

Hybrid Identities in Boris Khersonskii's Poetry

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In a recent post on *facebook* from the 26th of March 2021 Boris Khersonskii, a Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking poet, based in Odesa, publishes a poem, in which he reflects on his multiple identities and an (imagined) hostile reaction to them from different ethnic groups or communities:

Я розмовляю російською с жінкою та наодинці
думаю теж російською – вбивайте мене, українці!
Я вчу українську, корпею над словарями.
Убейте меня, кто рядится русскими богатырями!
Я вихрестився колись – то ж гонить мене юдеї!
Но остался евреем в глубине христианской идеи.
А посему, православные, ни капли доверия гаду!
Пусть ад крошечный он получает в награду. [...]
Я живу в Одесі. Убийте мене, одесити.¹

[In Ukrainian] I speak in Russian with my wife and myself,²
I think also Russian – so kill me, Ukrainians!
I learn Ukrainian, [in Russian] grub through the dictionaries.
Kill me all, who disguise yourself as Russian warriors!
[In Ukrainian] Once I converted to Christianity, so expel me, Jews!
But I remained a Jew in the deepness of the Christian thought.
That's why, Orthodox Christians, don't believe this creep a word!
He should become the hell as his reward! [...]
I live in Odesa. Kill me, Odesa natives!

In this poem the lyrical hero recounts core components of his hybrid identity. This identity fits to the life circumstances of Khersonskii himself: he is an originally Russian-speaking man of Jewish origin, who converted to Christian Orthodox religion and became gradually more Ukrainian-speaking and -writing after 2014. Also, a local attribution as *odessit* / *odesyt* – 'Odesa native' is problematized in the same way as other ascriptions.

The goal of this paper is to analyse different identities, presented in the poetry by Khersonskii. It poses a question, how the concept of Jewishness and its gradual loss through generations of a fictive – but very life-like – Jewish family is represented in Khersonskii's first famous cycle of poems "Family Archive" and how other components of the hybrid identity as the Orthodox religion, devotion to the Russian language and cultural heritage as well as a pro-Ukrainian political orientation and a growing usage of the Ukrainian language are revealed both in this book of poetry and his later texts.

¹ Khersonskii, Facebook post, March 26, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/borkhers/posts/4183309505037177>, accessed April 17, 2021.

² Interlinear translations, if not otherwise stated, are provided by me – M.D.

Jewishness and its partial loss in “Family Archive”³

In his poetic cycle “Family Archive” (*Semeynyi arkhiv*),⁴ written in Russian, Boris Khersonskii describes fortunes of a large Jewish family throughout the twentieth century. His book encompasses a large timescale (1908–1997) and space (from Siberia to Brooklyn, but mostly the Eastern Europe) and has therefore an epic quality – it has been also named also a “long poem” (Kukulin 2010: 609), “epic cycle” (ibid: 610) or even a “verse novel” (Shtypel’ 2006: 5).⁵ This book was shortlisted to a prestigious Andrey-Bely-Award and was translated in many languages including by now English, German, Ukrainian, Czech and Dutch languages.

Poetics of “Family Archive”

“Family Archive” consists of 48 poems, most of them named by place and time (e.g., “Odessa, July, 1954”) or period of time (e.g. “Kremenets: July, 1914; Vilna: August, 1939”) and describing situations, stories or dialogs, which could possibly happen at that time in that place. Some poems include other or additional titles as *molitva* (‘a prayer’), *auksion iudaiki* (‘auction of Judaica’), *snovidenie* (‘a dream’), *izrecheniia* (‘sayings’ or ‘dicta’); a notably big number of poems include ekphrastic elements, describing photographs or postcards. Stephanie Sandler (2015: 268) points out the role of this different elements: “The poet anchors the stories in objects (photographs, postcards, and auction lots of Judaica), and he gives these objects a strange unconscious life through his use of dreams and fantasies.”

Most of the protagonists of the book are presented as typical Jews. One of the characters, Iakov, says about his father:

Он был такой еврей,
что все остальные евреи
(особенно в профиль)
напоминают его (SA:⁶ 50)

He was such a Jew,
that all the other Jews
(especially in profile)
remind of him.

They have also typical Jewish fortunes – they face extermination in the Second World War, suffer from Antisemitism in the Stalin’s time or even convert to Orthodoxy and are sent to Siberia in the thirties as well as emigrate to the USA in the nineties.

The book is narrated from a retrospective point of view: the narrator knows, what awaits his characters. In the following example, the first poem of the cycle, he describes two high school

³ The present article is partly based on my book about Khersonskii’s “Family archive” and the problem of fiction and credibility, written in German (Donska 2020).

⁴ This book was first printed in Odesa 2003 and it gained a significant popularity after having been published by NLO in Moscow 2006.

⁵ Khersonskii himself names the genre of these poems as “biographical lyric poetry”. This interesting mix of narrative and lyrical features in “Family Archive” was discussed by Rodnianskaia 2007, Hodgson 2013 and Donska 2020.

⁶ Here and further the abbreviation SA is used for the edition Khersonskii 2006.

girls in Kremenets in 1910, who go to the mountain in the middle of the city and cast stones into the well on this mountain:

Одну, что постарше, зовут Нехама (потом – Надежда),
вторую зовут Рахиль (позднее – Раиса).
Рахили четырнадцать лет, впереди еще
семьдесят шесть (Нехама умрет в тридцатых),
впрочем, сегодня и это также в минувшем. (SA: 12)

The elder is named Nekhama (later called Nadezda);
the second is Rachel (who will be known as Raisa).
Rachel, fourteen, still has seventy-six years
before her (Nekhama will die in the thirties);
however, today, all this is history.⁷

The narrator does not unveil much of his own life, but his position is a position of a descendant, who tries to restore and imagine fates of his ancestors, using photographs, documents and objects.

Fact and Fiction, or Khersonskii and Aristoteles

This plausible position of a narrator, who browses a family archive and tells different stories, evoked by photographs or postcards, a collage of pictures, presented on the frontispiece of the book, and the credibility of the narrated stories might be crucial factors for a reaction of some critics, who defined the book as “poetry non-fiction” (Galina 2007: 211) or pointed out its “veracity” (Shtypel’ 2006). At the same time Khersonskii insists in numerous interviews, that he mixed real and fictive stories or even projected stories from his own life to the life of his ancestors. It means that the book is clearly fictional, using the ‘licence’ to invent stories and mix them arbitrarily with real elements.⁸ In our opinion, the best description of “Family Archive” concerning its fictional or factual status is provided by Ilya Kukulin, stating that it is a “quasidocumentary” book (Kukulin 2010: 606).⁹ It uses a documentalist persuasive strategy, staying undoubtedly fictional in its core.

Khersonskii describes credible stories, which could have happened. A reader cannot say, without doing an elaborate archive research, which, moreover, would probably not bring the desired result, which stories are real, and which are partly or fully invented. But all of them are life-like and so credible, that it has led even professional critics to trust them.

The probability of the described events can be illustrated on the following example. The poem “Kremenets: July, 1914 – Vilna: August, 1939” is devoted to Moisei’s and Shula (Shulamit)’s fates. They live in Vilnius. He is a successful publisher; his wife is a rare beauty. They thought the invasion of Soviets to be a good luck (Moisei believed Bolsheviks to be a Jewish regime). Later, before the German occupation, they made plans for flight. After the German occupation they stopped writing letters to their relatives.

⁷ Cited from the English translation made in 1996 by Ruth Kreuzer and Dale Hobson (Boris Khersonsky, Family Archive, <https://www.dalehobson.org/khersonsky/boriscon.html>, accessed on April 16, 2021). This translation was made from an early version of the book and therefore does not feature all the 48 poems, which were later included in the 2003 and 2006 book editions.

⁸ S. Donska 2020 for a detailed examination of the fact/fiction problem in the book.

⁹ Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky see Khersonskii’s poetic book as a part of the “documentary trend” in the modern Russian culture (Beumers, Lipovetsky 2010).

Researchers differ in designating the exact number of Jews, who faced extermination in Vilnius during the World War II. According to Arad (2004: 176) “[...] the total number of Lithuanian Jews who did not remain under German occupation was 21,500–22,000. *Approximately 203–207,000 Jews remained in Lithuania under German occupation and faced extermination.*” (Emphasis in original). Bubnys (2004: 218) proposes a slightly different, but similar calculation: “according to data from the statistics department, on 1 January 1941 there were 208,000 Jews (6.86 percent of the total population) in Lithuania. At the beginning of the war around 8,500 Jews went to Russia. During the Nazi occupation 1,500–2,000 escaped from the Vilnius and Kaunas ghettos and 2,000– 3,000 lived in concentration camps to the end of the war. Thus around 195,000–196,000 Lithuanian Jews were murdered.”

The end of the story, i.e., the possible death of protagonists, is described in a periphrastic way: “Все исчезло еще безвозвратнее, чем обычно.” (SA: 30) (“Everything has vanished, even more irretrievably than usual”). As we see from the statistical figures, it was indeed much more probable to die than to survive. Similarly, other described events, that is, education and work, arrests and labor camps, evacuation to Tashkent in the war time, comparatively “normal” childhood in the sixties or emigration of the parts of the family to New York in the nineties are absolutely probable, according to the described time and space.

In “Family Archive”, Khersonskii seems to precisely follow the advice of Aristoteles: “οὐ τὸ τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν, τοῦτο ποιητοῦ ἔργον ἐστίν, ἀλλ’ οἷα ἂν γένοιτο καὶ τὰ δυνατὰ κατὰ τὸ εἶδος ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαιῶν” (Aristot. poet. 1451a36-a38) (“it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen — what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity”).¹⁰ The narrated stories are to such extent probable and skilfully narrated that it makes readers and critics believe them.

Interestingly, the pictures on the frontispiece of the famous Moscow edition of the book in the publishing house *NLO* do not belong to the family archive of Khersonskii himself, but to that of Kuzmin, his editor. At first, as Khersonskii describes in the interview given to the author of this article (Donska 2020: 181), the designer of the book proposed, due to the lack of time, to use pictures from her own archive. But as her ancestors were Slavs, their appearance stood in an evident contradiction with the stories in the book. Then Dmitrii Kuz’min took pictures from his family archive, so that his Jewish ancestors represented Jewish ancestors of Khersonskii.¹¹ Nobody found any contradiction. Khersonskii and Kuz’min made jokes, that they ‘became relatives’. One Jewish family represented another Jewish family on photographs. The same happens – in a broader context – not only with pictures, but with narrated stories itself.

The fictional book about one family turns to be a parable about the fate of all East-European Jews’ families. Anatolii Barzakh (2010: 314) names “the extermination of the East-European Jews [...] genuine topic” of this book. In this point “Family Archive” illustrates the idea of Aristoteles that poetry is more serious and philosophical than history (Aristot. poet. 1451b6-b8), because poetry speaks about the universal and the history about particular events. A fictional book reaches a large audience and shows a history of the Jewish life and identity perhaps even in a more precise way than a historical book could have done.

¹⁰ The English translation by W.H. Fyfe origins from the multilingual website about “Poetics” <http://nevmenandr.net/poetica/1451a36.php> (accessed on April 17, 2021).

¹¹ The later bilingual Czech and Russian edition of the book (Khersonskii 2018b) has been illustrated with photographs from Khersonskii’s own family archive.

In the following chapters I examine, which specific components are ascribed to the Jewish identity in the book and how the loss of its numerous features is documented.

Jewish names

The most characters of the book can be unmistakably classified as Jews. Firstly, there are some direct denominations as *худощавый еврейский парень* ('a thin Jewish lad'), *еврейка-старуха* ('an old Jewish woman') or *богатый еврейский дом* ('a rich Jewish house'). Secondly, it is possible due to their typically Jewish names. They include such names as Solomon, Moisei, Rakhil', Aron, Iosif, Iakov, Meer, David, Leib-Kolmen, Brana.

These names mostly have biblical origin. If there exist different versions of the name, than the one, which is 'overtly Jewish', is used: Iosif and not Osip, Shulamit and not Sulamif' or Mariam and not Maria. Also, in 'sayings' of rabbis, a sub-genre in "Family Archive", protagonists have typical names as e.g. Shlomo ben Yehudah or Aaron ben Riven, pointing out the Jewish (*ben Riven*) and not Russian (e.g. *Rivenovich* or *Robertovich* or *syn Rivena*) patronym. The title *pebe* is consequently used in 'sayings':

Ребе Ицхак Леви сказал:
«Есть нечто сходное у людей и деревьев –
наши корни в земле». (SA: 14)

Rabbi Yitzchak Levi said,
"People and trees have this in common--
roots in the land."¹²

The 'sayings' of rabbis and their titles indicate not only a connection with overall Jewish life and culture, but with the specific domain of the Jewish scholarship and learning tradition or even with tradition of Chassidic tales, as published, for instance, by Martin Buber.

In the course of the century some of the characters lose their specific Jewish form of names: Nekhama becomes Nadezhda, Rakhil – Raisa, Leib-Leonid is later on addressed just as Leonid. This reveals a historical tendency to accommodate names to the hostile antisemitic reality in the Soviet times and later even give children names of Russian or Greek origin (such as Boris, which is the name of Khersonskii himself).

Together with the loss of religion (described characters become antireligious or orthodox) and language (they switch from Yiddish to Russian), which will be addressed next, the loss of Jewish names marks an important shift, which leads to the fall of the integral Jewish identity.

Jewish Religion

The connection with Judaism is represented in the text by means of two main poetic sub-genres: descriptions of cult objects and prayers.

In poems called *auksion iudaiki* ('auction of Judaica') the poetic persona describes six cult objects: *khanukiyah*, *menora*, *iad*, *bsamim*, *Keter-Tora*, *mezuzza*. The names of these objects are not listed in most Russian dictionaries (e.g. the one of Kuznecov (2000)), therefore the usage of

¹² Boris Khersonsky, Family Archive, <https://www.dalehobson.org/khersonsky/boris2.html>, accessed on April 16, 2021.

transliterated Hebrew words marks a strong connection with the Judaic tradition.¹³ Three of them are so much unfamiliar for the modern reader, that they have to be explained in the text: *iad* – *ukazka*, *bsamim* – *stanchik dlia aromatov*, *Keter-Tora* – *korona dlia Tory*. Additionally, in other parts of the text we can observe an occasional use of words in Old Hebrew or Yiddish, which refer to specific parts of Jewish (religious) culture: *Jom-Kipur*, *shtetl*, *gevel*, *Talmud*, *khasidim*, *rsbaim*, *gaon*.

Jewish prayers play an important role in the text. In the poem about *khanukiyah* a usual beginning of a blessing is presented in its original wording in Old Hebrew, but transliterated in Cyrillic letters:

Пока огонек горит,
металл немного теплей.
Пока Господь говорит,
в душе немного светлей.
Ну что ж, молись, начинай:
«**Барух ата Адонай**»,
а не хочешь – вина налей. (SA: 31, emphasis M.D.)

As long as the fire burns,
Metal is somewhat warmer.
As long as the God speaks,
In the soul is somewhat more light.
Well then, pray, begin:
“**Barukh ata Adonai**”,
And if you don’t want, pour some wine.

In the description of other cult object, *mezuzah*, another important prayer is presented in the same way – in Hebrew original, but in Cyrillic letters:

Шма, Ишроэль, Хашем Элекheyну. Эти слова
нужно писать всюду. На косяке дверном
(на лбу – прибавит нацист). (SA: 140, emphasis M.D.)

Shma, Ishroel, Khashem Elekheinu. These words
You should write everywhere. On the doorpost
(on the forehead, a nazi will add).

The prayer **שמע ישראל** (Hear, O Israel!) is, as widely known, a central part of the traditional morning and evening prayer. It is also written into a *mezuzah*, which is affixed to a doorpost of a Jewish home. Therefore, the verse refers not only to texts of common prayers in the original language, but also to a knowledge of religious customs and rites. An integration into the text in Cyrillic letters marks the level of presence of these prayers in the everyday life of Jews.

There are also four poems in the “Family archive” cycle, which are called *molitva* ‘prayer’. One of them occupies a prominent place as the book’s last poem. In three of the four of this ‘prayers’ the beginning of blessings in Jewish tradition “Благословен Ты, Господь, / Бог наш, Царь

¹³ Names of objects derive from simple Hebrew words: יָד (*iad*) means ‘Hand’, בִּשְׂמִים (*Bosem*) – ‘odour’ or ‘flavour’ and כִּתְרוֹ (*Keter*) – ‘crown’.

Вселенной” (Blessed art Thou, Lord, / our God, King of the Universe) in its Russian translation is used:

Благословен Ты, Господь,
Бог наш, Царь Вселенной,
защищавший нас, поддерживавший нас
и сохранивший нас до сего дня, –
лучше б нам не видеть его. (SA: 94)

Blessed art Thou, Lord, our God,
King of the Universe,
Who has kept us and protected us,
and supported us until this day
it would be better we had never seen.¹⁴

The first four verses are the beginning of the blessing *Shebecheyanu*,¹⁵ which is usually said on some holidays such as Hanukkah or in situations, in which joy should be expressed. The fifth line, which comes after a hyphen, marks a controversial argument, a polemic with the text of the traditional blessing. The text, which is supposed to express gratitude, turns to be a lamentation.

The last prayer is crucial for understanding the message of the whole book:

И верен Ты своему обещанию
вернуть к жизни усопших.
Благословен Ты, Господь,
Бог наш, Царь Вселенной,
воскрешающий мертвых.

(Хотя бы в непрочной памяти нашей.
Хоть изредка.) (SA: 149)

And Thou art faithful to Thy promise
to raise the dead.
Blessed art Thou, Lord,
our God, King of the Universe,
who resurrects the dead,

if only in our fragile memory,
if only now and then.¹⁶

This text refers to the prayer *Amidah*, a central prayer in the Jewish liturgy. As in the previous example the first lines are the direct Russian translation of the prayer. It ends with an important correction from the narrator: he believes in resurrection of the dead if not literally, but “in our fragile memory”. The book is such a memorial against oblivion.

¹⁴ Boris Khersonsky, Family Archive, <https://www.dalehobson.org/khersonsky/boris18.html>, accessed on April 16, 2021.

¹⁵ More about this blessing s. in s. Trepp 1992: 80.

¹⁶ Boris Khersonsky, Family Archive, <https://www.dalehobson.org/khersonsky/boris27.html>, accessed on April 16, 2021, here cited with changes.

It is clear from these examples that the Jewish religious tradition plays an important role in “Family archive” mostly in form of texts (prayers) and artefacts. At the same time the text shows, how people consequently lose connection with this tradition:

Он сообщил родителям,
что принимает крещение,
чтобы верней поступить
в столичный университет
и посвятить себя
академической карьере
в области философии
или юриспруденции.

Эти слова не вызвали
особого беспокойства.
Арон вспомнил пословицу:
«Отец – ассимилянт,
сын – выкрест, внук – юдофоб.
Что ж, я отказался от веры,
традиций и языка,
ты принимаешь крещение,
теперь дело за внуком». (SA: 132)

He informed his parents,
that he is going to be baptized,
in order to be surely accepted
in the university of the capital
to devote himself
to the academic carrier
in the field of philosophy
and jurisprudence.

These words did not cause
Any major worry,
Aron thought about a saying:
“A father is assimilant,
A son converted to Christianity, a grandson is judeophobe.
Well, I refused belief,
traditions and language.
You are going to be baptized.
The grandson will do the rest”.

The gradual disconnection from the complex of Jewish cultural life, including religion, traditions, rituals and language is vividly presented in this dialog. The poem describes Leonid’s life and is entitled “Odessa, 1908 – Ural’sk, 1962”. Its protagonist converts to the Orthodox religion, makes a phenomenally successful academic carrier in philosophy and teaches at the university of Odessa. After him being expelled from the university as ‘tsarist heritage’ he becomes a priest in the so-called ‘Renovationist Church’. Then he “vanishes for a long time”, which means being arrested and sent to Stalinist labour camps. The sense of loss is expressed in the letter from Uralsk, sent by this character to his sister:

Я чувствую: небытие
идет за мной по пятам.
Синагога, где я обрезан,
ликвидирована в двадцатых.
Церковь, где я крестился,
взорвана в тридцать шестом.
Гимназия, которую я окончил,
разогнана немедленно
при воцарении большевиков.
Здание лаборатории
разбомбили в войну.
Даже лагеря, где я сидел
около пятнадцати лет,
сегодня, надеюсь, закрыты. (SA: 138)

I feel: the nothingness
Follows me in my footsteps.
The synagogue, where I had been circumcised
Was disbanded in the twenties.
The church, where I had been baptized,
Was exploded in thirty sixth.
The high school I had finished
Dispersed immediately after
The Bolshevik takeover.
The laboratory building
Was bombed in the war time.
Even the camps where I have spent
Around fifteen years in
Are hopefully closed today.

This story is full of words as *ликвидирована, взорвана, закрыты* ('disbanded', 'bombed', 'closed'), which illustrate the loss of the whole world – not only a Jewish one, but in general, the world of 'yesterday', the previous world. Similarly, in other poems the concept of vanishing, termination, extinction of old habits and – also religious – practices plays an important role.¹⁷

В сорок втором, в Ташкенте, куда
его привез беспутный Давид, [...]
он уже не читал книгу, не носил ермолку,
не накрывал голову покрывалом. (SA: 108)

In forty-two, in Tashkent, where
dissolute David wound up, [...]
he no longer read the book,

¹⁷ Irina Rodnianskaia (2007: 97) holds the opinion that „[п]устота – вообще ключевое понятие в поэтической философии Херсонского“ (Rodnianskaia 2007: 97) – „emptiness is a core concept in the poetical philosophy of Khersonskii“. She links it to the religious concept of *kenosis* as a dominant in Khersonskii's poetics.

wore the yamulka, or covered his head
with the shawl.¹⁸

“Family archive” not only shows the richness of Jewish religious and cultural life, transmitted through texts and artefacts, but also points out its dramatic loss in the destinies of the characters described.

Language Problem

“Family archive” is a book, written in Russian which is the language of the assimilated Russian Jews in the Soviet Empire. Other languages are thematized in the book: a young man Iakov (Iankel) Lerman in the poem “Odessa, 1984 – Kolyma 1940” is a leader of a small communist group whose members speak Hebrew and dream about Palestine. He flies from Rumania to the Soviet Union, where he gets for ten years into the camps, but saves his life – unlike all his other relatives except one sister – from the Holocaust. In the poem “Odessa: February 1932” Solomon and Nadya (Nekhama from the first poem) “teach separate subjects in Yiddish to teens.” Interestingly the rhyme to the word *идиш* (‘Yiddish’) is *ненавидишь* (‘you hate me’), as further family problems of this young married couple are being described.

As indicated above, the text of “Family archive” also includes occasional Hebrew and Yiddish words. Still the predominant language of the book is Russian. Russian is, as widely accepted, the language, which gave access to the world culture and was associated with cultural assimilation and new carrier possibilities.

It is well-documented, that seventy years of Soviet rule “resulted in a nearly complete destruction of what vestiges of Jewish religion, communal life, and cultural and linguistic identity still remained in Russia after the Holocaust” (Rapoport, Lomsky-Feder 2002: 237). These researchers argue that only the family remained as an institution which promoted and secured the Jewish identity. The predominant component of this identity became the devotion to cultural values, education and attitude, mostly known as *intelligentnyi*: “The ideal of belonging to the ‘intelligentsia’ is central to the construction of the identity of Russian Jews” (ibid.: 233).

The question of carrier possibilities, which went hand in hand with Orthodoxy and Russian language, is overtly addressed in the text in the already cited story of Leib-Leonid. The devotion to cultural belongings, connected with the Russian culture, are not overtly discussed. But the text bears a number of intertextual allusions to famous authors of the Russian literature. The most important is an allusion to a well-known poem by Afanasii Fet “Шепот, робкое дыханье...” (‘Whispering and timid breathing’) in the poem “Осень, дачная аллея...” (SA: 37) (“On the dacha lane it’s autumn”): it includes a complete metrical conformity (the four-footed trochee), strong syntactical similarity (nominative sentences with the same place of the attribute), thematic and even lexical (*янтарь – янтарный*) hints. Other important poets such as Boris Pasternak, Osip Mandelstam and Iosif Brodskii are intertextually addressed in “Family archive”, too.¹⁹

¹⁸ From the above-mentioned English translation by Ruth Kreuzer and Dale Hobson (Boris Khersonsky, Family Archive, <https://www.dalehobson.org/khersonsky/boris21.html>, accessed on April 16, 2021).

¹⁹ For a detailed comparison s. Donska 2020: 103-107.

Links to the famous Russian poets (partly Russian poets of Jewish origin, which, I believe, is not a crucial point) prove, that not only the Russian language, but also the Russian cultural field is important if not for all the protagonists of “Family Archive”, then to its implied author.

Traces of Jewishness

A present time narrator tries to revive a fullness of Jewish life, using photographs, postcards, documents and ritual items as ‘anchors’ for his memory. As described in the concept of postmemory by Marianne Hirsch (2008, 2012), palpable items and images ensure connection of generations and continuity of the Jewish identity.

These objects force readers to imagine solid, palpable things, which last longer than people’s lives. The objects survived, but people lost parts of their knowledge about the Jewish tradition during the twentieth century and three or more generations of assimilation; they hardly know, what the function of these cult objects is, as the necessity to explain three of six objects shows. The tradition vanished – at least partly, and the objects stayed as a remnant, an evidence, that the religious life had existed, but it dissolved together with the old Jewish world.

The poem about *khanukiyah*, the first lot of the “auction of Judaica”, includes following verse:

Бытие
металла однообразнее, но дольше
наших жизней. Похоже, вещьность
угрюмо перерастает в вечность. (SA: 31)

The being
of metal is more monotonous, but longer
than our lives. It seems that entity
gloomily turns into eternity.

The pun *вещность – вечность* marks the nostalgic feeling: people and their culture are inevitably gone. Only metal objects are left, as traces of the lost culture, without people, who would use them in a proper way.

Ilya Kukulín (2010: 604) proposes the term “photoelegiac” poetics regarding the “Family archive”. Indeed, the book is based on searching for traces of the lost fullness of (Jewish) life, collecting these traces in a memory. The use of objects and photographs is not accidental: in Susan Sontag’s words “[t]o collect photographs is to collect the world” (Sontag 2008: 3) and “[p]hotographs furnish evidence” (ibid: 5). They are used to narrate a lost world in a convincing way.

The identity is, according to the opinion of Paul Ricoeur (1996), based upon narration, and narration reflects concepts of identity on different levels of this book. It shows a past integrity of Jewish life with its language, tradition and religion and reflects upon its partial loss and enrichment with new elements as the Russian language and the Orthodox religion.

Emerging of Ukrainian

In the time as “Family archive” was published, Ukrainian culture did not play an important role in the cultural universe of Khersonskii. As a Chernivtsi native, who has lived his whole life in Odesa (despite of the possibility to emigrate), Khersonskii, of course, came in touch with the

Ukrainian language and culture. However, despite the fact that the most toponyms, used in “Family archive”, are today a part of Ukraine, there is a vanishingly small reference to the Ukrainian culture. The only Ukrainian word “Он обитает в самостоятельном Львове” (SA: 87, emphasis by me – M.D.) ([Russian] “He lives in independent [Ukrainian, but in Russian alphabet] L’vov”) in “Family archive” can be read as having a pejorative connotation.

This situation changed dramatically after the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine 2013–2014. Khersonskii showed an overt and firm pro-Ukrainian political position.

Ukrainian political orientation

Khersonskii transmitted his overt pro-Ukrainian political orientation through his blog, *facebook*, in the media and in his 2015 published book *Otkrytyi dnevnik* (“Open diary”), which comments on actual events in form of a diary, written starting with 01.01.2014 the whole calendar year.

Being a Russian-speaking poet, he became an important intellectual voice in the Ukrainian public space.²⁰ He embodied an idea, important in the first stage of Maidan, that also Russian-speaking citizens can be true Ukrainian patriots.²¹ This importance of Khersonskii for the Ukrainian identity is pointed out by Sally McGrane in her article for the New York Times: “Now, say many, the poet, who made a name for himself at age 55 with a series of verses tracing the fate of his Jewish family over five generations in Odessa, has come to embody a new kind of Ukrainian citizenship” (McGrane 2015). She even names postings of Khersonskii “something of a daily symposium on the identity of the new Ukraine” (*ibid.*).

His overt pro-Ukrainian position made Boris Khersonskii to a target of critics, propaganda and internet-bullying in pro-Russian media. Moreover the criticism on him was not only limited to denunciations: in February 2015 his former flat became a target of a bomb attack.²² Till now Khersonskii has often been exposed to accusations in his *facebook* and other media channels, which he ironically comments in his poetry as well.

The Ukrainian language

Back in 2014 Khersonskii wrote in the “Open diary” (06.12.2014): “Хочу как-то объяснить моим читателям появление в моем блоге стихотворных текстов на украинском языке. Я человек русскоязычный, воспитанный в русскоговорящей семье, почти не знающей украинского” (Khersonskii 2015: 266) – „I want to explain somehow to my readers the fact, that poetical texts in Ukrainian have appeared in my blog. I am a Russian-speaking person, raised up in a Russian-speaking family, hardly knowing any Ukrainian”. In the following post Khersonskii tells, that he passively consumes Ukrainian poetry, but his own poetry in Ukrainian

²⁰ His position as (mostly) Russophone pro-Ukrainian poet has been analysed in scientific literature (Kukulin 2016, Uffelmann 2019a and 2019b, Hoffmann et al. 2019).

²¹ Especially in the beginning of the protests the idea of a new Ukrainian political identity, comprising both Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking citizens of all nationalities was important for the civil society. Laada Bilaniuk mentions the need to persist on this idea, which was – and is till now – not self-evident for the society: “While [...] I had encountered many people who were ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians who were proud to define themselves as patriots of Ukraine, stereotypes of ethnolinguistic allegiance still persisted and needed to be overtly challenged.” (Bilaniuk 2017–2018: 300).

²² S. more about accusations of “russophobia” as well as critics on Khersonskii’s (2014) book *Missa in tempore belli* about Euromaidan and annexation of Crimea in Uffelmann 2019b.

is an effrontery (*наглость*) and only a try. But consequently, he masters Ukrainian more and more and makes also self-translations.

Time passes by, on 22 of May 2016 Khersonskii writes on *facebook* about the presentation of his Book “Family archive and other poems” – translations of his poetry into Ukrainian, made by Marianna Kiianovs’ka together with the author himself.²³ He gets highly emotional: “Марьянна провела презентацію прекрасно. [...] Скільки раз я употребляю слово "катарсис" в професійному психотерапевтичному контексті! Но вот переживал его очень редко. Вчера это было пережито. Спаси́бо всем!” – “Marianna held this presentation brilliantly. [...] How many times in my life I have used the word ‘catharsis’ in a professional psychotherapeutic setting! But I have experienced it quite rarely myself. Yesterday I experienced it! Thanks to everybody!”²⁴ The publication of his “main” book at that time – the “Family archive” – in Ukrainian is evidently a highly important step and shift in his own identity as a poet.

On one side, Khersonskii expresses pride for being able to write in Ukrainian – indeed he gained this ability in an advanced age – and on the other side, he combines it with the idea, that his Ukrainian is imperfect or insufficient, as vividly expressed, for example, in the following poem, published on 3 of November 2019 on *facebook*.²⁵

Ні, ніколи не зможу я розмовляти на мові,
як дитина, якої мати співала колись колискову.
Бо нема у моєму серці української крові,
й неспроможий старий народитися знову.
[...]
та чому ж ти зітхаєш, душе моя бідна?
бо не знаєш тієї мови, яка в тебе рідна.
бо не маєш на полиці єврейську книгу сімейну,
тільки й можеш промовити, барух ата Адонай елехейну,
[...]
Так, я нащадок шинкарів, лікарів та рабіннів,
арендаторів, володарів майстерень та млинів,
та спадщину ту занедбали дидусі мої та бабусі,
й часи були нещадні у своєму хибкому русі,
бо якщо шукаєш Бога, то знайдеш Його у Ісусі.

[In Ukrainian] No, I will never be able to speak this language,
As a child, whom its mother once sang a lullaby.
Because I have no Ukrainian blood in my heart,
And an old man cannot be reborn.
[...]
So why do you mourn, my poor soul?
Because you do not know your own native language.
Because you do not have a family Jewish book on you shelve,
And you can only say, barukh ata Adonai elekheinu.
[...]

²³ Tatjana Hoffmann et al. (2019: 234) mention collaboration with Kiianovs’ka among another important literary contacts and translations between writers in Ukraine using Ukrainian and Russian languages as these of Serhii Zhadan /Anastasia Afanaseva, Zhadan, Oleksii Chupa, and Marharyta Surzhenko and others.

²⁴ Khersonskii, Facebook post, May 22, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/borkhers/posts/1221372607897563>, accessed April 17, 2021.

²⁵ Khersonskii, Facebook post, November 3, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/borkhers/posts/2814607265240748>, accessed April 17, 2021.

Yes, I am a descendant of tavern keepers, doctors and rabbis,
Land leasers, owners of mills and repair shops,
But my grandfathers and grandmothers abandoned this heritage,
And times were merciless in their fast flow,
Because if you seek for a God, you will find Him in Jesus.

Here both his devotion to the Ukrainian language and his sorrow due to the loss of his 'heritage' language are expressed.

Now, in 2021, Khersonskii has published already numerous books, written partly in Ukrainian, as *Klapykova kovdra* (Khersonskii 2015a) with essays both in Russian and Ukrainian or *Vkelonytsia derevu* (Khersonskii 2019) with poems both written in Ukrainian and in self-translations or translated by other poets. He stopped publishing his books in Russia and relies completely on Ukrainian publishing houses (as *Folio* in Kharkiv, *Vydavnytstvo Staroho Leva* in Lviv, *Dukh i Litera* in Kyiv or *Meridian Czernovitz* from Chernivtsi). At the same time, he does not stop writing in Russian: it is his reflected position that one can be a Ukrainian (patriot), still using Russian language.²⁶ Therefore, as Vitaly Chernetsky (2019: 65) suggests, Khersonskii is “placing the poetic persona between Ukrainophone and Russophone worlds”, without switching completely to one of the languages. As shown in the poem, cited in the introduction to this paper, Khersonskii is able to play with code switching in one poem or even line, making it to his poetical (and political) tool.

It is important to mention, that the Orthodox religion, to which Khersonskii converted in the 1970-ies, plays an important role in his poetry. Here we can name two books, which have overtly religious topics – “Вспышка сверхновой: Рождественские стихи” (Khersonskii 2017a) and “Страстная седмица: Пасхальные стихи” (Khersonskii 2017b), which consist of poems, devoted respectively to Easter and to Christmas and written in different years.

In a very recent *facebook* post from the 8th of April 2021 Khersonskii asks what do his numerous subscribers are awaiting from him: “Стихов на русском языке, чтобы напомнить мне, что я типовой російськомовний жидок? Віршів українською, щоб мені нагадали, що моя українська невдала, а також, що я враг русского языка и русской культуры?”²⁷ ([In Russian] “Poems in Russian to remind me, that I am [in Ukrainian] ‘a typical Russian-speaking Yid’? Or poems in Ukrainian to remind me, that my Ukrainian is poor [in Russian] and I am an enemy of Russian language and Russian culture?”). The code switching from Russian to Ukrainian and back shows on the metalevel his fluency in both languages, but at the same time performatively reinforces his lamentation: regardless of the language he writes in he will be prosecuted for being the wrong person in the wrong environment. The political engagement of Khersonskii as a pro-Ukrainian mostly Russian-speaking intellectual, described above, makes him to a target for accusations from both Russian and Ukrainian monolingual or mononational fields.

Modern post-Soviet literatures face a trend to translingual and hybrid constellations, as stated in Finkelstein 2018. Marco Puleri (2020) describes hybrid identities referring to Russophone Ukrainian writers, mentioning Khersonskii among “(other) Russian” writers as Rafeenko, Kurkov and Nikitin. The identity of poetic persona in works of Khersonskii, which to a big extent probably reveals his personal identity, consists of even more components: Jewish

²⁶ This point of view is expressed, for example, in an online article in focus.ua (Khersonskii, “Соскочить с языка. Можно ли писать по-русски, оставаясь при этом украинцем”, May 22, 2016, <https://focus.ua/opinion/opinions/350822>, accessed April 16, 2021) as well as in numerous other sources.

²⁷ Khersonskii, Facebook post, April 8, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/borkhers/posts/4226832030684924>, accessed April 17, 2021.

nationality, Orthodox religion, Russian Language, Ukrainian language and political identity, which we described here to different depth and extent.

The last identity component, which has to be mentioned in the present article, is the so-called Odesa identity. As with other identities of Khersonskii, he belongs – but only partly – to a mentioned community. As he repeatedly states in his *facebook*, he, widely accepted in Moscow, Kyïv and internationally, has a problem to be accepted in Odesa literary communities. He analyses the so-called “Odesa syndrome” in an essay in a book *Klapytkova kovdra* (Khersonskii 2015a: 179–216) and publishes in his *facebook* and in a separate book (Khersonskii 2018a) a series of funny sketches, written in Russian, which present Khersonskii as a man, who ran mad because of his love to Odesa intelligentsia. In the present article due to the lack of space I do not analyse the Odesa controversy of Khersonskii thoroughly, but this local identity can be investigated in more detail in further publications. In addition, an important political identity as former dissident can be part of a further research on multiple identities in Khersonskii.

Conclusion

“Family archive” by Boris Khersonskii shows a loss of an integral Jewish identity through generations of a big Jewish family in the twentieth century and emerging of new parts of identity, typical or possible for Russian Jews: Russian language and Orthodox religion. After the Euromaidan revolution the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian political identity find a more and more prominent place in Khersonskii’s poetry. At the same time, the lyrical persona does not abandon other components of his identity: his Jewish origin, Russian cultural socialization and Orthodox religion.

All together it constitutes a hybrid, multiple identity of four core components (Jewish, Orthodox, Russian, Ukrainian), which is reflected in Khersonskii’s recent writing. On the one side, the lyrical persona presents himself as being always marginal to some solid, integral community and being under constant pressure of being accused and, hyperbolically, sentenced to death. The integrity – being completely Jewish or completely Ukrainian, with perfect proficiency of language and culture – is presented as inaccessible for the poetic persona. On the other side, Khersonskii succeeds in building a new, truly hybrid identity and consistently argues it to be an integral part of a tolerant Ukrainian society.

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