his own place in that universe, and to integrate himself within the society; not to be “the other,” rejected for being different. This was no easy task, for Vygotsky grew up in a traditional, reluctantly modernizing society, whereas he himself was a supremely modern personality.

The third reason is that in recent biographical sketches published on the Internet a single theme repeats itself: Following his graduation essay, L. S.

<sup>2</sup> Even in their chapter on the history of Vygotsky, no attention is paid to any possible influence of the Jewishness of his family and surroundings. Indeed, there is no mention of his having Jewish origins. The biography of Vygotsky (Vygodskaia & Lifanova, 1996), is a special case of this phenomenon.

<sup>3</sup> *Voprosy Psikhologii*, No. 5, September–October 1996, pp. 4–5.

<sup>4</sup> Joravsky was writing in the 1980s when many details of Vygotsky’s life and writings were as yet buried by Soviet censorship. In both versions, he further softens his observation by adding that perhaps Vygotsky was more stoic than defiant.

<sup>5</sup> This is one of the few works that gives attention to the Vygotsky family’s Jewish background. See Ch. 1.

Vygotsky simply “disappeared from the field of creative activity.”<sup>6</sup> This is completely erroneous. At a later point, we analyze some of the more than 80 articles that he published in this period. It is in this context that we can evaluate Alexandr Etkind’s statement that, “even today, important aspects of L. S. Vygotsky’s intellectual biography remain unclear or underevaluated” (Etkind, 1993; p. 37). We hope to redress such an imbalance.

### Russia at the Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The Russia into which Vygotsky was born was at once an era of brilliant culture, and one with a regime entrenched in the principles of autocracy, but with an autocrat incapable of understanding or maintaining these principles. All too often, armed and brutal repression was the regime’s automatic response to any dissent (Friedgut, 1987). At the same time, it was the middle of Count Witte’s “Golden Decade” of the 1890s: intense industrialization, with the formation of new urban populations of merchants, craftsmen, commercial groups, and an incipient industrial working class. These economic and social changes created a growing psychological strain as both old and new social groups encountered the need to adjust to new structures of social relations. Young Lev Vygotsky’s interest in the human mind found a broad and fertile field for exploration.

### Gomel’ 1897–1913

With the building of railroads in addition to its traditional river transport, Gomel’ (52.25’ N, 31.00’ E.), a small city in Belarus, on the River Sozh, about 150 miles southeast of the capital Minsk, had become a regional center of transportation and commerce. Semion (Simkha)<sup>7</sup> L’vovich Vygotsky came there from Orsha with his infant son, Lev, as the local director of the Russian Freight Transport Company and agent of the Moscow Land Bank. He later became manager of the Gomel’ branch of the Moscow-based Union Bank; he ran an insurance agency from his home as well (Krever, 1907; Feigenberg, 1996). He was thus clearly active in the modernizing of Russia.

Jews had lived in Gomel’ since 1537. The first All-Russian census of 1897 records Gomel’ as a predominantly Jewish city. Of its 37,355 inhabitants, 20,385 (54.6%) were Jewish. As in most of the Russian empire, the Jews were largely craftsmen and small merchants, gradually spreading into commerce and finance as these developed. Gomel’ had been the personal property of the Rumiantsev family, and in the 18th century one of the counts made it a provincial cultural

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, the biographical essay on Vygotsky at [http://www.child-land.com/detskii\\_sad.files/vygotsky.html](http://www.child-land.com/detskii_sad.files/vygotsky.html) (accessed November 30, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Although both Vygotskaia and Lifanova (1996) and Feigenberg (1996) refer to him only as Semion, and this is his generally accepted name, his son’s report card from the *gymnasium* and university examination booklet shown in Vygotskaia and Lifanova (pp. 34, 36), both name him as Simkha. In addition, in Krever (1907, p. 939), the judge refers to him as “Simkha Vygotsky.” The simplest explanation is that the father was given the Hebrew name Simkha at birth and was so registered in all his official documents. However, in seeking to integrate into Russian society he took a name, which, although still Jewish (Semion is one of the Twelve Tribes of Israel), is used also by Russians. The authors are indebted to B. G. Meshcheriakov for pointing out to us the hand-written rendering of Vygotsky’s original Hebrew name in his son’s documents. We will, however, use Semion L’vovich and Lev Semionovich, throughout.

center, including the building of a large and ornate synagogue for the Jewish population (Feigenberg, 1996).

The Jewish community was predominantly religious and traditional, intolerant of deviants, but quite naturally it was subject to all the revolutionary and modernizing undercurrents that affected the entire empire in this period. Whereas the older generation was almost entirely religious, the younger Jews were active politically in various parties and social movements (Krever, 1907; Feigenberg, 1996). As one observer noted in 1904, “At first Populism was dominant, then Tolstoi, now undoubtedly Marxism.”<sup>8</sup> The Jewish community of Gomel’ included all trends of Jewish organization and outlook. The city was a center for the Liubavich *Hasidim*. There were also Zionist–Socialist *Poalei Zion*, urging the Jews to go to the Land of Israel to build a socialist society, and their rivals, the Jewish Marxist Social Democratic *Bund*, who sought to be an integral part of the revolutionary socialist movement of Russia but insisted on carrying their propaganda to Jewish workers in the Yiddish vernacular. A rather different type of organization was the secular Association for the Enlightenment of the Jews of Russia (*Obshchestvo dlia rasprostraneniia prosveshcheniia sredi Evreev Rossii*, abbreviated OPE). Religious schools dominated Jewish education, although there existed a private Jewish men’s *gymnasium* from which young Lev Vygotsky graduated and a similar institution for young Jewish women (Pul’ner, 1926).

For the purpose of our discussion, it is the OPE that is the most important, although it was neither the largest nor most influential of the Jewish organizations. Semion L’vovich Vygotsky was president of the local branch throughout Vygotsky’s childhood and adolescence. The OPE had been founded as a means of integrating Jews into Russian society through modern education and use of the Russian language rather than the Yiddish vernacular. Philosophically, they were the heirs of the German and Russian Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) movements of the 18th and 19th centuries whose creed could be summed up as “be a Jew at home and a man abroad.”

### Vygotsky’s Home Life and Education

Both at home and in the community, Semion L’vovich Vygotsky was active in realization of OPE goals. He was the founder of an OPE public library, of which the young Lev Semionovich and his friends made frequent use. Although founded and financed by a Jewish organization, the library was open to and used by all (Feigenberg, 1996).<sup>9</sup> Such community activism and cultural interests were natural for the family in which several generations of well-known authors, scholars, and political figures had flourished (Kelner, 2006). The elder Vygotsky’s position in business, in which he had numerous contacts with the local authorities and members of the commercial and financial elites of Gomel’, gave him public status. The family lived in a spacious apartment on the second floor of an imposing brick building, once occupied by the Rumiantsevs.

Semion Vygotsky’s status in Gomel’ and his outlook are illustrated by his

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<sup>8</sup> Testimony of G. Kalashnikov in Krever (1907), pp. 896–897.

<sup>9</sup> Vygotskaia and Lifanova (1996, pp. 26–27) write only of an “Association for Education” and a “wonderful public library,” without mentioning the Jewish character of either. See Gerchikov (2006a, 2006b) for testimony as to the richness of the library’s collection.

involvement in events surrounding the 1903 Gomel' pogrom, happenings that must have left a deeply traumatic impression on 7-year-old Lev Semionovich (see discussion in Kozulin, 1990). S. L. Vygotsky participated in the organizing committee of a Jewish self-defense unit, initiated by the *Bund* and *Poalei Tzion*, recruiting, training, and arming 200 fighters when threats of an impending pogrom ran through the city.<sup>10</sup>

When the pogrom began, a number of Jews appealed to Vygotsky as one who could speak with the non-Jewish establishment, to intercede with the Russian authorities. He did so, urging the police chief, the deputy chief, and a priest to calm the situation, but to no avail (Krever, 1907).<sup>11</sup> In the actual pogrom, 6 Jews were killed, but the self-defense repelled the attackers, limiting the Jewish losses in life and property and killing a number of the pogromists. When the police attempted to disarm the Jews, they resisted and beat off the police attack. As a result, 36 members of the Jewish self-defense were put on trial, along with 44 non-Jews. In his testimony as a defense witness for the accused Jews, Vygotsky commented bitterly that as long as Jews had not raised the question of their human rights, everything was fine, but that the privileged non-Jewish classes of Russia could not stomach the idea that Jews had become aware of their rights and wanted equality (Krever, 1907; see also Kozulin, 1990). Vygotsky's entire testimony was a plea for a Russia in which all have equal rights.

The home life of the Vygotsky family only reinforced the values that Semion L'vovich represented publicly and must be counted a major formative influence on Lev Vygotsky, the second of the family's eight children. The family atmosphere was one of intellectual and moral challenge, along with a warm, tolerant, and respectful attitude toward the children and other humans in general. The family was solidary and supportive, and Lev's devotion to his mother and brother when they were later seriously ill with tuberculosis is evidence of this. At the outset of his work in experimental psychology in 1923, we find a questionnaire, intended to elucidate the subject's personality formation, in which the very first question following the demographic basics, is, "Family: Do you have an emotional attachment to your family? If so, what sort? What are your relations with your parents? Is there mutual understanding and closeness?" (Dayan, 1924b, p. 235). The formulations almost certainly drew on Lev's own formative life experience, a pattern we find repeated a number of times in his development.

Both parents knew several languages and took an interest in literature and theater. The house was always full of books that the children were encouraged to read.<sup>12</sup> Here was the source of Lev Vygotsky's lifelong interest in literature, theater, and philosophy, particularly moral and ethical thought.

Lev's early education was given by his mother at home. Here, along with the basic school subjects of Russian language, Russian and world history, literature,

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<sup>10</sup> Vygotskaia and Lifanova (1996, p. 26), citing 1905g. v Polesskom raione, Gomel: Gomel'skii rabochii, 1925, p. 208. Here the self-defense is called "The Committee of Public Safety" with no reference to Jews or pogrom. See Klier and Lambroza (1992, pp. 209, 223, 341) for an account of the Jewish self-defense's role in this pogrom.

<sup>11</sup> Testimony of Vygotsky at the October 1903 trial of 36 members of the Jewish Self-Defense.

<sup>12</sup> Feigenberg (1996, p. 17) and Vygotskaia and Lifanova (1996, pp. 28–29) both emphasize the cultural and humanistic influences of the family atmosphere.

and mathematics, he mastered the fundamentals of a classical education, Greek and Hebrew language, as well as English, the Bible, and Jewish history and culture. In addition to his mother's instruction, Vygotsky had a tutor, Solomon Markovich Ashpiz, a young mathematics student who had been expelled from university and exiled for his part in a student demonstration (Feigenberg, 1996). Ashpiz was evidently an excellent pedagogue and an intelligent and personable role model for his young pupil. Beyond this we may view the employment of a former political exile by the family as a lesson in openness and tolerance, relating to a person for his essential qualities rather than for his social or political standing. Ashpiz used a technique of probing questions to develop his pupils. As the pupil expounded on his subject, Ashpiz questioned him in such a way as to stimulate the pupil to see what he had omitted or where he had erred and to feel that he himself had made the leap forward rather than having been led into it by the tutor (Feigenberg, 1996). We can suggest that Vygotsky's concept of "zone of proximal development" is rooted in this experience.

Vygotsky's father brought him a copy of Spinoza's *Ethics* as a gift from one of his business trips (Vygodskaja & Lifanova, 1996). It says much for the youthful Vygotsky's intellectual capacities that he was able to read and appreciate this difficult philosophical text. Later, we discuss how this fact influenced Vygotsky's intellectual searchings.

The broad cultural horizons with which Vygotsky's parents and tutors endowed him found expression in his youthful hobbies: stamp collecting, which gave him knowledge of far off countries; and Esperanto, to which he was introduced by his cousin, David Isaakovich Vygodsky (Feigenberg, 1996),<sup>13</sup> that put him into correspondence with persons from other countries and cultures.

The Vygodsky household was Jewish, but in a cultural and historical rather than a religious or national sense. Lev was thoroughly conversant with texts of the Bible, with Jewish history, and with the meaning of Jewish festivals and religious traditions. He knew the prayers and his Hebrew was sufficiently fluent that he himself composed and delivered the customary Bar Mitzvah sermon with moral-historical content in the Hebrew language. (Later in life, he translated Hebrew literature into Russian.)<sup>14</sup> In preparing him for this ceremony, his parents engaged a religious instructor, once again intelligent and modern-minded, who was both willing and able to answer fully and frankly all questions regarding religious texts and traditions (Feigenberg, 1996).<sup>31</sup> The fact that Dobkin sees fit to note this detail indicates that the young Lev Vygotsky indeed asked penetrating questions regarding religious texts and traditions in a spirit similar to that of his much-admired role model, Spinoza. The fact that the parents sought out an enlightened religious tutor is once again testimony to the family's rationalist values. As we show later, Vygotsky's familiarity with Jewish scripture and with Spinoza's philosophy found repeated expression in his scientific works throughout his entire career. His literary and pedagogical style was, from his youth, said to be influ-

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<sup>13</sup> David Isaakovich Vygodsky grew up in Lev Vygotsky's family and was an important influence in Vygotsky's life. For his career and ultimate fate, see van der Veer and Valsiner (1991), pp. 5–6.

<sup>14</sup> See *Novy put'*, 39, 1916, cols. 37–40, for Vygotsky's translation of Berdichevsky's story "Vykup" (Redemption).

enced by biblical style, reinforcing his message by repetition, describing one idea through parallel presentations of the point using several different images (Feigenberg, 1996; see also van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991).

### *Adolescent Years—The Gymnasium and the History Seminar*

Lev Vygotsky successfully passed the government examinations for the fifth school year, but for his final years his parents decided that he should attend Dr. A. E. Ratner's private Jewish men's *gymnasium*. His sisters attended the parallel institution for women run by R. D. Syrkina. There were two state *gymnasia* in Gomel', but the atmosphere there was oppressive and unfriendly toward Jews. For example, the school inspector, Chichidovsky, whose responsibilities included supervision of the private Jewish *gymnasia*, was said to be a dyed-in-the-wool Russian monarchist who demonstrated little love for any "foreigners" (*inorodtsy*), as the Jews and other non-Russians were classed by the tsarist regime (Gerchikov, 2006a).<sup>15</sup>

During his 2 years of *gymnasium* education, Lev organized and led a remarkable study seminar on Jewish history. Through examination of the history of the Jewish people, the seminarists sought to understand the nature of history, the role of the individual in history, the essence of nations, and other similar questions of the philosophy of history, attempting to discover the significance of human history (Vygodskaia & Lifanova, 1996; Feigenberg, 1996).<sup>16</sup> True to their upbringing, Lev Vygotsky and his sisters strove to understand Jewish history as part of universal history. This was a period in which "the national question," the place of ethnic minorities in the European empires, was prominent in intellectual debates. It is a sign of their awareness of the world, and their own self-awareness, that this seminar was active for 2 full school years, ending only when Lev departed for university studies. It is of particular importance that we note the sources they used if we wish to understand the outlook of Vygotsky, for it is undoubtedly he who determined the tone and direction of the seminar. The Bible, Heinrich Graetz, and Ernest Renan were their main sources for understanding the origin and essence of a nation. For the role of the individual in history, the young seminarists studied Tolstoi and Thomas Carlyle (Feigenberg, 1996). All these sources were available in Russian translations in the OPE library founded by Lev's father.

Although Ratner's *gymnasium* provided a comfortable social atmosphere and was on a high intellectual level, attendance at a separate Jewish school was a constant reminder of the inequality under which Jews lived in Russia. They were still "the other," restricted in all too many aspects of their lives. Thus, it was that when Lev Semionovich graduated from the *gymnasium* with a gold medal, supposedly guaranteeing him a place in the best universities of Russia, his parents persuaded him to choose medicine as a profession that would free him from the restrictions of the Pale of Settlement, although his own preference was to study

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<sup>15</sup> Krever (1907), p. 901, brings the testimony of G. Kalashnikov: "When I was in the *Gynasium* there was already Judeophobia. Now it is even worse."

<sup>16</sup> Vygodskaia and Lifanova make no mention of the seminar dealing with Jewish history, whereas Feigenberg emphasizes that the discussions of the essence of a nation focused on the Jews and the Bible served as a primary study resource, along with Graetz's *History of the Jews*.

literature and philosophy (Vygodskaia, 1995; Vygodskaia & Lifanova, 1996).<sup>17</sup> But even on the eve of his setting out into the wider world, Vygotsky was handed a reminder of his “otherness.”

That summer, the system of filling the 3% quota for Jews in the universities of Moscow and St. Petersburg was changed, and instead of gold medal winners automatically being accepted on the basis of their proven academic merits, the quota was to be filled by lottery among all applicants. By what seemed a miracle, Vygotsky nevertheless won a place in Moscow University through the lottery (Feigenberg, 1996). However, he must have embarked on his new life with a bitter taste in his mouth.

In Moscow, he reveled for the first time in the freedom and culture of the metropolis. At long last, he faced the prospect of full acceptance among his fellow students, a prospect that appeared to be moving toward realization with the unfolding of Russian history through the stormy years of 1916 and 1917. However, his most “Jewish” years were to be those on the editorial staff of *Novyi put'* (*New Path*), and his early literary criticisms, first in Moscow and later in postrevolutionary Gomel'.

### *University Years*

Lev Vygotsky had come to Moscow to study medicine. Rather quickly he realized that this was not to his liking and transferred to law, an alternative choice that still fulfilled his parents' aim. At the same time, he enrolled for the study of philosophy and history at the Shaniavsky Free University, an unrecognized, independent university established by professors who had been dismissed or resigned from Moscow University because of their support of student strikes and demonstrations.

Vygotsky's behavior in this case gives us an insight into his outlook. In our times, we are used to the phenomenon of adolescent rebellion. In those years also, it was a not uncommon phenomenon among Jewish youth in Eastern Europe where the traditional, religious Jewish society was cracking under the pressures of modernization and revolution. But his relations with his parents and siblings were close and devoted. Above all, he believed in a Spinozan harmony of development. He therefore took on himself the extra burden and responsibility of studying according to his choice while still honoring his parents' wishes by studying law.

Vygotsky was a serious student of literature and wrote his graduation thesis on a literary-psychological theme: “The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, by William Shakespeare,” later included in his *The Psychology of Art*. In the opinion of S. P. Dobkin, this work was “in large measure autobiographical” (Feigenberg, 1996, p. 36). This same view is developed further by A. Z. Shapiro, who points out that the Hamlet-like situation in which Vygotsky found himself in his student years involved more than merely questions of profession (Shapiro, 1996). His choice of studies was made on the basis of moral considerations, and his choice of psychology as a profession had a similar basis.

During these years (1916–1924), Vygotsky published more than 80 articles and notes in various newspapers and journals (see Vygodskaia & Lifanova, 1996

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<sup>17</sup> This point is the only specific mention of the family's Jewishness in the entire biography.

for bibliography). These were literary and theatrical criticism and essays, many of them on Jewish themes. In these articles, published in Gorkii's journal *Letopis'* (*Chronicle*) and during his return to Gomel' in the local *Nash ponedel'nik* (*Our Monday*) and the regional *Polesskaia pravda* (*Polessian Truth*), we can see the forming of the views that were later expressed in his *Psychology of Art*. Perhaps most important in the framework of this discussion are the articles he published in the Russian-language Jewish periodical, *Novyi put'*.

### *Novyi put'* Publications, 1916–1917

In 1916–1917, Vygotsky was as yet a student, writing his graduate thesis, while at the same time working as technical secretary of *Novyi put'*, and contributing to it. This was a liberal–democratic publication in the spirit of the Jewish Enlightenment movement in Russia. The journal's board included prominent Jews and non-Jews, Duma (parliament) members belonging to the liberal–democratic parties, and several from the moderate socialist parties. The content of this weekly publication reflected secular Jewish culture presented in the Russian language as part of Russian and world culture and encouraged Jews to participate in the public life of Russia as citizens striving for full equality. These values led to rejection of both Zionism and violent revolution, as well as of religious exclusivism and strictly religious education, although not of religious tradition as part of the Jewish cultural heritage. These were the same values in which Vygotsky had been educated at home.

As we have already noted, Vygotsky published literary criticism, but in addition he published three essays relating to important dates in the Jewish calendar. These essays are vivid testimony to his intense spiritual awareness and passionate emotional involvement in the fate of the Jews of Russia and his own role as a part of this society. In essence, these dilemmas are a reflection of his Hamlet-like soul-searching. No less important is the common feature of the historical base of these discussions. It is characteristic of numerous Jewish holidays that they commemorate historical events, and their celebration is a link between the present and the historical past. So it is with all three of essays in which Vygotsky seeks to understand the current situation of Russia's Jews by drawing on ancient history and tracing its development. As much as this was similar to his preoccupations in the Jewish history seminar of his *gymnasium* days, it was a clear beginning of his general cultural–historical understanding of human development. The particular led to the universal.

The first of these purely Jewish articles, "Lines of Mourning," is devoted to the ninth day of the Jewish month of Av, a day of fasting and prayer marking the supposed dates of the destruction of both the first and second temples in Jerusalem. The subject was of interest to him in 1916 as it had been in his adolescence. He opens by characterizing the times: "In these terrible days. . ." In 1916, at a low point in Russian military fortunes in World War I, the Russian government had expelled the Jewish population from areas adjacent to the front lines, creating tens of thousands of refugees. The times were indeed terrible for Russia and even more so for the Jewish refugees.

In these days of trials and tribulations, why should we resurrect our sadness for the dead, and exhaust ourselves with agonies that are long since inscribed in our annals?

Recounting all the tragic events connected with this date, he analyzes the relevance of those days to the present, and his analysis is drenched in pain for “the defeats and downfalls imposed on us from the outside, and by which our history was formed, . . . subjugated everywhere and in everything to a foreign will . . . to the will of world history.”

He points out, however, that the significance of this suffering is

not temporary or transient, but timeless, cherished and preserved . . . not a historical mourning, but suprahistorical, creational. . . . That which is external to history is soon forgotten, erased and transient: events, sufferings, peoples. . . . But what about the invisible and nonmaterial beams of pure sorrow emanating from the tragic in history? Who knows? Are they not gathered together and distilled into the supreme pain of this day, and thus projected into eternity? (Vygotsky, 1916a, col. 28–30)

We should remember here that even in his *gymnasium* days Vygotsky defined the essence of a people as the community of its historical fate, and thus historical memory becomes imbued with the function of signification. Raising himself above the suffering, both of past and present, he completes his painful exposition in a typically Jewish spirit of optimism:

There exists a moving and wonderful tradition, . . . a legend according to which, on this day of grief and mourning, precisely on this day, the Messiah will be born. . . . For it is out of the darkness of the sorrow of this day that the Messiah’s approaching footsteps are heard. (Vygotsky, 1916a, col. 30)

It is precisely the stark contrast between ultimate defeat and the onset of redemption that is the key here, carrying within it the hope for change. Even at this nadir we see how he wants the reader to believe in the possibility of redemption.

The following number of *Novyi put’* carried Vygotsky’s article devoted to the works of M. Iu. Lermontov.<sup>18</sup> It appears that, in the fact that they were published almost simultaneously, we find expression of the essence of his mental workings, his balancing the fields then closest to his heart: history and culture. The same phenomenon repeats itself in December.

In his article devoted to the 75th anniversary of Lermontov’s death (Vygotsky, 1916b), Vygotsky writes of a Russian literary tradition portraying “the despicable Jew” in a scornfully comic manner, originating with Derzhavin and Pushkin. Vygotsky praised Lermontov for going against that tradition and accords him a special standing in Russian literature.

It is strange and incomprehensible that Russian literature, advancing the principle of humanism, . . . shows so little humanism in its depictions of the Jew, in whom

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<sup>18</sup> Mikhail Iuryevitch Lermontov (1814–1841) is most remembered for his lyric poetry that is widely thought to be next to that of Pushkin in Russian literature. He also wrote highly regarded plays and novels.

the artist never felt the human being. Always and everywhere the Jew is the personification of human shortcomings. . . . Moreover, the comic is the unchanging characteristic of that image. Gogol could note comic aspects even in a pogrom against Jews. Dostoevsky mocked the prayers of a Jew, and Turgenev topped them all by gracefully laughing at a Jew condemned to death. . . .<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, Lermontov devotes a tragedy to the Jews. The Jews are its focus, their lives are its theme, a Jew is its hero. (*The Spaniards*, 1830). . . . He casts the figures of the Jews in a somber, yet grand, light, and heard tears where others had noted only the comic; and saw individual human features where all the others, with the light hand of Gogol, saw only 'poor mugs distorted by fear.' . . . In the very undertaking of a tragedy about Jews, Lermontov spoke new words, never voiced before.

Vygotsky pays particular attention to Lermontov's poem "A Jewish Melody," in which there is nothing Jewish. The poem is simply devoted to the sufferings of the poet, who identifies his own melancholy with a Jewish mood. Vygotsky sees this as "a phenomenon new and wonderful in Russian literature." With all his respect and sympathy for Lermontov's courage and originality in relation to Jews, Vygotsky unapologetically applies the highest critical standards to evaluating the artistic side of Lermontov's writing: "It is the approach to the theme that is significant, and not its implementation; the goals and not the facts. . . . These are the hardships of the path of lofty art and exalted themes."

At the end of 1916, once more we find two articles: one on a historical theme, the other literary criticism. The holiday of Chanukah, marking the victory of the Maccabees over the Syrian-Greek armies of Antiochus, generally falls in December. In December 1916, the weak and corrupt political leadership of Russia in World War I had brought the country to a catastrophic situation. Vygotsky opens his essay "Thoughts and Moods (Lines for Chanukah)" (Vygotsky, 1916c) with a phrase in Hebrew from the Chanukah prayers: "In those days, and at this time." (He uses Hebrew: "*Bayamim hahem, bazman hazeh.*") The relating of current events to historical occurrences exemplified in this phrase from Jewish liturgy is a mode of analysis that may be directly related to Vygotsky's later development of his cultural-historical theories. The entire text that follows is an attempt to understand what is common and what different between those ancient days and his own times.

To him, the common link appears to be the uninterrupted flow of events: at the one pole (in those days—161 B.C.), "The brightest moment of supreme celebration of the Jewish people's power, its strength and its free will," whereas today Vygotsky sees "a historically unprecedented nadir of glaring weakness, a crumbling of the nation's strength and an ultimate prevailing of lack of free will." And once again we are presented with the Hamlet-like dilemma, "the *ultimate* prevailing. . . ." Is this an expression of the extremity of the fall, after which it is either "No!"—the finality of death, or "Yes!" a renaissance? Here is a truly Hamlet-like dichotomy.

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<sup>19</sup> There is a remarkable similarity between Vygotsky's opinion here and that of Abraham A. Brill, *Psychoanalysis in Theories and Practical Applications* (1913), cited in Heinze (2004, pp. 33–34). Brill writes, "Jewish jokes not produced by Jews, never rise above the level of the comical strain or the brutal mockery" (p. 31).

With deep pain and passion, he writes of the loss of meaning of the Jewish existence in the diaspora, of the absurdity of participation in the “diabolic vaudeville” of the war, fighting for alien and obscure interests. He relates an apocryphal

incident in which two Jews, one Austrian, one Russian met in battle. The one bayoneted the other, but on hearing the dying man pronounce the “Shma Yisrael” prayer, went out of his mind. If this incident were not, in fact, historically true, it would have had to be invented as a symbol of our times. (Vygotsky, 1916c, col. 51)

This absurdity is of itself an outcome of the tragic history of the exile.

If there exists

a chasm of opposites (between the heroes of those events and Jewish life in our times) then it was hewed out and deepened over a long period, year after year, not omitting a single link nor a single year of the chain binding our times to those days . . . and we long ago went along that path: “I know, Lord, that a man’s way is not his own . . .” (Jeremiah 10:23; Vygotsky, 1916c, col. 51)

What disturbs him is that “Even on the scale of world history this [the Maccabees’ victory] was an unusual event, an authentically heroic page, an achievement of self-liberation,” but he notes that it is celebrated not so much as a military victory, as the moral and spiritual victory of the “resanctification of the Temple, the first prayer of which is to ‘He who performed wonders for our forefathers,’ humbly thanking Him for these deeds.”

Here we can see to some extent the essence of the secular, yet traditional self-consciousness characteristic of the Jewish intelligentsia of that time. They display deep knowledge of and respect for tradition, history, and religious texts, along with rejection of reliance on miracles and a firm faith in the necessity of the assertion of the people’s common will.

The theme of the “Literary Notes” that appeared in *Novyi put’* (Vygotsky, 1916d) is Andrei Belyi’s novel *Peterburg* but, in fact, the main discussion centers around Vygotsky’s thoughts regarding anti-Semitism: “One often hears the accusation that Jews are inclined to see everything, even matters unrelated to this “universal tribe” (the term is Dostoevsky’s), through the prism of the Jewish problem.” As a result, it would appear as though “the Jews have falsely attributed to themselves the role of center of the universe.”

But the anti-Semites shout exactly that message: Vygotsky quotes Vladimir Soloviev, who designated “Judaism as the universal axis of history” (Vygotsky, 1916d, col.27) Vygotsky comments in his sharply critical style:

Undoubtedly this is no more than a gross error, an ignorant blunder. . . . Anyone knows that at present the dependency is just the reverse, that the Jewish people are dependent on universal history, on Cyrus or Napoleon, and not the opposite.

Vygotsky brings the analogy of the sun and the Earth. Although we all know that the Earth orbits about the sun, “the indisputable reality of our experience” points to the opposite. Vygotsky, even then showing his bent for psychology, writes,

Such is the nature of the human “I,” the structure of the human eye, that any open space may appear to be a closed sphere, with the observer himself at its center. That is how things stand in the world of ideas in general, and regarding Jews in particular. (Vygotsky, 1916d)

In the novel *Peterburg*, the Jewish question is enfolded in the more general context of xenophobia. This extends to all representation of non-Russians, whom one can meet both in the earthly and in Belyi’s hallucinatory Peterburg. But Vygotsky emphasizes that

Andrei Belyi’s anti-Semitism is much greater and deeper . . . an expression of the revealing and deeply significant mind-set of “mystic anti-Semitism” so characteristic of the times through which we are living, and that envelops more and more groups of the “penitent intelligentsia.” (Vygotsky, 1916d, col. 30–31)<sup>20</sup>

What Vygotsky refers to are the works of Vladimir Solov’ev and the intellectual legacies of Dostoevsky and Berdiaev, who condemned anti-Semitic discrimination in politics, in everyday life, in racial theories, and so forth, basing this condemnation on Christian conscience and consciousness, but at the same time saw no contradiction in abhorring political and civic discrimination but advocating religion-based limitations on the Jews (Vygotsky, 1916d).

Attempting to comprehend the essence of anti-Semitism, Vygotsky sees in that phenomenon “one of the most riddle-like companions of Jewish history.” The incomprehensible character of this question, as Vygotsky sees it, finds expression in such metaphysical categorizations as “riddle-like, inexplicability, the mystery of Israel, . . . eternal fellow-traveler of the eternal people, the secret of the eternity of the Jewish people” (Vygotsky, 1916d, col. 31).

In this essay, we can discern the culminating flare-up of Vygotsky’s personal feelings in conjunction with choice of a direction in life at a time when he perceived no limits to the play of his maturing intellect, the intellect of a powerful thinker. However, the realization of his desires and his personality’s self-realization are at the same time limited both by laws (the Pale of Settlement) and by the atmosphere of anti-Semitism in society that, in the eyes of Vygotsky, degraded Russia’s culture.

Vygotsky’s critique of this same novel in the periodical *Letopis’*, although written at the same time and on the same conceptual basis, is formulated quite differently (Vygotsky, 1916). Here Vygotsky writes a profound psychological analysis of a significant phenomenon in *belles lettres*, without a single word about anti-Semitism. He writes only of “antiartistic, pejorative tendencies” of Belyi, who writes of “the alien essence prevailing in the spirits of his heroes, symbolized by non-Russian, foreign little devils with the forms of Mongols, Semites and others. All of his central characters, without exception, are non-Russians.”

It should be noted that in the Jewish periodical, the discussion of the essence of anti-Semitism began with a quotation from a review in the non-Jewish periodical *Russkie zapiski* (*Russian Notes*) in which it was recognized that in this novel “. . .anti-Semitism was expressed in a most vulgar manner.” Andrei Belyi is

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<sup>20</sup> The term *penitent intelligentsia* refers to those intellectuals who were horrified by the brutal pogroms of 1905 and wrote or spoke against political anti-Semitism.

condemned for his “sociopolitical leanings.” Extrapolating from this, Vygotsky develops his own analysis of anti-Semitism as a phenomenon and allows himself to share it with his Jewish readers. In the journal *Letopis'* and in other literary notes, there is no direct mention whatsoever of Judaism. We may consider this as the application of that central principle of the Enlightenment—“Be a Jew at home and a man abroad.” This was neither a moral double standard nor a splitting of the Jew’s personality but a means of integration into Russian society without a loss of the particular Jewish identity, a goal shared by many of the modern, educated Jewish intelligentsia of Russia. For the young Vygotsky, this was a fundamental personal question of choosing a path in life.

Abolition of all civic limitations on Russia’s Jews following the February 1917 revolution explains partially the enthusiasm with which he greeted the changes and the new tones in his essay “Avodim Hoinu” (“We Were Slaves”) published soon after (Vygotsky, 1917a).<sup>21</sup> This essay presents very different problems than did his earlier Chanukah essay. Foreseeing the difficulties that might result from the prolonged period of denial of rights, Vygotsky expresses anxiety regarding his people’s future:

The excitement of the historic moments through which we now live is not only an emotion of festive and grand rejoicing at having been liberated from the oppressive yoke of the past, but is for the greater part the excitement of anxiety as we look to the future. (Vygotsky, 1917a, col. 8)

He compares the contemporary situation of the Jews with that at the time of the exodus from Egyptian slavery. Here he offers a penetrating analysis of the frustration generated by the achievement of freedom:

Only yesterday our sole good choice was readiness for an *auto da fe*. . . . But today unexpectedly and suddenly it is as though our hands had been freed. . . . We are not yet used to walking freely, speaking freely, our consciousness has not yet digested the transformation that has taken place. As yet, the old-style soul lives on in the old body. . . . This new day has caught us unready. (Vygotsky, 1917a, col. 8)

Now the main battlefield is that which is internal: Which way now? Vygotsky directs this question to himself as well. The new situation demands responsibility and action. Vygotsky takes on an active role in this, taking part in the construction of a new life not only for the Jews, now equals among the peoples of Russia, but for society in general and himself as well. But he does not take any part in organized revolutionary politics, viewing them as partisan; instead Vygotsky sought the universal. At a later point in his career, in his activities in Gomel’, we see clearly the theme that in the new circumstances all fields of life must be brought to a new and more perfect level.

Unlike his previous articles, Vygotsky writes here of a vital and active minority in the people as a basis for the belief that

the debilitating lack of freedom can be overcome quickly, and the people’s dreams quickly realized. The flow of events itself confronts the Jews of Russia with the

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<sup>21</sup> The phrase is taken from the Passover *Hagadah*.

prospect of an imminent appearance and formation of a will of the people. (Vygotsky, 1917a, col. 8–9)

However, it soon becomes apparent to him that the active minority has its own particular interpretation of the general will. Vygotsky's reaction to their struggle for "party demands," is highly critical:

The people are greater than any party, history greater than politics, and religion and a world view are greater than any program. The life of a people can never be built solely on a foundation of positivism and rationalism. The question of a people's cultural and historical existence is not a political question. (Vygotsky, 1917a, col. 9)

We may point out here that it is in the framework of Jewish local politics that Vygotsky writes of "a people's cultural and historical existence." The article ends on a note of celebration:

In these days of liberation, . . . a living *Hagada* is being created in the hope that the deep decadence which the Jews have experienced must give way to a renaissance of the people's consciousness. . . (Vygotsky, 1917a, col. 10)

His reference to the *Hagadah* once more introduces the idea of the Jewish cultural–historical influences on Vygotsky's consciousness. One of the main themes, repeated throughout the *Hagadah*, the account of the Jews' exodus from slavery in Egypt, that serves as the prayer book for the Passover *Seder* ceremony is, "It is therefore incumbent on each one of us in every generation to see himself as having personally been liberated from Egypt." The entire ceremony is aimed, through stories, legends, songs, and symbols, at engaging children's attention. It is a clear use of historical allusion to build the present on the past. It would seem that at that moment Vygotsky believed in the possibility of both general and personal unfettered self-realization and that life in Russia was truly changing for the better.

### Return to Gomel' 1917–1924

It was in Gomel', in the years 1917–1924, that Vygotsky began to crystallize his theories of human development while teaching and engaging in research. In the summer of 1917, having completed his studies, Vygotsky returned to Gomel' to assist his family in coping not only with the general instability that swept Russia in that revolutionary year but also with the illness of his mother and young brother, stricken with tuberculosis. Vygotsky sent to *Novyi put'* an account of the Jewish political parties' participation in the Gomel' Municipal Duma elections (Vygotsky, 1917b). Following a statistical account of the election results, he analyzed the state of consciousness of the Jewish community. Once more he criticized partisan antagonisms:

In everything the public life is focused *within* the parties. It is as though they never encountered each other in the course of their work. The great Jewish problems and the practical general Jewish questions slip by all their activities . . . all around there

are fierce conflicts of tastes and of outlooks . . . ripping apart the irreconcilable sections of the community. (Vygotsky, 1917b, col. 30)<sup>22</sup>

It is evident from this that he entertained no sympathy for the politics of the Jewish parties in Gomel'. We can only be reminded of his earlier words in the essay "Avodim Hoinu" that the people is larger than any party and history greater than any program.

We know that during much of the German occupation of Gomel' (March 1918–January 1919) and of the Civil War when the town repeatedly changed hands, Vygotsky was preoccupied with the illness in his family. Part of the time, he stayed with them in Kiev, where the climate was easier and the medical services more developed than in Gomel' (Feigenberg, 1996). During this time, he also wrote at least two little-known essays of literary criticism (Timenchik, 1995).<sup>23</sup>

When he returned from Kiev to Gomel' and the city's life began to revive, he was finally able to work. He taught at several institutions simultaneously and even took some part in the founding and development of a publishing house (Feigenberg, 1996; Vygotskaia & Lifanova, 1996). He was now able to engage in an occupation from which Jews had previously been excluded—teaching in public schools and not only in the Jewish *gymnasium*. He taught philosophy, literature, and logic, and most important for his future, he taught psychology and created a psychology laboratory in a teachers' college where he began his first psychology experimentation.

Along with this intensive activity he found time to visit the theater and published weekly reviews of theater and literature. In an article devoted to A. S. Serafimovich, he opens with a discussion of a story by V.M. Garshin<sup>24</sup>:

The hero of this tale enrolls in a teachers' seminary. He believes that being a teacher of the people is more worthy than being an artist. But all the same, not everyone chose teaching. Not everyone rejected art. There were those who continued to create both on canvas and in books. (Vygotsky, 1923d, p. 3)

Although ostensibly relating to Serafimovich, whom Vygotsky dubs "a people's writer," it appears that he was writing first of all about himself (for this is only the introduction to the essay about Serafimovich). Here we see a repetition of the pattern of behavior from 1913 when he enrolled in two separate universities simultaneously so as to reconcile the conflict between his parents' wishes and his own aspirations. Once again, faced with an "either–or" situation, he mobilizes his enormous potential for creative work to reach a harmonious Spinozan synthesis of

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<sup>22</sup> A similar picture of intracommunal antagonisms at this time is given in Bogoraz-Tan (1926), pp. 157–158.

<sup>23</sup> The items mentioned in Professor Timenchik's article were unknown to the curators of the Vygotsky archive, but thanks to the erudition and generosity of Professor Timenchik, copies of the two works have now been deposited in the archive.

<sup>24</sup> Vsevolod Mikhailovich Garshin (1855–1888). Active in the Populist movement for social and political reform in Russia. A writer of short stories whose central theme was the hero facing a dilemma of choice between personal satisfaction and social and national duty. Garshin died at his own hand, age 33.

what appear to be irreconcilable opposites, engaging both in teaching and writing, in literature, art, and psychology simultaneously.

In his newspaper articles in 1922–1923, he wrote mainly on literature and theater, taking upon himself the role of educator. His criticisms were aimed, on the one hand, at forming a demanding cultured audience and on the other, a literature and theater that could rightfully be called art. Thus, in discussing the role of Belorussian theater, he wrote, “The educative potential of this theater for our rural population is immense. . . . A Belorussian literary language can be their key to the entire Russian and world literature” (Vygotsky, 1923e, p. 3). At the same time, he objected to a theater characterized by “an embellished and sugar-coated ethnography that smacks of children’s productions” (Vygotsky, 1923f, p. 3).

In his essay “On Children’s Theater,” Vygotsky the pedagogue posed the question whether this should be “theater for children or a theater by children” (Vygotsky, 1923h, p. 4). In writing of Belorussian literature, he defines its task as raising its artistic level so that it might take a worthy place in world literature:

The time has come for Belorussian literature to exchange the tones of the shepherd’s pipe for those of the grand piano. The main task is to preserve the native fragrance of the cornflower, while mastering the complex themes and harmonies of contemporary musical poetry. (Vygotsky, 1923e, p. 3)

It is clear from this that for Vygotsky theater in the provinces need not and should not be provincial:

One must not think that only great and sophisticated theater can generate excitement. Wherever there is life, excitement may be found. . . . Just as electricity is not only present in lightning, but is also present wherever there is a 25 candlepower light bulb. In the same way, poetry and art inhabit not only grand creations, but also the 16-candle stage of the provinces. (Vygotsky, 1923g, p. 3)

Remarking on a Jewish operetta, Vygotsky has the same sharp criticisms as in his reviews of Russian and Belorussian theater: “A trifle became decidedly heavy—with all sharing the weight. Jewishness was laid heavily on Silva” (Vygotsky, 1923a, p. 3). Or “The Jewish operetta is not satisfied with a joke. It wants to be at once tragedy and farce with a pinch of homespun philosophy, and something of the synagogue” (Vygotsky, 1923c, p. 3). In another essay on the Jewish theater, he wrote,

This slapstick has the rudiments of pure theater. But “slapstickiness”, like theatricality is intolerable and has the same relation to pure slapstick and to theater as vulgarization has to folk culture. . . . A different way must be found. (Vygotsky, 1923b, p. 3)

We can see that, as a rule, these reviews end with a recommendation, a wish, a call: the positive challenge posed by an architect of a new culture. At this point, no difference is to be seen between his approach to Jewish culture or to any other national culture. He sees the revolution as having given the Jews full equality with all the other ethnic groups of Soviet Russia and his loyalties and energy can now be turned to a general solution for the universal human condition. However, with regard to the influence of Vygotsky’s Jewish environment and upbringing on his

work in this period, it is clear that Jewish themes still attracted his attention. We may note that from late March to mid-April 1923, three of four columns are devoted to discussion of the Jewish theater. During the course of the year other such discussions also appeared in his columns. This is evidence not only of the continuing Jewish prominence in Gomel' and in its culture that we noted at the start of our article, but also of Vygotsky's ongoing concern that this culture, too, be of a high artistic quality.

Also, in his theater criticism, Vygotsky brings another Jewish hero figure, and his discussion indicates the qualities he admires: "Bar Kochba<sup>25</sup> is not only a historically true figure as a warrior and revolutionary against the Roman oppression and against a national-religious philosophy of life . . . [but also] as an active and revolutionary figure of the new generation—against tradition" (Vygotsky, 1923c, p. 3).

To the very end of 1923, Vygotsky continued his intensive, manifold activities in Gomel'. In January 1924, his lectures at the second All-Russian Psychoneurological Congress changed the course of his life. Before analyzing the final decade of Vygotsky's activity as a psychologist in Moscow, we must consider one more Jewish influence on his outlook and thought, that of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza.

### Vygotsky and Spinoza

Acquainted with Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza from his youth, Vygotsky took Spinoza's thinking as a basis of his own world view and even worked to the end of his life on a manuscript tentatively named "The Theory of Affects by Spinoza: Prolegomena to the Psychology of Man," summing up his own activity in the field of psychology (Luria, 1935; Feigenberg, 1996).<sup>26</sup> Alexander R. Luria, who was presumably familiar with the manuscript, terms it an "important philosophical work" (Luria, 1935, p. 226).

We can suggest a number of reasons why Spinoza's mode of thinking would appeal to Vygotsky. These reasons fall into two main categories: the method and substance of Spinoza's thinking, and identification with Spinoza's personality and life. First and foremost, Spinoza, along with Descartes and Leibnitz, is categorized as a father of modern rational and scientific thinking, values that were central in Vygotsky's world. In addition, Spinoza's theory of the world allowed for change and dynamic development, a gradual discovery of the unknown and its integration into his scheme of the known universe. At one point, Vygotsky noted, "Without development there is no history, no significance, no meaning" (Zavershneva & Surmava, 2006)<sup>80</sup> As a youth, Vygotsky was attracted by Hegel's dialectical scheme of development (Feigenberg, 1996). However, for Vygotsky, Spinoza's view of dynamic of development was more attractive. Where Hegel was based on a conflict of opposites, thesis versus antithesis, Spinoza postulated

<sup>25</sup> Bar Kochba—Leader of a revolt against the Roman Empire in 132 that lasted 3 years.

<sup>26</sup> Vygotsky (1984), pp. 92–318, is presented as a complete rendition of this work "from the sole remaining manuscript, dated 1933." See n.1, p. 350. Fragments had previously been published as the article, introduced by P. Ya. Gal'perin, Vygotsky (1970), pp. 119–130. In very recent times, discussions of Vygotsky's understanding of Spinoza and Spinoza's influence on Vygotsky have drawn the interest of many scholars. See, for instance, Surmava (2004).

a harmonious combining of elements, in particular the interdependence of mind and body. That this appealed to Vygotsky can be seen by his choice of a quotation on this theme as epigraph for his *Psychology of Art* (*Psikhologiya iskusstva*) (Vygotsky, 1986). His attraction to the above portions of Spinoza's approach to understanding the universe is evident from a reading of Vygotsky's works in which he repeatedly refers to Spinoza and his ideas.<sup>27</sup> Certainly, Spinoza's broad application of his philosophical system, embracing history, religion, politics, and culture, would have appealed to a polymath of Vygotsky's type.<sup>28</sup>

We can further suggest that Spinoza, to whom Vygotsky was first exposed at an early and impressionable age, would have been attractive to Vygotsky as a personal role model. Dobkin has stated that Jewish identity was a primary element in Vygotsky's outlook (Feigenberg, 1996). However, it must be remembered that Vygotsky's concept of Judaism was that of the Enlightenment and particularly of Spinoza: rationalist, materialist, and universalist, inclusive of coexistence of mental and spiritual elements along with the physical in humans; historical-cultural, but neither religious nor national.<sup>29</sup> Spinoza's breadth of intellect, his attachment to Judaism at the same time that he rejected the methodology of the Orthodox, insisting that scripture must be subject to the same scientific analysis for consistency and validity as any other subject; Spinoza's remaining attached to his own understanding of Jewishness even after the Orthodox establishment excommunicated him for his approach to study of the Bible; all these would very likely have appeared attractive to the young Vygotsky.

#### 1924—The Move to Moscow

Spinoza's principle of not accepting the authority of established institutions when they contradict intelligence and scientific observation might well have been in Vygotsky's mind when he delivered the first of his two lectures at the Second Congress of Neurophysiologists in Moscow in January 1924. In his lecture, he attacked the ruling school of Behaviorist "Reflexological" (Bekhterovian-Pavlovian) psychology, a school that at that time had the support of both the academic establishment and the Soviet authorities. Vygotsky criticized this approach as valuable in itself but inadequate as a basis for all psychology.<sup>30</sup> By the time he appeared at this conference, Vygotsky considered himself a Marxist. He had turned to Marxism not as a cure-all to the world's ills, but rather as a methodology that might help him solve the contradictions with which he had struggled in writing *The Psychology of Art* (Joravsky, 1989a; see also Vygotsky, 1978).<sup>31</sup> Yet his dialectic was that of Spinoza rather than Hegel, and his materialism, like Spinoza's, made room for the influence of the mental and spiritual in humans. Indeed, it was precisely on this point that Vygotsky voiced his criticisms

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<sup>27</sup> The index to the first volume of Vygotsky (1982a, p. 475), *Sobranie sochinenii*, contains 21 references to Spinoza.

<sup>28</sup> A full, clear exposition of Spinoza may be found in Wolf (1913, pp. 231–239).

<sup>29</sup> Joravsky (1989a), pp. 199–200, for the discussion of Vygotsky's use of Spinoza.

<sup>30</sup> On the political and scientific context and consequences of Vygotsky's action, see Blunden (2001). The substance of Vygotsky's lecture appears in Vygotsky (1982a), pp. 43–62.

<sup>31</sup> Vygotsky writes, "to approach the study of mind having learned the whole of Marx's method."

of behaviorist theories. As V. P. Zinchenko has remarked, Vygotsky drew more from Spinoza than from Marx (Zinchenko, 2004). Indeed, a newly published fragment of Vygotsky's own notes dated September 1932 contains the injunction "to enliven Marxist psychology by Spinozism" (Zavershneva & Surmava, 2006)<sup>32</sup>

But there were other, earlier observers who cast doubt on the Marxism of "the educator from the provinces" who burst on the Soviet psychological scene so suddenly in 1924. Reviewing the conference, a journalist wrote that

the young psychologist, L. S. Vygotsky's report on the methodology of reflexological psychology was worthy of special notice among those of the "middle roaders" who had set out on the path of scientific objectivism, but had not yet turned decisively to dialectical materialism. (Dayan, 1924a, p. 164)

With the growing pressures of politics on all fields of inquiry in the Soviet Union, the criticism of Vygotsky's theories and methodology intensified. As had happened so often in his childhood, he again found himself classed as "other"—this time, not because he was a Jew, but because he was an "insincere Marxist." Alexander Shapiro recounts being told by one of his professors of her conversation with Lev Vygotsky in which the latter is quoted as saying, "I want to die. They don't consider me a sincere Marxist" (Shapiro, 1996, pp. 23–27). Marxism and the revolution were to have been his tools for achieving the synthesis that he had sought all his life. They were to have allowed him to contribute fully to creating a free new human in a free new society, and Marxism, even if Spinozan in content, was to have served as a methodology assisting him in developing his general unified theory of human psychology.<sup>33</sup>

From 1924, Vygotsky dedicated himself solely to psychology. Nevertheless, Jewish motifs continued to influence his consciousness. A comprehensive analysis of the influence of Judaism on the origins and development of his cultural–historical theory would demand its own research beyond the bounds of this presentation. Such analysis would, of necessity, have to be based on Vygotsky's autobiographical writings and other writings on Jewish topics known to exist in the family-owned Vygotsky archive but as yet not generally accessible. Kozulin, for example, raises the possibility that Vygotsky's writings on psychological tools have roots in his childhood memories of Jewish religious objects but can adduce no direct evidence in this regard (Kozulin, 1990).

We have already indicated Vygotsky's tendency from his youth to analyze Jewish current events in the light of historical development. Together with this, we have given instances of his extrapolating from his own early life experiences into a more generalized context. In addition, it is in place to point out that one may find in his psychological texts numerous usages of Jewish scripture and culture. One such is, "The stone, rejected by the builders, has become the capstone of the corner" (Psalms, 118:22; Vygotsky, 1934/1982b, p. 79).

At the beginning of his Moscow career, Vygotsky was active in what is called in Russia "defectology," elsewhere known as "special education." His studies

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<sup>32</sup> For the dating of the notebook, see Zavershneva (2007, p. 1).

<sup>33</sup> Heinze (2004), p. 405, n. 26, finds a similarity between Buber and Vygotsky in that both of them believed that psychology was in general crisis and that the solution lay in a single unifying theory based on meaningful human activity.

centered about the treating of blind and deaf–mute children. He never called these children “defective” or “handicapped” but referred to them as “anomalous,” insisting that, properly nurtured, they could attain levels comparable to their peers (Feigenberg, 1996, p. 69). One can easily imagine that in his inner ear when formulating this approach he heard the above biblical injunction, absorbed during his childhood. His Jewish education had given him a moral principle on which to build his scientific outlook.

Vygotsky frequently presents an association that attests to the fact that his Jewish upbringing, although it has receded into the background, is still alive. Thus, analyzing the development of concepts in children, Vygotsky writes,

Just as some ancient Biblical clan, existing as a distinct family unit, dreamed of multiplying and becoming as innumerable as the stars of the sky or as the sands of the seashore, exactly so is it with the diffuse complex of the child’s thinking. (Vygotsky, 1934/1982b, p. 147)

The image is taken directly from the Old Testament (Genesis 22:16). As in our previous examples of the suggested origin of the concept of “Zone of Proximal Development” and the application of “The stone, rejected by the builders, . . .” we find Vygotsky, in his last and most mature work, reaching inward to his early cultural training to formulate a principle of child development in which the child’s earliest experiences and sensations are the beginning of an extended process of “drawing into the basic clan more and more new, and completely concrete objects” (Vygotsky, 1934/1982b, p. 147) Vygotsky’s universalism was similarly constructed. His early Jewish Enlightenment education served as the nucleus for a more complex development of personality, striving to attain a universality of humanism. The breadth of his erudition allowed him to enter as an equal into discussions with scholars speaking and writing in various languages. At the same time, throughout all of his pedagogical activity and in his writings, he preaches that humanistic social and political thought recognizes the necessity of cultural integration based on the careful safeguarding and coexistence of different cultures.

National forms of development present us with an undisputable and mighty historical fact. . . . However, it is important that we avoid a fundamental error. . . . An excessive cult of folkism, intensifying the national element in human behavior, cultivates nationalism in pupils instead of national consciousness. A national coloration of human behavior, like any cultural achievement, may be regarded as a supreme human value, but only when it does not become a cage, limiting the individual, like a snail in its shell, shut off from all external influences. . . . Being true to one’s people is being true to one’s own individuality, and is the only normal and honest way to behave. (Vygotsky, 1926/1991, pp. 244–245)

Such a sensitivity to ethno-national particularities almost certainly sprang from Vygotsky’s early life experience and education. As he so clearly states in this quotation, evidently prepared during his latter years in Gomel’ but published after his arrival in Moscow, Vygotsky valued his own heritage as a tool with which to enrich all humanity, rejecting any national or religious isolationism.

## Conclusion

We have examined the world of the young Lev Semionovich Vygotsky. In his formative years, it was an intensely Jewish world. His town, his friends, and above all, his family had a strong Jewish identity. In his intellectual activities, he expressed an interest in Jewish history and in the problem of anti-Semitism. Lev was raised to give this a humanistic and cultural–historical interpretation, and this natural inclination was reinforced by what he found in his readings of Spinoza, an influence that remained with him throughout his life. Spinoza, who defied authority wherever authority contradicted reason and intelligence, was an attractive role model for the young Vygotsky.

Vygotsky's life was spent in search of a synthesis in which he and the world about him would be in full harmony. To this day, the world lacks the Spinozan harmony and social enlightenment that Vygotsky so much wanted to discover. One may nevertheless firmly believe that Lev Vygotsky did succeed in achieving a personal Spinozan synthesis. Having chosen a life in science, he remained true to his people, and first and foremost to himself, while still “defiantly superior to ethnic labeling” (Joravsky, 1989b, p. 254). and dedicating himself to serving universal human values. Throughout his career as a psychologist, from his first writings as a student in Moscow and right through to his deathbed publication, *Thought and Language* (*Myshlenie i rech'*), along with generalizing from the essence of his own life experience, Jewish history and culture, which he absorbed as a child, were repeatedly the framework of reference within which he generated and expressed his innovative ideas. Andrew Heinze defines a Jewish point of view as one that either “derives from Judaism or Jewish culture, or reflects a state of mind shared by Jews in response to bigotry or social ostracism” (Heinze, 2004, p. 4). We have presented repeated examples of such expressions, both biblical and Spinozan, from Vygotsky's earlier literary writings and his later psychological works, down to the very last of them, *Thought and Language*.

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