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Moving man of imagination

He lived in 19th-century Eastern Europe, and his dreams were not paved with gold, but with a desire for spiritual enlightenment.

By Ido Bassok

"Na Vanad" ("Wanderer") by Yekheskl Kotik, annotated and translated into Hebrew by David Assaf, Beit Scholem Aleichem and Tel Aviv University

"Wanderer" is the second and last volume of the memoirs of Yekheskl Kotik (the third seems to have been lost). Kotik, a dreamer, settled in Warsaw and opened a "Litvak" tavern. Those who knew him describe him as a naif, an idealist and a social reformer. He is also the author of one of the first, and most important, memoirs in the Yiddish language, with the possible exception of Gluckel of Hamlin, who preceded him by 200 years.

The first volume, "Mayne Zikhronos" ("My Reminiscences"), was already highly acclaimed, more so than the second volume, when it came out in 1912. In 1999, the book was translated into Hebrew by David Assaf, who added an introduction and notes. (The English translation, published by Wayne State University Press, is called "Journey to a 19th Century Shtetl.") Assaf, an expert in East European Jewry, has a special interest in historical-biographical writing about personalities who have strayed from the norm in the Hasidic world - including Rabbi Yisrael of Rozin and other characters plagued by doubts and misgivings in the Chabad and Belz dynasties.

Yekheskl Kotik (1847-1921) was born in the little rural town of Kamenetz-Litovsk in Polesia, then part of the Pale of Settlement to which Jews were restricted under the czar. For the modern reader, it may be hard to grasp the state of flux everything was in at that time - from culture, technology and education to national and legal issues. Kotik's father was married off at the age of 14. At the time, even 8-year-olds were rushed into panicked unions in fear that the czar, Nicholas I, would impose restrictions on marital age in the Jewish community.

Kotik himself experienced the horror of the strict heder educational system, which he fiercely criticized along with the attitude toward children in general. He personally observed the spread of Hasidism into bastions of Litvak culture as his own father "converted" from misnaged to hasid. The reforms introduced by Alexander I began in his youth: the abolishment of serfdom, the toning down of discrimination against the Jews, advances in infrastructure (trains and roads) followed by a surge of industrial development, the suppression of the Polish uprising in 1863, and the growing Russification of the Jews. Kotik spent the latter part of his life in Warsaw, Poland - a country that strove, at least at first, to establish a democratic government and a Western-style educational system of the most progressive kind.

If even the plainest testimony to these processes is intriguing to historians and laymen, how much more so when the author is involved and is a passionate believer in the cause! Kotik's writing, with all its clumsiness and tendency toward digression and rambling, pulls the veil off an unfamiliar world and attacks the hypocrisy, coarseness and depravity in the Jewish and non-Jewish environment that Kotik knew from close quarters.

City and country

Assaf's introduction to this volume is shorter than for the previous volume. There he wrote at length about the historical and geographical background of Kotik's world, the family and town that the author comes from, his uniqueness as a storyteller and a tireless social activist, and the response to his books in Yiddish. Because the genre shifts from memoir to autobiography, placing the narrator in the center, Assaf devotes himself here to the symbolism of the literary framework (which begins with the grandfather's second marriage and the ensuing breakdown of the family, and ends with the death of the father and grandfather, followed by the shattering of illusions in the pogroms of 1881). Assaf portrays Kotik as a young man searching for self-fulfillment, trying without success to realize his childhood dream of acquiring an education, learning a "modern" profession and adopting a lifestyle that fits in with his ideals as an enlightened Jew.

The reader might get the impression that Kotik is mainly a "small-town" Jew, who spends most of his time out in the sticks, in places like the Makrovzi estate and the village of Kushelyeve. One might think that even when he lived in the big city (Warsaw, Kiev, Kharkov, Moscow) he yearned for the countryside, epitomized by his revered grandfather, the Jewish "squire." But Kotik is actually a city man: He travels to Bialystock to get some real learning under his belt, only to leave in the wake of pressure from his father and distress signals from his wife. He goes to Warsaw, but again he is stymied by lack of money

and professional training. Even his move to Makrovzi is motivated by its proximity to Grodno. He is a kind of "Menachem Mendel" character out of the tales of Scholem Aleichem - a man of imagination, whose dreams are not paved with gold, but with a desire for spiritual enlightenment and broader horizons. There are times when he is happy with his material success, but he soon begins to miss what lies beyond the physical world and the pleasures of the moment. That is his real reason for moving from place to place.

An even more important aspect of Kotik's psyche discussed by Assaf is what he calls his "emotional handicap," which is expressed in indifference and alienation from his family. "Kotik takes almost no interest in his wife and children, and certainly not in their emotional and spiritual world," writes Assaf. "The role of his wife in his life and what he remembers about it is marginal."

On this point, I beg to differ. First of all, spousal love and love between parents and children in the sense that we speak of it today is a modern invention. Among traditional Jews of the type exemplified by Kotik, this kind of relationship was not at all common. Secondly, Kotik emerges from the text not as an emotional cripple, but as a man of extraordinary sensitivity toward the suffering of others, including his wife. He gives up his great dream of breaking into the enlightened world because of his wife's entreaties and his concern that his family would not feel comfortable there.

Kotik is sensitive to the plight of women in general: He is openly critical of the rich Jews who are so zealous in their observance of the Sabbath that they toss the wares of Jewish women, hoping to make another few pennies before sundown, into the gutter. Notwithstanding the impression created in the introduction, Kotik's portraits of women are not dichotomous depictions of powerful monsters versus vulnerable weaklings. His women run the gamut from sly and manipulative to splendid, multi-talented homemakers.

Translation problems

In a review of the first volume of Kotik's memoirs, I praised Assaf for the clarity of his translation, fine prose style and meticulous annotation. In this volume, he has done a beautiful job once again, although after reading the text carefully, I have a few quibbles. Assaf usually comes up with idioms that manage to capture the quaintness of the Yiddish, and he is not afraid of using slang here and there. In an effort to preserve the authenticity of the text, however, he sometimes leaves certain words untranslated. One example is "yishuvniks." That is all very well for readers who are familiar with the world of East European Jewry. But what about those who are not? In the transition from Yiddish to Hebrew, many translators - not just Assaf - are tempted to leave the borrowed Hebrew words untouched. The trouble is that these words

often mean something different in modern Hebrew. Here and there, the translation is overly literal. As in the first volume, Assaf has done a painstaking job of annotating the text. This is no mean feat, considering how much historical, literary and geographical esoterica he has gathered from a whole slew of arcane sources.

In a few instances, though, his thinking surprised me. In the second chapter of this volume, Kotik describes in great, possibly satiric, detail how a Hasidic rebbe, Rabbi Avraham of Slonim, paid a visit to his town when he was 10. Kotik writes that a minyan of followers went into the bathhouse with him. "They didn't bathe. All they did was gawk at the rebbe and his naked body ... like small children looking at a wonderful giant toy." In his commentary, Assaf points out that a minyan - a prayer quorum of 10 men - is not needed for immersion in a mikveh (ritual bath). Moreover, "this account of the rebbe in the mikveh is an unlikely story. Hasidim never immerse themselves or bathe with their rebbe, and certainly would not ogle a naked body." Assaf apparently assumes that if Hasidim are portrayed as not behaving according to the norms for pious Jews, the portrayal is warped or unreliable.

But the opposite is true: Kotik discloses behaviors that may not be normative in the Hasidic community, but fit in with what we know about the erotic or semi-erotic attraction these people have for their rebbe, and their compulsive need for male company and close physical contact. Earlier on, Kotik describes his father's attitude toward the throngs of Hasids surrounding the rebbe, to whom the father makes a pilgrimage but ends up losing 700 rubles: "My father ... adored the clamor of pious Jews. He loved their joyfulness, their hustle and bustle, even their smell." To this, Assaf appends a comment: "Probably a reference to the typical odor of Jewish cooking."

Why make such an assumption? Clearly, the father is nostalgic for the smell of the Hasidim, for the physical intimacy, with its homosexual overtones, that exists among the men crowding into the rebbe's court. Observations of this kind are liable to ruin the most important thing we derive from reading memoirs: the authentic touch and the familiarity with the personal and the idiosyncratic, which is rarely found in history books and cannot be gleaned from legal and religious texts.

What was Kotik? A source of pride to the Jewish community for his contribution to "our new folk literature in Yiddish," as Scholem Aleichem put it, or a "teller of silly tales," to quote Shmuel Yitzhak Yatzkan, the legendary editor of the Yiddish paper Haynt?

Today, as we peer through the yellowed curtain of time into a world that no longer exists, Kotik's admirers seem to have been right. There is a certain

roughness and simplicity - or pseudo simplicity - in his writing that does wonders for bringing this hidden world alive. Kotik's gift, I think, lies in how he does away with the compartmentalization accentuated in the history books, which is often misleading. The relationship between Jews and gentiles in the rural sector is a good example. The close ties between Kotik's grandfather and the squires, or between the squire's wife and the young Jew who manages the estate, completely reshuffles our picture of the unbreachable barrier between the Jews and gentiles of Eastern Europe. The same goes for the "Lithuanians" of Warsaw: In Kotik's stories we find enlightened Jews dressed in ultra-Orthodox garb and heretics happily embracing Judaism.

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