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Leon Pinsker's Proto-Zionist Pamphlet *Autoemancipation!* in Sh. Y. Abramovitsh's Skeptical Yiddish Reworking

Keywords

Leon Pinsker, Sh. Y. Abramovitsh, territorialist nationalism, adaptation, German, Yiddish

Abstract

Leon Pinsker's pamphlet *Autoemancipation!* (1882), a seminal text of early Jewish nationalism, arguably established Zionism as a movement functioning in the German language. Soon after its publication, the renowned Yiddish writer Sh. Y. Abramovitsh produced a Yiddish language version (1884). Abramovitsh's rendering is above all an adaptation of German or Western European political and cultural concepts and vocabulary to the Jewish, Eastern European Yiddish-speaking milieu, with changes in vocabulary, rhetorical strategies, and cultural references. Abramovitsh reworked the pamphlet according to his own thinking on the plight of Jews in the Russian Empire and a possible nationalist solution, as exemplified in his contemporary novels. In the article, I compare the language in which several socio-political concepts are expressed in the two texts in order to determine whether Abramovitsh, in his ideological skepticism, also subtly adapts the content of the nationalist thesis.

Protosionistični pamflet Leona Pinskerja *Avtoemancipacija!* v skeptični jidiš predelavi Šolema Jankeva Abramoviča

205

Ključne besede

Leon Pinsker, Š. J. Abramovič, teritorialistični nacionalizem, priredba, nemščina, jidiš

Povzetek

S pamfletom *Avtoemancipacija!* (1882), temeljnim besedilom zgodnjega judovskega nacionalizma, je Leon Pinsker po nekaterih argumentih uveljavil sionizem kot nemško govoreče in pišoče gibanje. Kmalu po izidu pamfleta je priznani jidiš pisatelj Šolem Jankev

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Abramovič objavil njegov prevod v jidiš (1884). V Abramovičevi različici so nemški oziroma zahodnoevropski politični in kulturni koncepti ter besednjak prirejani vzhodnoevropskemu, judovskemu, jidiš govorečemu okolju, kar vključuje spremembe v besedišču, retoričnih strategijah in kulturnih referencah. Abramovič je pamflet predelal v skladu s svojim razmislekom o stiski Judov v Ruskem imperiju in njeni mogoči nacionalistični rešitvi, s čimer se je ukvarjal tudi v svojih sočasnih romanih. V članku primerjam, kako so v obeh besedilih izraženi nekateri družbenopolitični koncepti, da bi ugotovil, ali Abramovič s svojo ideološko skepsjo prefinjeno priredi tudi vsebino nacionalistične teze.



Introduction

The pogroms of 1881/1882 in the Ukrainian part of the Russian Empire were a watershed moment in Jewish political history. The pogroms, following on the heels of the assassination of tzar Alexander II., who had introduced reforms in favor of Russian Jewry, surpassed in scope and ferocity the previous outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence in Russia through the nineteenth century, and inaugurated an era of ever bloodier anti-Jewish outbursts in the twentieth century. Besides triggering a massive emigration of Jews from Russia, the 1881 pogroms shattered the hopes of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia of a possible political, social, and cultural assimilation of Jews in the Russian Empire, and boosted alternative ideologies, including Jewish nationalist thought and activism. This included nationalist territorialism, which argued that Jews should renew their national consciousness and seek out a territory that will serve them as a safe haven from persecution.

206

Among the intellectuals swept up in these developments was Yehuda Leyb (Leon) Pinsker (1821–91), a Russian Jewish doctor and intellectual working in Odessa and well-versed in the languages, culture and ideologies of Western and Central Europe. After the shock of 1881, he published in Berlin and in German a proto-Zionist pamphlet entitled *Autoemancipation!* (1882), which fired debate on the merits of Jewish nationalism and on the territorial solution, and came to be regarded as a “milestone in the evolution of modern Jewish nationalism.”¹ Pinsk-

¹ Shlomo Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism: The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 77.

er became a leading figure in the Russian-based *Hibat tsiyon* (Love of Zion) movement, which strove for the settlement of Jews in Ottoman Palestine and preceded the Zionist movement spearheaded from 1897 onwards by Theodor Herzl.

Pinsker's pamphlet was widely read and discussed among the German-reading Jewish intelligentsia in Russia and translated into several languages. In 1884, it was "translated" into Yiddish by one of the founding figures of modern Yiddish literature, Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (1835–1917), also known as Mendele Moykher Sforim (Mendele the Bookseller), who was by then already established as a masterful satirist and an acerbic critic of the Jewish condition in Eastern Europe as well as a voice for the Jewish economic and political plight in Russia. Abramovitsh's rendering of Pinsker's pamphlet is less a translation and more a linguistic and cultural adaptation or transposition of a German text, aimed at cultured Central and Western European readership, into a Yiddish one, aimed at a Yiddish-speaking and Yiddish-reading Eastern European readership, about whose plight the text is predominantly about.

In the following, I will first present the different intellectual and linguistic origins of the two writers in their historical moment, as well as the ideas, intentions, and readership of Pinsker's seminal pamphlet. In the next step, I will compare the German original and the Yiddish version and examine a few cases where Pinsker's original and Abramovitsh's adaptation diverge, to determine whether Abramovitsh's Yiddish transposition modifies Pinsker's ideas in changing the vocabulary, adopting different rhetorical strategies, as well as rearranging and omitting passages. I will show that in Abramovitsh's rendering, the text gains different emphases that grant the Yiddish version either a diminished nationalist appeal or a skeptical inflection.

207

The Doctor and the Satirist

Both Pinsker and Abramovitsh were Jews from the Russian Pale of Settlement,² and were earlier enthusiastic adherents of the so-called Jewish Enlightenment or Haskalah, a modernizing intellectual movement among Jews in nineteenth century Eastern Europe. Adherents of Haskalah sought the normalization of

² The Pale of Settlement was the name for the only territory in the Russian Empire where Jews were allowed to settle permanently.

Jews' political, economic, and social conditions by way of integration into Gentile (i.e., non-Jewish) society, most importantly through education and economic normalization. While Jewish assimilation was well under way in Western Europe by the end of the nineteenth century, in the Russian Empire it was hindered generally by the economic and political backwardness of the tsarist regime and particularly by tsarist anti-Jewish measures.

Pinsker was from a respected, assimilated family and himself a physician by profession, working in the multicultural city of Odessa. He was a longtime member of a circle for the promotion of the education of Jews in the Russian language and secular subjects.³ In contrast to the majority of Russian Jews, his first language was not Yiddish, but Russian, and he had no Jewish traditional education, but, exceptionally, was educated at Russian schools. He was widely traveled and familiar with modern Western ideologies, including the nationalist movements of nineteenth century Europe. From his youth, Abramovitsh was, on the other hand, steeped in traditional Jewish education and could draw on his familiarity with traditional Jewish life for his complex satirical works that defined his image as the “Grandfather” (Yiddish: *Zeyde*)⁴ of Yiddish literature. In his early prose works of the 1860s and 70s (*Dos kleyne mentshele*, 1865, *Dos vintshfingerl*, 1865, *Fishke der krumer*, 1869) Abramovitsh, still committed to enlightenment views, satirized Russian Jewish life based on the ideals of secular education and a modern free-market economy, which were supposed to be the “wishing ring” (*vintshfingerl*) that would uplift Russian Jews to a dignified existence.

Both Pinsker and Abramovitsh were dismayed and terminally disillusioned in their persuasions by the pogroms of 1881–82. Before 1881, anti-Jewish outbursts in the Russian Empire throughout the nineteenth century were limited in scope and gained less public attention; they occurred, notably, in the multicultural city of Odessa.⁵ The Odessa riots of 1871, which gained wider public attention, had already sown doubts in a number of Russian Jewish intellectuals about whether education and assimilation would truly succeed in normalizing the sit-

³ Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism: From the French Revolution to the Establishment of the State of Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 70.

⁴ Yiddish is written in the Hebrew alphabet. All transcriptions from Yiddish here follow the standard of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, which is prevalently used today.

⁵ John Klier, “Pogroms,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, accessed September 10, 2023, <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Pogroms>.

uation of Jews in Russia. The 1881 pogroms were more widespread, were something of a mass movement, and were widely publicized, even outside Russia. Like in 1871, parts of the Russian press excused, supported, or even incited the riots, and the role of the tsarist authorities in allowing the riots or even tacitly supporting them remains a matter of discussion.⁶

Along with other Jewish intellectuals, Pinsker responded to the pogroms by homing in on nationalist ideas and refashioning them in his fiery pamphlet: *Autoemancipation!*. In the pamphlet, he argues that Jew-hatred is an incurable disease, and yet one arising from the objective condition of Jews as a landless nation; assimilation into other nations will always be doomed to failure; therefore, Jews must help themselves by first strengthening their national consciousness and then by self-organizing and forming a political will to acquire a piece of land which will serve as a national refuge for Jews fleeing persecution and hardship. Similar nationalist ideas, based both on traditional Jewish attachment to the Land of Israel and on the new European nationalisms prominent from the beginning of the nineteenth century, had already been current in the developing Jewish press in Europe and Russia (mostly in the Hebrew and Russian languages). While it is debatable how familiar Pinsker was with these debates and with activist groups in Russia before writing *Autoemancipation!*,⁷ he co-headed the founding conference of the movement of Hibat tsiyon (Love of Zion) in Katowice in 1884, and was elected a leader of the organization.

The Pamphlet and Its Adaptation

Pinsker wrote his pamphlet in German and published it in Berlin⁸ to reach German-reading Jews in Central and Western Europe. According to Marc Volovi-

⁶ In his introduction to Pinsker's pamphlet, Arthur Herzberg notes: "It was all the more impossible to believe that these were only lynchings, carried out by an illiterate rabble, because leading newspapers had whipped up the frenzy, men of education and position participated in the attacks, and the government more than tacitly abetted the pogromists." Arthur Herzberg, *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 180.

⁷ Laqueur, *History of Zionism*, 75–76.

⁸ The full title of the anonymous publication is [Leon Pinsker,] "*Autoemancipation!*" *Mahnruf an seine Stammesgenossen von einem russischen Juden* (Berlin: Commissions-Verlag von W. Issleib [G. Schuhr], 1882). The writer thus identifies himself only as a "Russian Jew" making an appeal to his kinsmen.

ci, he essentially contributed to making German the main language in which Jewish nationalist ideologies, particularly Zionism, developed in the following decades.⁹ However, as Walter Laqueur notes, “Pinsker’s appeal received wide notice from Jewish writers in Russia but hardly any attention from the people for whom it had been intended and from whom he expected leadership, namely western, and more particularly German, Jewry.”¹⁰ Similarly, fifteen years later, from 1896 onwards, Herzl’s ideas on a “Jewish state” gained considerably more traction in Russia than in the West.

While discussing translations of his pamphlet to cater to a Russian readership, followers suggested to Pinsker to have the text translated not only into Hebrew, which would limit it to a handful of intellectuals, but also in Yiddish, the first language of the vast majority of Russian Jews at the time. Pinsker may even himself have asked Abramovitsh, with whom he was befriended, to translate the text.¹¹ For Abramovitsh, the project was a good opportunity to take up writing after several years of crisis and silence. Susanne Klingenstein describes his adaptation of Pinsker’s pamphlet as a “loosening exercise,”¹² undertaken to relaunch his writing. In 1884, on the 25th anniversary of the beginning of his writing career, Abramovitsh published Pinsker’s pamphlet.¹³

Since 1881, Abramovitsh had himself moved ideologically to accommodate ideas about Jewish nationalism. With the novel *Di klyatshe* (*The Nag*) in 1873, according to the critic Shmuel Niger, he recalibrated his satirical perspective. In his previous prose works, he had satirized the internal workings of Jewish communities in Russia and opposed the pauperized Jewish masses (*di mase, der hamoyn*, also: multitude) to their oppressive “benefactors” (*bale-toyves*), the Jewish “big shots” (*tkifim*) that in fact exploit and victimize them. In *The Nag*, however, he started to view the Jewish people as a whole, a *kneses Yisroel*, the

210

⁹ Marc Volovici, “Leon Pinsker’s *Autoemancipation!* and the Emergence of German as a Language of Jewish Nationalism,” *Central European History* 50, no. 1 (March 2017): 34–58, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938917000061>.

¹⁰ Laqueur, *History of Zionism*, 73

¹¹ Shmuel Niger, *Mendele Moykher-Sforim: Zayn lebn, zayne gezelschaftlekhe un literarishe oyf-tuungen* (Chicago: L. M. Stein, 1936), 213; Nachman Mayzel, ed., *Dos Mendele-bukh: Briv un oytobyografishe notitsn* (New York: Ikuf, 1959), 479–80.

¹² Susanne Klingenstein, *Mendele der Buchhändler: Leben und Werk des Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014), 357.

¹³ Klingenstein, *Mendele der Buchhändler*, 348–56; Niger, *Mendele Moykher-Sforim*, 200–4.

“gathering of Israel,” as a nation being oppressed by other nations, and particularly homed in on Jews as a national community within the Russian Empire. His inner-Jewish class analysis thus started shifting to a critique of Jewish-Gentile relations in a national light: as Niger puts it, he shifted his perspective “from the multitude to the nation.”¹⁴

Abramovitsh's adaptation was published under the title *A sgule tsu di yidishe tsores* (“A solution to Jewish troubles” or “A remedy to Jewish pains”) in an almanac composed and published by Abramovitsh himself (*Kalendar far di rusishe yidn*, Odessa, 1884) and also as an offprint. It was republished in Lemberg (Lviv) in 1898 and, significantly, taken up in the 1913 “Jubilee edition” of Abramovitsh's collected works, where it was presented less as a translation and more as an original work.¹⁵ Similar to Pinsker's German pamphlet, the Yiddish version was on first publication widely read among Russian Jews, since there was hardly any other material available in Yiddish about contemporary ideas and at that point no Yiddish press in Russia.¹⁶

On Modern Jewish Ideologies

In his adaptation, Abramovitsh did not include Pinsker's German preface, but as in his fiction, added his own preface that already sets the tone for the rest. The famous ironical and faux-naïve prefaces in Abramovitsh's fictional works are purportedly written by the book-peddler Mendele, a fictitious persona who is the medium through whom Abramovitsh was empowered to write his mature Yiddish (and later Hebrew) fiction.¹⁷ The preface in the *Sgule tsu di yidishe tsores* at first glance does appear to be written in the signature “Mendele-style” (*nusekh mendele*), with all of the familiar “mendelesque idiosyncrasies,”¹⁸ which already lends it an ironic bend, like with other fictional works introduced, “translated,” or “adapted” by Mendele. However, even if Klingenstein considers this

¹⁴ Niger, *Mendele Moykher-Sforim*, 126.

¹⁵ Niger, 213; Mayzel, *Dos Mendele-bukh*, 474–75.

¹⁶ Mayzel, 479.

¹⁷ For an in-depth discussion of “Mendele the bookseller” as a central conceit of modern Yiddish fiction (but not, notably, Abramovitsh's pseudonym), see Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), especially 130–68.

¹⁸ Mayzel, *Dos Mendele-bukh*, 475.

introduction to be on par with Mendele's other introductions to Abramovitsh's prose works (*The Wishing Ring*, *The Nag*, *Benjamin the Third*, etc.),¹⁹ the speaker of the preface nowhere names himself "Mendele" and does not depict a scene that would make him recognizable as Mendele. In this case, perhaps Abramovitsh's writerly only persona partially bleeds over into Mendele's character, and not as completely as in his works of fiction.

The writer of the preface affirms to be familiar with the heaps of contemporary literature on the problems of Jewry: "Have you ever seen a Jew fall (God forbid) on his rump or struck by toothache, without having a heap of merciful Jews fall upon him, each one with his old wives' remedies to help? No worries indeed, we Jews have always had, thank God, more than our share of problems, merciful people, benefactors and advisors."²⁰ Those purported "healers" of the Jewish condition (*yidische lage*) have

talked our ears off with their absurdities. Among them there have been conjurers going off on a tangent, talking gibberish and wanting to heal us by means of the Devil (*durkh dem sitre-akhre*). Others have crawled truly far into holiness and searches a remedy in the holy Will of God, praying *Asher yatsar* a hundred times a day just to enrage our enemies. Further there are those who have written all manner of charms [. . .], odds and ends wonderfully made, in which it's impossible to understand a single word. Also, there are those who have gone off, upon God's bidding, eyes closed, on an empty stomach and with empty pockets, to measure fields at the Cave of the Patriarchs.²¹

Thus, the writer of the preface makes a mockery of a variety of proposed solutions to Jewish plight in the modern era, especially gibing at religious quietism, but also, notably, at emigration to Palestine to work the land ("to measure fields at the Cave of the Patriarchs"), as early proto-Zionist groups had been doing.²² Abramovitsh seems to have been familiar with the ferment of ideologies in the Jewish public sphere in Russia, and was preemptively parodying these "solu-

212

¹⁹ Klingenstein, *Mendele der Buchhändler*, 360.

²⁰ Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh, "A sgule tsu di yidische tsores," in *Ale verk fun Mendele Moykher-Sforim*, ed. Mayzel Nachman, 10 vols. (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1920), 8: chap. 3, א. All translations of quotes originally in Yiddish are my own.

²¹ Abramovitsh, א-ג.

²² See Mayzel, *Dos Mendele-bukh*, 475–76.

tions” in the very preface to a translation of one such source of ideas. This is a satirical self-sabotage similar to other such feats by Mendele, such as in Abramovitch's *Travels of Benjamin the Third* (1878).

Nevertheless, despite the harsh words aimed at the competing ideologies concerning the Jewish condition, the editor and translator of the preface is happy to present to readers a book (*seyfer*), “written in the German language” (in der daytsher shprakhe) and rendered “in our Jewish/Yiddish tongue” (oyf undzer yidishn loshn).²³ The very names are telling: *shprakhe* is a Germanism in Yiddish, the normative Yiddish word is *shprakh* (without the end vowel); while the Jewish/Yiddish “language” is signified with the Hebrew-Aramaic word *loshn*. This already distances Pinsker's German original from the Jewish/Yiddish version—separating a Germanizing linguistic tendency from a Judaizing one. Moreover, the writer calls the pamphlet a *seyfer*, an appellation traditionally reserved for Jewish holy books (a secular book is a *bukh*); thus, ironically uplifting the meaning of this text of modern ideology to a kind of “holiness.”

Already in the preface, there are thus signs both of an ironic bent to the whole text presented, as well as of a distancing from the original “German language” and a preference for “our” language—an announcement of what the “translation” will accomplish. It has been noted that Abramovitch's “translation” of Pinsker's text should rather be considered a “subversive cultural transposition,”²⁴ or even a Jewish appropriation, a “Judaization” or *faryidishung*²⁵ of the German text in order to produce a text readable in an Eastern European Jewish mindset and cultural space. The various examples of this *faryidishung* in vocabulary, imagery, metaphors and rhetorical devices have been laid out by Yiddish scholar Max Weinreich,²⁶ who aims to demonstrate on the one hand Abramovitch's stylistic skill, and on the other the particularity of Yiddish used as a language of a modern literature and publicism. Thus, while Pinsker's intended readers were primarily educated and assimilated Western Jews, Abramovitch's intended au-

²³ Abramovitch, “A sgule,” ג–ג. In Yiddish, *yidish* means both Jewish and Yiddish.

²⁴ Klingenstein, *Mendele der Buchhändler*, 360.

²⁵ Mayzel, *Dos Mendele-bukh*, 475. In Mayzel's view, Abramovitch set out to “refashion and judaize” (*ibertsumakhn un faryidishn*) the text. Mayzel, 474.

²⁶ Max Weinreich, “Vos heyst shraybn yidishlekh? Analizirt oyf mendeles an iberzetsung,” *Yidishe shprakh* 2, no. 4 (July–August 1942): 97–112.

dience, according to Max Weinreich, was the “study house intelligentsia,”²⁷ i.e., not the Jewish masses, but Talmudic students and scholars in the Russian *yeshivot* (Talmudic schools) or synagogue study rooms, who could grapple with the more abstract ideas of the pamphlet, many of which are expressed, as Weinreich demonstrates, with the devices of Talmudic disputation.

The general message of the two versions does not differ in its essence: in both, the pamphlet offers a pessimistic analysis of the failure of Jewish assimilation, a diagnosis of the disease of Jew-hatred, and a proposed solution in national consciousness-raising. Yet, the two texts differ not only their cultural field of reference, but also in how they express some key concepts. These differences can be traced in vocabulary, rhetoric devices, and the rearrangement and omission of text. Let us take a look at a few examples.

Naming the Issue

Abramovitsh’s change of the title is already telling. The concept “self-emancipation,” that is, that Jews need to emancipate themselves, not only wait to be emancipated (i.e., given equal rights) by the polity in which they live, is essential to Pinsker’s argument: it is the very title of the German pamphlet. Abramovitsh, however, entirely forgoes the word emancipation—a paradigmatically modern political concept—in line with his very sparing use of vocabulary of Latin-Greek origin, common to many European languages: what in Standard Yiddish linguistics came to be called “internationalisms” (*internatsyonalizmen*). Instead, Abramovitsh titles his piece *A sgule tsu di yidishe tsores*, “A solution/remedy to Jewish problems/pains.” This brings into the very title the medical metaphors that Pinsker, a doctor, uses to analyze the Jewish condition—to diagnose it and offer a remedy to it. It also replaces the modern concept and term of emancipation with two Yiddish words coming from the Hebrew-Aramaic component of the language (*sgule, tsores*), thus accentuating traditional Jewishness against modern ideas and vocabulary.

214

Both Pinsker and Abramovitsh use a series of medical and psychological terms to designate Jew-hatred, which Pinsker terms “Judeophobia,” as a disease. For

²⁷ Weinreich, 102.

Pinsker, this is a hereditary and incurable “psychic aberration” (*Psychose*),²⁸ while for Abramovitch it is an “obsession,” an *idée fixe* (*mankolye*).²⁹ In his preface, Abramovitch is eager to point out how much the German intellect has contributed to this Jew-hatred in a modern garb. As he says about Germany, where Pinsker’s pamphlet was published, “In that land a few years back, the ugly scabies appeared for the first time under the weird new name ‘antisemitism.’ Which means, in our language (*oyf undzer loshn*): hatred for Jews (*di sine tsu yidn*), who are descended from the line of Shem. As though it had been now evidently proved that Shem kept a locker in Noah’s Arc and was lending money at interest to Yapheth and his cattle.”³⁰ Scorning this new-fangled term for an old hatred, Abramovitch elsewhere names the phenomenon simply “Jew-hatred” (*sine tsu yidn*), or, as it is traditionally referred to, *sines yisroel* (“hatred of [the people of] Israel”). In this way, Abramovitch accurately portrays antisemitism as a modern ideology, one of the -isms of the nineteenth century but refuses to adopt the word and lend it legitimacy.³¹ Pinsker also never uses the word “antisemitism” in his text, perhaps for similar reasons; he opts either for his medicalized term “Judeophobia” or the simple “Jew-hatred” (*Judenhass*).

In another case, however, Pinsker does take on an expression arguably coming from enemy territory, namely by invoking the “Jewish question” (*Judenfrage*). Pinsker’s text starts off by referring to “the eternal problem presented by the Jewish question.”³² Abramovitch never uses such a term (which later came into use in Yiddish as a neologism from German: *yidnfrage*). He uses, in the same passage, the words “a very old riddle/enigma” (*a shtark alte retenish*)³³ concerning Jews, a kind of riddle over which a whole world of (Gentile) thinkers is racking their brains, unable to crack the nut, ironically just like Talmudic scholars’ pore over difficult passages. He also talks about “Responsa” (*shayles-tshuves*) about

²⁸ Herzberg, *Zionist Idea*, 185. The original German terms in parentheses are taken from the anonymously published first edition of Pinsker’s *“Autoemancipation!”*

²⁹ Abramovitch, “A sgule,” 6.

³⁰ Abramovitch, 2. While Pinsker was trying to appeal to German Jews and could not criticize the contribution of German culture to Jew-hatred too sharply, so Abramovitch had to forgo, due to Russian censorship, any mention of the recent pogroms in Russia, which Pinsker does address.

³¹ The term “antisemitism” was popularized around 1880 by publicist Wilhelm Marr to replace old-fashioned “Jew-hatred” with a modern, respectable, “scientific” ideology.

³² Herzberg, *Zionist Idea*, 182.

³³ Abramovitch, “A sgule,” 3.

Jews:³⁴ by using a Hebrew term used to name scholarly correspondence on religious law (“Responsa”), he parodies the (Gentile) quibbling over Jews as a vacuous enterprise. All in all, by rejecting the fraught term of “the Jewish question,” Abramovitsh refuses to play on the enemies’ field. He makes it clear that the problem is not Jewish existence, but those questioning it. The “Jewish Question” is being posed by Jews’ enemies.

Nation and Homeland

An apparent contradiction in Pinsker’s argument is that, having diagnosed Jew-hatred as an immemorial and ineradicable disease among the nations, he then proceeds to explain and even justify it as a natural reaction to the specter of the Jews as a “living dead” people: “After the Jewish people had yielded up its existence as an actual state, as a political entity, it could nevertheless not submit to total destruction—it did not cease to exist as a spiritual nation (*geistig als Nation fortzubestehen*). Thus, the world saw in this people the frightening form of one of the dead walking among the living.”³⁵ So the Jewish people has no place among the nations because it is something unreal, between worlds, at least from the perspective of nineteenth century nationalism: “No concrete, real attribute of the Jews causes Judeophobia; it is the abnormality of the Jews being somewhere between a national existence and a lack of a real foundation for that existence.”³⁶ A real foundation would, in Pinsker’s view, mean a piece of land with “spatial continuity” (*räumliche Zusammengehörigkeit*).³⁷ That land could become a homeland and the basis for a normalization of the Jewish condition. This view on nation and homeland can be analyzed to show how Abramovitsh, in his version, subtly departs from Pinsker’s conceptions.

216

Firstly, there is the question of how Pinsker and Abramovitsh conceive of nations, specifically a Jewish people as opposed to other peoples. The two writers use a different set of synonyms for the nation, which demonstrate, once again, how Abramovitsh “judaized” and subtly shifted the perspective laid out by Pinsker. Pinsker uses, more or less interchangeably, both the Germanic *Volk*, “peo-

³⁴ Abramovitsh, 3.

³⁵ Herzberg, *Zionist Idea*, 184.

³⁶ Avineri, *Making of Modern Zionism*, 81.

³⁷ Pinsker, “*Autoemancipation!*”, 2. The English translation renders this less precisely as “a common land.” Herzberg, *Zionist Idea*, 183.

ple,” and the modern, Latin-descended *Nation*, “nation.” He uses both terms for both the Jews and the Gentile nations. In Yiddish, however, Abramovitsh dispenses with the internationalism *natsye*, using only it once, and prefers the Germanic *folk* (as in *dos yidishe folk*, “the Jewish people”) or the Hebrew-Aramaic *ume*, a more erudite synonym. Moreover, for the Gentile nations, Abramovitsh very frequently uses the traditional name *umes ho-oylem* (“the nations of the world”), an appellation harking back to Jewish religious tradition, where the Gentile nations are often viewed with distrust.

Secondly, there is the way of naming national homelands. Pinsker vacillates between the terms *Vaterland*, “fatherland,” and *Heimat*, “homeland,” sometimes distinguishing between them. Thus, he writes that “the Jewish people has no fatherland (*Vaterland*) of its own, though many motherlands (*Mutterländer*).”³⁸ Elsewhere he distinguishes a coincidental “homeland” (*Heimat*), where Jews happen to live, and a “fatherland,” which would be their national property, calling for “the auto-emancipation of the Jewish people as a nation, the foundation of a colonial community belonging to the Jews, which is some day to become our inalienable home (*Heimat*), our fatherland (*Vaterland*).”³⁹ A fatherland is then a homeland which inalienably belongs to a nation; Jews have lost their ancestral fatherland, currently have many homelands, but should strive for only one new homeland, a new fatherland.

Abramovitsh, though he elsewhere follows Pinsker in acknowledging that Jews lost their historical “fatherland” (*foterland*),⁴⁰ shortens and makes less pointed the crucial passage cited above. Here is Pinsker’s passage in full:

The Jewish people has no fatherland of its own, though many motherlands; it has no rallying point, no center of gravity, no government of its own, no accredited representatives. It is everywhere a guest [*anwesend*, literally “present”], and nowhere at home.⁴¹

217

³⁸ Herzberg, *The Zionist Idea*, 183. This is the only occurrence of the word “motherland” in Pinsker’s text.

³⁹ Leon Pinsker, *Auto-Emancipation*, trans. David Simon Blondheim (New York: Maccabean, 1906), 15. In Herzberg’s edition, this passage is abridged.

⁴⁰ Abramovitsh, “A sgule,” 5.

⁴¹ Herzberg, *The Zionist Idea*, 183.

The same passage is much abridged in Abramovitsh's version; the whole first part, with all the modern political terminology, has been stricken. What is left is only this sentence: "[Jews] are scattered, dispersed, are to be found everywhere in the world, but are nowhere at home." (*Zey zenen tsezeyt, tseshpreyt, gefinen zikh umetum in der velt un zenen ergets nisht in der heym.*) Here, Abramovitsh describes Jewish diasporic existence leaving aside Pinsker's modern political terms, as if in resistance to the modern political jargon that Pinsker espouses. But in removing this modern political charge, he also makes the statement less incisive and more diffuse.

Finally, it is important to note that Abramovitsh shortened Pinsker's pamphlet by about a half, leaving out the last part of the text which contains Pinsker's practical ideas on how to organize a Jewish national movement.⁴² Pinsker suggests, similarly to Herzl in *The Jewish State* (1896), that Jews should form a representative political body (a "national congress") and an executive body (a "directorate")⁴³ to further their interests as a nation and to pursue the acquisition of a national territory. Abramovitsh follows Pinsker by briefly invoking the need for a territorial "refuge" (Pinsker: *Zufluchtsstätte*, Abramovitsh: *mokem-miklet*) for Jews in need, but neglects Pinsker's practical political plan, which is essential to the argument. In truncating Pinsker's argument, Abramovitsh's piece eventually becomes repetitive and loses focus. In leaving out the appeal to practical political self-organizing, Abramovitsh neglects the very element that, in a few decades, made Jewish nationalism, especially Zionism, an effective political ideology.

Conclusion

218

Apart from these few examples, other aspects of Pinsker's and Abramovitsh's text could be analyzed, such as their perspective on assimilation, traditional religion, Jewish national particularity, or even contemporary, international relations. Hopefully, the above examples suffice to show that the two texts are sometimes patently, but more often subtly, at variance. Abramovitsh's satirical voice, particularly when writing in his "Mendele-style," is often subtle in its ironies and sleights of hand, and this subtlety is alive in this non-fictional text as well.

⁴² Mayzel, *Dos Mendele-bukh*, 477.

⁴³ Herzberg, *Zionist Idea*, 196.

In 1913, the Zionist writer Ben-Ami described Abramovitsh's ideological positions thus:

Reb Mendele is no systematical, strictly logical thinker. He perhaps even holds no fixed and precise worldviews. [. . .] [His ideas] are notions (*aynfaln*), flashes of wit (*blitsn*), and as such they often contradict each other. And it often happens that Reb Mendele destroys one day what he declared the day before. In this, he is a true artist, wholly unconcerned with any particular fixed and determined truth.⁴⁴

As Niger suggests, this may well be an exaggeration.⁴⁵ Abramovitsh's views on a number of issues relating to the Jewish situation in his time, as discussed above, seem clear. However, he was indeed skeptical about nationalist solutions to the Jewish plight in Russia. Both Pinsker and Abramovitsh were disillusioned *maskilim*, but each was disillusioned with a different inflection, and each found a way forward in a different direction. Pinsker, from 1881 onwards, opted for a territorial, and eventually Zionist national project, which Abramovitsh never did, at least not in any partisan sense. Abramovitsh in fact described himself as “an enemy of partisanship” (*a soyne fun parteyishkeyt*),⁴⁶ just as one would expect from a literary writer, as opposed to an ideologue or activist, who needs a staunch *parteyishkeyt* to get anything done. As for the various ideologies springing up in the Jewish public space, Abramovitsh kept rethinking them by weaving them into his fiction, sometimes by rewriting earlier works. He kept abreast with the times, even if his work could never offer a forward-looking, activist push, such as was attempted in the sentimental Zionist literature he later parodied.

One can even wonder whether territorial nationalism, or Zionism in particular, might not have come to look to Abramovitsh as a way of “healing [us] by means of the Devil” (*heyln durkh dem sitre-akhre*), as he puts it in the preface to the pamphlet. To explore this further, it would be worth researching, apart from his

219

⁴⁴ Ben-Ami, “Reb mendele she-bal-pe,” in *Der Pinkes: Yorbukh far der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur un shprakh, far folklor, kritik un bibliografye*, ed. Shmuel Niger (Vilnius: Vilner farlag fun B. A. Kletskin, 1913), 173–74.

⁴⁵ Niger, *Mendele Moykher-Sforim*, 206–7.

⁴⁶ Nadezhda Abramovitsh and Aleksandra Dobrin-Abramovitsh, *Der zeyde tsvishn eygene un fremde: Zikhroynes fun mendeles tekhter* (Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1928), 27.

positions on national pride,⁴⁷ his other literary works of the 1880s and 1890s in which he reacted to the new developments in Jewish nationalism, such as the new version of *The Wishing Ring* (1888–89), the Hebrew version of *Benjamin the Third* (1896; with reference to Herzlian political Zionism). In this way, one might gain a more comprehensive picture of Abramovitsh's socio-political thinking before and after his engagement with Pinsker's pamphlet.

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220

⁴⁷ For example, in the essay "Ahava leumit ve-toldoteya," published in the Hebrew paper *Hamelits* in 1878. See Dan Miron and Anita Norich, "The Politics of Benjamin III: Intellectual Significance and its Formal Correlatives in Sh. Y. Abramovitsh's *Masoeh Benyomin Hashlishi*," in *The Field of Yiddish: Studies in Language, Folklore, and Literature; Fourth Collection*, ed. Marvin I. Herzog et al. (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1980), 105–6.

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