

# Russian Orthodox-Jewish Relations: A Literary Review

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The Canadian professor Dmitri Pospelovsky wrote of Russian-Jewish relations in the 1970s:

. . . I should express my bewilderment at the anti-Semitic feeling which exists in several contemporary Russian nationalist circles in the Soviet Union. I would have thought that when they talk about slander suffered by the Russian people, they would understand the even greater slander borne by the Jewish people with the enforced substitution of the original Jewish culture by the *Yevseksii*<sup>1</sup>. . . Even worse, if the Russian identity was destroyed by communists and *komsomol*' members of all nationalities, those who destroyed the Jewish identity were exclusively Jewish communists, that is to say, Jewish traitors, and this must have led to even greater demoralisation among the Jewish people. But amazingly, the vast majority of Russian nationalists take no account of the tragedy of the Jewish people: instead of mutual sympathy between these two persecuted peoples, unhappily we see more often mutual antipathy and distrust.<sup>2</sup>

Russian and Soviet literature including *samizdat* clarifies the process by which this antipathy and mistrust grew. These feelings were clearly rooted in socio-political and ideological factors (the traditional clash between the Westernisers and Slavophiles, 'populists' and 'liberals' etc.); also relevant were the conflicts of national and religious mentalities, burdened as they are with centuries-old traditions of enmity between Christians and Jews.

<sup>1</sup> *Yevseksii* — a shortened form of *Yevreiskikh seksii Rossiiskoi kommunisticheskoi rabochei partii bol'shevikov* (the Jewish Section of the All Union Russian Communist Party — Bolsheviks). These organisations existed in the 1920s to destroy national and religious Jewish traditions and to instil communist ideology into Jewish circles in the USSR.

<sup>2</sup> Dmitri Pospelovsky, 'Russkii natsionalizm, marksizm-leninizm i sud'by Rossii' *Grani*, No. 111-12, p. 423.

*The Russian Nationalist Movement*

In the mid-seventies the Brezhnev government, faced with a strengthening movement among Jews to emigrate, decided for propaganda purposes to make use of fictional literature, which is emotionally far stronger than the journalistic anti-Zionist propaganda they had been using before. Censorial restrictions on reference to the Jewish problem in the USSR were lifted, and various social groups active in the country at the time began to use the new opportunities to influence the general situation through literature, as is traditional in Russia. Such groups were first and foremost adherents of Russian nationalism.

The Russian nationalist movement had revived in the 1960s after a long period of lethargy (one example of this was the growth of VSKhSON in Leningrad).<sup>3</sup> From the very beginning interest among Russians in their national roots was linked to the revival of interest in their national religion — Orthodoxy. But this process was complicated by the need to dissociate it from the people who for several decades had been the cultural shadow of Russians — from Russian Jews.

The reason for such a dissociation has been the subject of much research, which cannot be covered by this article. But its necessity immediately put nationalist-thinking circles in a difficult relationship with Christianity whose values are deeply rooted in Judaism. And so even at the dawn of the Russian nationalist movement there appeared followers of paganism as the original national religion (as opposed to Christianity which had been borrowed from Byzantium).

*Valentin Pikul'*

This development is reflected in, for example, the works of one of the most popular Soviet historical novelists, a member of the 'Russian nationalist movement' — Valentin Pikul'.<sup>4</sup> In his best known novel of the seventies *U poslednei cherty* (*At the Final Rubicon*)<sup>5</sup> the fall of the Romanov dynasty is depicted as the result of the breakdown of the ruling elite of the Russian Empire; the church is governed by 'the grandson of a Shvabian rabbi', Oberprocurator Sabler; the army is

<sup>3</sup> VSKhSON — acronym of the All-Russia Social-Christian Society for the Freedom of the People. This was one of the most powerful Russian underground organisations of the 1960s, active in Leningrad and destroyed by the KGB. Its leader was Igor' Ogurtsov.

<sup>4</sup> According to the professor of Russian literature at Jerusalem University, I. Serman, in the seventies Valentin Pikul' was the most popular fiction writer in the USSR out of the ranks of the so-called authors of 'pulp fiction'.

<sup>5</sup> *U poslednei cherty*, *Nash sovremennik*, 1979, Nos. 4-7.

commanded by the war minister Sukhomlinov, married to a 'a new Esfira'; economics is controlled by minister of finance, Witte, 'who got Russia entangled with loan-sharks' and is a friend of Rothschild and Mendelssohn (in those days known as the Berlin Banker); court favourite Rasputin ruled the tsar and tsaritsa, serving as a tool for a group of Jews 'on the make', which included the evil Manus 'a powerful German spy'. It is not surprising that the Empire, having fallen into the hands of proteges of the Jewish secret service, fell like an overripe fruit into the clutches of the powers of darkness.

Two distinctive marks are contained in this novel: firstly, it is not a crudely anti-Semitic publication, which one may think from the examples cited above. The author did not denounce Jews generally, but only those who were connected with the imperial ruling circles (for example, Brodsky the sugar-manufacturer, who helped Sukhomlinov to murder his first wife; Manasevich-Manuilov the convert to Christianity; Simanovich, owner of a gambling house, and others). This 'period piece' was clearly packed with allusions to 'Brezhnev's Russia', whose leaders had lost their way in 'diamond speculation' and were linked with the 'south Russian shady dealers'. (Indeed, the novel came under fire from the ideological authorities.) Secondly, it was clearly anti-Orthodox: representatives of the church hierarchy are almost more repellent than the Jews; they are liars, rogues, homosexuals ('a synod of Sablerite pederasts'): it is the priests who through cunning and deceit promote Rasputin. The only character among the priests who is treated with any sympathy by the author is the well-known member of the 'Black Hundreds', Hieromonk Iliodor. He is called 'a man of extraordinary complexity', perhaps because he turned away from Christianity and started to preach 'the genuine pagan faith'.

The trend exemplified in Pikul's work continued to develop although Pikul himself eventually moved away from this tendency. Among his successors we see the authors of the popular series of historical biographies *Zhizn' zamechatelnykh lyudei* (*The Lives of Outstanding People*) who used the following device: one or other infamous and repulsive historical character was linked, usually falsely, to Jewry; for example the False Dmitri II in Ruslan Skrynnikov's book *Minin i Pozharsky*, Hertzog Byron in Apollon Kusmin's book *Tatishchev*, Kankrin, Abasa and Greig, the finance ministers of tsarist Russia in Yuri Selesnev's book *Dostoyevsky*. The general historical concept of authors of this kind is like this: from the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 19th the empire was gradually being eroded by a bourgeois plague, sometimes termed a plague of 'high-living', linked to international Jewish finance. Even Nicholas I trembled before the Parisian Rothschild (Selesnev's

*Dostoyevsky*), and by the time of Aleksander II representatives of this perfidious nation had begun 'to boil the peasants down in the factory pot', and this they achieved under Stalin (see Mikhail Lobanov's *Ostrovsky*). Such an 'anti-bourgeois' tendency meant that October 1917 could be portrayed as a national uprising against international decadence: against rich businessmen who protected tsarism, and bourgeois liberals. Without denying the sincerity of the anti-Semitic feeling in the hearts of the Russists, as this section of society was called, we can suppose that some of the Russists hoped to make anti-Semitism an integral part of the new ideology of the ruling *nomenklatura*.

Amongst other similar publications it is worth noting the novels published in the major 'Russist' journal *Nash sovremennik*; for example the novel by Yuri Sergeev *Stanovoy khrebet*, 1986 (*Backbone*) where he praises

the 'true creed of the Rus' people in many gods, the glorious beauty of the religion by which they defiled and murdered. . . we were brought a slaves' religion. . . Nikonian icons<sup>6</sup> were foisted on us with strange, foreign faces, jeering and glorying in biblical murderousness, drunkenness, and lust, with a bestial greed for the submission of our land.<sup>7</sup>

Or the story by Valeri Kolykhalov *Gorislava* (1988), where the heroine, a Siberian peasant, proudly calls herself and her husband 'the last pagans', and accompanied by emotional exclamations from the author she prays 'to the beloved sun'.

### *The Russian Party*

Against this group's beliefs stands the so-called 'Russian Party' who are sometimes called 'nationalist-liberals' or Renaissance Russians. Two figures stand out from this group: the rapidly developing poet and prose writer Leonid Borodin, and the public figure, who unexpectedly launched himself into prose-writing, Feliks Svetov. Both authors have been published abroad, although they live in Russia and in the early eighties were political prisoners.

<sup>6</sup> Among the religious reforms introduced into the Orthodox Church in 18th-century Russia by Patriarch Nikon, old icons were replaced by new ones showing the saints' fingers in accordance with the new Nikonian laws, i.e. with three fingers together and not two. According to the reform the sign of the cross was to be made with three fingers, not two.

<sup>7</sup> Yuri Sergeev, 'Stanovoy khrebet', *Nash sovremennik*, 1986, No. 5, p. 75.

### Leonid Borodin

The Jewish character in the story by Leonid Borodin *Pravila igri*, (*The Rules of the Game*) printed in 1986 in the West German magazine *Grani* is a man completely immersed in Russian cultural circles. Nothing connects him with Judaism and even his name and patronymic are Russian — Valeri Osinsky. At the beginning of the story, which takes place in a Mordovian labour camp for political prisoners, Osinsky's friend Plotnikov, a fellow prisoner, arouses the nationalist feelings of Osinsky, while trying to convince him that protest tactics are wrong, 'Somehow all that isn't quite Russian,' says Plotnikov — completely forgetting that he is talking to a Jew. And he receives the unexpected reply 'Then what is it? Jewish, I suppose?' Other friends accuse Plotnikov of anti-Semitism and so conflict begins in the story.

By comparing different characters' views, Borodin tries to explain the social and spiritual roots of the Russian-Jewish conflict. The character of one of the political prisoners, the dissident Moiseyev, almost personifies the Russian nationalist tradition. According to Moiseyev, to sacrifice oneself by being sent to the GULag, is possible in the name of the one value higher than that of the individual — in the name of one's people. His leader, the Jew Osinsky, is sacrificing himself in the name of alien, Russian concerns, and this makes Moiseyev feel an almost mystical suspicion of Jewish schemes. The paradox of the situation lies in the fact that Osinsky as well as Moiseyev is blinkered by his world-views, and it is Osinsky, who is the more blinkered of the two; Osinsky — 'the young Marxist' 'the Marxist with a human face' — whose socialist convictions in themselves did not demand the denial of his own people. As Nakhman Syrkin, one of the founders of the Jewish socialist movement noted, only in Jewish circles did the unnatural tendency emerge of refusal to defend one's own people and allegiance to the laws of an alien nation.<sup>8</sup> This Jewish denial of natural national allegiance, the conscious aspiration to assimilation into the roots of the surrounding environment, as Borodin has so sensitively shown, is avenged on its proponents from an unexpected quarter. The denial of natural solidarity on a national basis paradoxically creates a special area of solidarity amongst Jews based on a perpetual and almost fanatical suspicion of anti-Semitism, and of rejection by one's comrades. The paradox, according to Borodin, is that the Jews turn out to be right: several of their comrades, like Moiseyev, seeing on one hand such Jewish solidarity, and on the other, the simultaneous denial by Jews of their own national interest, and their preoccupation with

<sup>8</sup>For a more detailed analysis of this see Sh. Avineri *Osnovniye napravleniya yevreiskoy politicheskoy mysli* Jerusalem, 1985.

exclusively alien problems, begin to suspect their Jewish friends of a kind of 'double game', of secrets, which no-one can understand, and therefore of villainous schemes. As a result they are indeed turning into genuine anti-Semites themselves and totally justify the hyper-sensitivity of people like Osinsky. And so the vicious circle of mutual suspicion and mistrust is complete.

The author's positive hero, Plotnikov, rejects the general anti-Jewish suspicions of Moiseyev, and the similar (in his eyes) 'group defence' of Jews by another character in the story, the writer Ventsovich. He measures his companions, against not national, but individual criteria; he looks into their souls and their consciences 'Of them, not of them, Jew-lovers and Jew-haters, Russian, and not Russian, God! If only I could understand' he says at the end of the story.<sup>9</sup>

Although religious questions are not touched on directly in the story (its action takes place before the start of the religious renewal in Russia) the evolution of Plotnikov in this direction is depicted to the reader as unescapable.

### *Vasili Belov*

Yet another trait, giving rise to Russian-Jewish conflict in the ranks of the 'Russian Party', can be seen in the latest novel of the well-known writer Vasili Belov *Vse vpered!* (*The Best is Yet to Come*) printed in 1986 in *Nash sovremennik*. As in all countries of the world, in Russia too a process of Europeanisation is going on, i.e. the assimilation by society of those norms of civilisation which were first devised in the Netherlands and England and which spread from there throughout Europe and then to the remaining countries of the world. The process of assimilation of these 'western values' as they are called, began in local civilisations everywhere, first in France and Germany, and was a painful process. It involved not only gains but also losses for national groups: European customs were often strongly rejected, (one need remember only the German romantics of the 19th century). This process in Russia engendered the conflict between Westernisers and Slavophiles, liberals and reactionaries ('reaction' was the response of those of a nationalist mentality to the invasion of western ideas). These days the process engenders an analogous reaction: the popular authors, the *derevenshchiki* (village writers) belong to the new romantics. Hence Astaf'yev's hatred of America in *Pechalny detektive* (*The Sad Detective*), and Soloukhin's hatred of Poland in

<sup>9</sup>Leonid Borodin, 'Pravila igri' *Grani*, 1986, No. 140 p. 74.

*Kameshki na ladoni (Pebbles in the Palm)*, and the unfavourable reaction against Jews in Belov's *Vse vpered!*. It is worth quoting a comment by the Jewish professor, physicist and commentator on public affairs, Aleksander Voronel', that 'the Jewish mentality is that of the usual Westerner — a Shtolts, not an Oblomov' and 'if the Jew is not like this, then he should explain why he is not like a Jew'.<sup>10</sup> On the strength of this the natural conflict arises between Jews and 'Russist writers', as a particular instance of the historical conflict between Russian Slavophiles and Westernisers. It is no accident that the most important negative character in Belov's novel, the engineer Brish, is a Jew who embodies dark western origins, and the site of whose dubious intrigues is the traditional place for 'rothschildian schemes' — Paris!

I should point out that the writers in this circle clearly refrained from anti-western and anti-Semitic publications as long as the *gosudarstvenniki* ('national-Bolsheviks') wrote such propaganda in Soviet prose, widely encouraged by the authorities. They obviously did not want to play into the hands of the politics of Brezhnev and his successors. But in the era of *glasnost*' and *perestroika*, when the situation has changed, the village writers have removed their self-imposed limitation and have produced unfashionable anti-western, and in the same vein anti-Jewish, works.

### *Feliks Svetov*

The broad outline of Russian-Jewish relations against the background of the growing religious revival in Russia is covered in the lengthy novel by Feliks Svetov *Otverzi mi dveri (Open the Doors Unto Me)*, written in the early seventies and published in Paris by the YMCA press in 1978. This genuine encyclopaedia of national figures, situations and conflicts was written by an author who found himself in a uniquely favourable position: being a Jew himself, well-received in a wide variety of Jewish circles in Moscow — from the remains of the old religious community to the modern Zionist salons — he became a Christian and because of that experienced a reaction to his conversion from many Russian people and other sections of the population. Unfortunately the artistic expression of this turned out to be much weaker than the circumstances on which the author based his book, and so the novel, like other works by Feliks Svetov, did not catch the attention of society, and indeed hardly aroused any comment at all. But the observations contained in it are truly valuable for the historian and sociologist.

<sup>10</sup> Aleksander Voronel', 'The fear for Jewish concerns', Tel-Aviv, 1981, p. 80.

The main hero is the literary critic Gol'tsev, a good, honest, conscientious Jew, completely deprived of his Jewish national heritage, and to a large extent deprived of his Russian heritage i.e. as a Soviet citizen, he was as deprived of true Russian history as any other Russian. In his declining years his conscience is awakened and he turns to faith, becoming Orthodox. An unusual aspect of the baptism of a Jew or any other proselyte these days is that to join a persecuted church not only does not bring any gains, but, on the contrary, threatens the proselyte with persecution. (Gol'tsev was thrown out of his job as a literary editor through the joint efforts of the Russian boss and his Jewish deputy.) Gol'tsev's baptism had not been intended to separate him from his own people, and once baptised he felt himself to be a Jew, and told other people so, although his professed faith was Orthodox. But the situation for a Russian Orthodox Jew living in Moscow is shown in the book to be difficult and ambiguous.

As someone deprived of his historical heritage and knowledge, he does not anticipate the difficulties which are encountered by a Jew who has become Orthodox: he does not consider the long-standing anti-Christian tradition of Judaism, nor the equally long-standing tradition of anti-Semitism among Christians. Moreover, he is completely without a true understanding of church ritual — as a man with a background of Russian culture, he imagined faith only in its cultural expression, without considering church devotion and ritual. As a result his behaviour irritates both Jews and Russian Orthodox in its tactlessness. (For example, at the funeral of his beloved uncle at a Jewish cemetery, he is deeply moved and solemnly makes the sign of the cross over the dead body. This is something no true Orthodox Christian does to the body of someone who belonged to another faith.) At a religious seminar in Leningrad in the early eighties a paper by B. Ivanov was read out which showed how typical the portrait drawn by Svetov was. (The report was first published in the Leningrad *samizdat* journal *Chasi*.)<sup>11</sup> Ivanov noted the following typical traits in what he terms 'libertarian Christians' (that is, Christians who have come to faith of their own accord without a background of Christianity in their families or countries): 1. disbelief in individual immortality; 2. a two-sided ethic and a two-sided understanding of the world, which can draw Christians of this kind to the Manichean heresy; 3. disbelief in the historical authority of the church; belief in the authority of the church is understood by them to be adopted not in a spirit of sacrament, but as the individual decision of each parishioner; 4. doubt in the need for confession and repentance. Gol'tsev possesses literally all of these characteristics, and especially the tendency, remarked on by Ivanov, to comment on everything that

<sup>11</sup> I quote from the text of a paper published in *Grani* No. 113, pp 232-43.

the traditional Christian considers sacred, in an atmosphere of free speech. For example, as a literary person, he creates his own variation on the story of Saint Paul 'the Jew from Tarsus', where he clearly interprets it as a model analogous with his own fate. According to his version, Saint Paul was condemned to execution with the connivance of the other Christian apostles — a version which to a true Christian is an absolute blasphemy — yet the idea that this could be so never even enters Goltsev's head.

The arrival of proselytes is always difficult for any church, but when it happens in a period of maturity and strength in the church, she can comparatively easily admit the new comers into the body of believers. But when the church has been weakened by persecution and humiliation, as the Russian Orthodox Church has in recent times, it is another matter. She has to solve problems literally while on the move, problems which would be difficult even in happier times. Svetov's hero, Gol'tsev, truly cannot see that he is a burden for his beloved church, and a burden for his passionately beloved Russia.

His situation is truly tragic. Jews maliciously turn him away. According to Svetov, Jewish emigration from Russia was in no way engendered by true growth in the national consciousness of the vast majority of the Muscovite Jewish intelligentsia; the emigrants were completely Russian in their culture, mentality, and customs considering as their own both Russian history and Russian society. They fled from Russia because in a society now officially termed 'the society of stagnation' or even 'pre-crisis society', they clearly scented disaster, or at least decay. A unique opportunity had appeared for them to use their national origins to desert a sinking ship. The attitude of characters in the novel towards emigration from the USSR depends wholly on their view of life and not their national origins: having abandoned the hero Gol'tsev the priest's daughter, a sympathetic character and Russian patriot, leaves for the States with her Jewish husband, while on the other hand, the Jewess, a negative figure, stays in Russia, because there she has a 'useful' Russian husband. The author shows that Jews are linked with Russia by their spiritual and cultural substance, and so it is not easy for them to break with their homeland despite having been allotted the role of 'outcast'. And so they rage against Russia with an artificial zeal, the more easily to break away from her and leave. According to Svetov, Jewish hatred of Russia does not spring from their different nationality, but from their links with Russia, their closeness to her. Such behaviour has been affected in no small way by the complete ignorance of the national question. For the first time in their lives they come up against the arguments of national ideologues such as Zhabotinsky. They are a long way away from the classical liberal atmosphere which gave rise to

these arguments, and can use the thoughts of the national leader, imitating the 'national Bolsheviks' (or the more recent organisation *Pamyat'*), only in the reverse, i.e. anti-Russian, sense. They are aggressive, but, according to the observations of Svetov, this aggressive energy has resulted, first and foremost, from the amorality of the changes that have taken place in those who have chosen the USA and not Israel as their final destination. For according to the spiritual tradition of today's Russia, it is unworthy of an honest man to put his own fate, his own well-being, in first place. (Here lies the main difference between the Soviet mentality and that of the West.) People who have chosen to go to the USA are consciously governed by the desire to improve their individual situation and so from the point of view of the moral position they adopt, are committing an amoral act by leaving Russia. From this comes the emphasis on the teaching of hatred towards Russia generally and towards Lev Gol'tsev, a Jew who constantly reminds Jews that one should not desert one's motherland in times of trouble, and that such a desertion would be dishonourable. The Jews feel a greater hatred towards him than towards any one else, even Russians — and at the end of the novel the hero is cruelly murdered by one of the Jews who is emigrating.

But Gol'tsev is unhappy and at any rate unsuccessful in his other, Christian, identity as well. In the Russian society of today the religious, Orthodox revival is linked to a national return to Russian roots. Therefore, a professor and philosopher, having made friends with Gol'tsev as a Jew, when he found out that Gol'tsev had been baptised, began systematically and maliciously to insult him, to such an extent that the convert to Christianity murdered this anti-Semite at his home. According to the philosopher, Orthodoxy is the only sacred, undefiled thing the Russian people owns, and an invasion of this holy of holies by those of another faith leaves the original people with no hope.

The professor-philosopher, it is true, is portrayed as a coarse and negative character, but even the most positive of the Orthodox characters, Father Kirill, the priest who baptised Gol'tsev, fundamentally shares the professor's views. He does not insult Lev Gol'tsev, insofar as he believes in his good intentions, but he does consider that religion in the world today is first and foremost a means by which to serve one's people, and therefore he advises his spiritual son and convert to Orthodoxy. . . to go to Israel, so that, gun in hand, he can defend his people and his country. Gol'tsev proudly replies that he wishes to serve Russia, not understanding that his beloved country has come to a tragic time in her life, described by Tolstoy in *War and Peace (Voina i mir)*: 'When Russia was healthy, a foreigner could serve her and be an excellent minister; but as soon as she falls into

danger, she needs her own, native people.' This doubtless painful situation in the life of a country, of instinctive mistrust of even the best and most well-meaning of people, who are fellow countrymen of a different racial origin, is depicted by Feliks Svetov in his other tale *Khorosho pogulyali! (A Nice Walk!)*. Here the concern felt by baptised Jews for Russians, their brothers in faith, touching in its naivety, is met with suspicious mistrust, analogous with the mistrust of Moiseyev in Borodin's story, and considered by the Russians an unnecessary and burdensome inconvenience.

### Conclusion

Of course in this short survey, we have touched on only a few selected works concerned with our theme; it is outside the boundaries of this work to consider the outstanding plays by Fridrikh Goenshtein *Spory o Dostoyevskom (Arguments about Dostoyevsky)* and Venedikt Yerofeyev *Val'purgieva Noch (Walpurgis Night)*, the novels of the best-known fiction-writers, such as Yulian Semenov and Anatoli Rybakov, the historical prose-writing of Ivan Shamyakin and Grigori Kanovich and others. In conclusion, one may say that the national-religious revival in Russia has brought about a difficult stage in Russian-Jewish relations. The hypocritical anti-Semitism of the party apparatus has now begun to change into an openly declared histriosophic anti-Semitism, more like the traditional forms of the European hatred of Jews. The Jewish public (*Yevreiskaya ulitsa*) has responded on its part with an open and just as unpleasant hatred of Russians. But on the other hand the open declaration of national-religious myths and stereotypes has brought about a new situation; by bringing clarity to the system of national pretensions in the discussion about Jewish-Russian relations, it allows these relations to be better discussed and understood, and in the end contributes not only to a mutual understanding in the real, and not mythical world, but also to a greater mutual tolerance. The presence in the modern world of a safety-valve like Israel may mean that the outcome of these relations will be worthy of civilised nations, who have considerably enriched each other's lives in the course of their historical contact.

*Translated from Russian by Helen Bell*