

CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS
New Perspectives in English and American Studies

Kultúrák, kontextusok, identitások

A Debreceni Református Hittudományi Egyetem
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Kustár Zoltán, rektor

A sorozat szerkesztői:
Gaál-Szabó Péter, Kmeczkó Szilárd, Bökös Borbála

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Péter Gaál-Szabó, Andrea Csillag, Ottilia Veres, Szilárd Kmeczkó



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SZILÁRD KMECZKÓ

Perspectives on Assimilation
in *Shadows on the Hudson*
by I. B. Singer

Introduction

Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote his literary works in Yiddish even after he had arrived in America in 1935. The New Yorker Yiddish newspaper *The Jewish Daily Forward* published the novel between 1957 and 1958 as a serial story. Its English version entitled *Shadows on the Hudson* was released in 1998 (Singer 1998). The characters in the story are Jews from Warsaw, most of whom have survived the soa, and now try to comply with the new environment to develop a new existence. Some of them become successful and rich, adapting themselves to the new world order, which precious little resembles their fathers' world, seemingly without any problems. They have paid a stiff price for this. Some of them do not feel strong enough to break with their past life and go beyond personal catastrophe. They do not even try to become American and start a new life. Their dead are not present in their thoughts as memories but as live reality in the proper sense of the word.

Just a few years after the soa, each decision has a moral weight and the decisions can be questioned. The losses in the course of assimilation into the broader culture can distinctly be assessed, as the earlier, traditional framework of existence is being transformed or put into brackets. The existential situation of the characters makes the question of assimilation unavoidable. Some kind of relationship has to be developed to it. But how can anyone remain a Jew in such an environment where it is not possible to keep the Ten Commandments? I am going to look over the endeavors of some of the characters, exploring the dilemmas which accompany assimilation and the peculiar answers given to them. The threads of the story are woven together in the period between December 1946 and November 1949.

The table society of Boris Makaver

During the time period of the story, Boris Makaver's residence in Upper West Side is furnished in a similar style as his flats were in Warsaw and Berlin. The little garden in the yard enclosed by the annexes reminds him of Warsaw, too, as if reminiscing about an "original space of dwelling" (Gaál-Szabó 2011). In the widowed master of the house, the little "island/oasis" carved out from the American metropolis evokes thoughts rooted in Europe. It has become a habit of his to follow the Hasidic rabbi from Williamsburg to whose father in Narew also Makaver's father made a pilgrimage many years ago. His Jewishness, that he has never denied, has gained more and more in importance in his everyday life.

At the beginning of the story all dinner guests have already arrived and they are sitting around the table. They are all Polish Jews, who started out directly or indirectly from Warsaw, and the presence of Warsaw has been palpable in their thoughts and has shaped their imagination up to the present. Makaver speaks Warsovian Yiddish as he has not learnt either German or English properly. Dr. Solomon Margolin is an excellent observer. It does not escape his attention that Makaver's daughter Anna, who is struggling in her second marriage, grows young again in the presence of Hertz Dovid Grein, her calf love who recalls Warsovian memories in her. Anna's spectacle evokes in Dr. Margolin memories of the Warsovian avenues and the Saxon Garden. Neither can Grein get rid of the past easily, which from time to time intrudes into his thoughts. The first snowfalls in New York and the mounds of snow in the streets, further on the obtrusive odor of the horse dung dropped in the Central Park leads his thoughts towards his Warsovian memories. The spectacle of the sprinkling snow reminds also professor Shrage of Warsaw. The sight of a woman heavy in build, dressed in raggle-taggle clothes visualizes the encounter of poverty, ugliness, and tastelessness, which makes Anna's husband Stanislaw Luria, who is traveling on the elevated rail, recall the Polish peasants and their costumes.

Thus, the past is live and haunts in an endless way, "provid[ing] the subject with a directionality" (Gaál-Szabó 2012, 475). Consequently, in the case of some of them the old possibilities of earning a livelihood, which failed to materialize at that time, try to find their fulfilment in the new world; with others the haunting past destroys the ground on which they could plant their feet firmly, and thus, hinders them from striking root.

Berlin, Frankfurt, and Warsaw

Analyzing Werner Cahnman's writings, Mihály Vajda weighs the historically immaterialized possibilities (Vajda 2007, 113–129). He puts the question of whether the soa would have been preventable? The answer is more than dubious; however, the modernization alternatives of German Jews get an important role in the course of analysis. As opposed to Gerschom Scholem, who denies the German's willingness to a German-Jewish dialogue, Cahnman claims the existence of such a dialogue; on the other hand, he does not speak about German-Jewish approach in general. He distinguishes between two different ways of the relationship between Germans and Jews. One is the northern type with Berlin as a center, the other one is the mode of relationship characteristic of the southern and western German Jewishness with Frankfurt as a center. The difference between them can be apprehended according to three points of view.

The first viewpoint concerns the form of settlement. While the Jewish community lived in modern big cities in the North, it was characteristic of the Jewishness in the South and West that they lived mainly in villages, small towns, though, some of them moved to big cities just a short time before and had relatives in the country. The second viewpoint concerns the relationship to traditions. The Jewishness with Berlin as a center becomes emancipated under the influence of the rationalistic mentality of enlightenment, however, not as a people with a specific spiritual character. Actually, it is about the assimilation of individuals, who will find their place in German society as Germans with the Jewish faith. Save that, being a Jew does not mean faith in a definite religious idea but rather in keeping to the laws i.e. tradition and lifestyle. In the South and West, the alignment of the Jewishness with modernity occurred later – as compared to the North – under the influence of Romanticism. The third viewpoint concerns the relationship of Jewishness to Germandom and within this framework, to the own Germandom of the Jewishness. On the southern and western territories, a specific separatism was characteristic as a result of which we can rather speak about integration than assimilation in the case of the Jewishness that belongs to Germandom but is at the same time definitely distinguishable from it. Vajda argues when interpreting Cahnman that the key to the situation can be found in the approach to integration, which becomes dominant. Provided that the features of modern mass democracy had had a lucky development, the soa might have been avoided.

As Makaver's dinner guests are from Warsaw without exception, it is worth evoking how Singer describes the living conditions of Polish Jews

with a special focus on Warsawian Jews. Either we take his volumes of bibliographic inspiration in our hands (Singer 1986; Singer 1998), or we take the strange story of the little Jewish town placed in the 17th century medium and described on the basis of the writer's practical experience (Singer 1996), or we turn the pages of Singer's voluminous saga (Singer 2007), we come to the same conclusion in each case. The inhabitants of little Jewish towns characteristic of Polish circumstances and the Christian environment depend on each other. Though they live separately, cooperation and trade have established traditions. In the family memories of Warsawian Jews, the traditional lifestyle in villages and little towns is lively also due to late modernization. They cultivate relationships with their relatives in the country; however, it can also happen that the father in many families is the follower of the Hasidic rabbi in some little town. Most of Singer's writings inform the reader of the spiritual closeness of the tradition dominated Jewish past in a period of time when it would be in vain to look for the characteristic scenes of a provincial Jewish lifestyle. Makaver's guests in Warsaw were not Poles of the faith of Moses but they were Jews and they remained Jews in New York, too. What does it mean for them to be Jews? Whatever they might think of it, the reference point is the fathers' world whose revival in an American milieu and with the experience of the soa behind their back seems to be doubtful, though, as if Makaver would be experimenting on it.

Stanislaw Luria and David Shrage

This is the second marriage of Anna Makaver and Stanislaw Luria, and this marriage ends in failure they do not expect anything of each other. Anna makes eyes at someone else, the passive but not repulsive enticer, Hertz Dovid Grein, is an old acquaintance of the family. The emerging sympathy and later on the love-bond between them do not remain a secret for the others, considering communication New York is namely just a little village, at least due to an intensive relationship-acquaintanceship network of the Jewish immigrants and among them of the Jews having fled from Hitler.

Luria's family, his wife, and children were victims of the soa. The present in New York cannot be fitted to the tragic torso of his former life; neither does he have the strength to shut down the previous part of his life that hinders him to be kind to others and to develop a personality that Anna can tolerate. The spiritual handholds on life are missing for him. He is fully aware of the fact that in his case it would be an extraordinary task beyond his strength. He follows Anna's emotional unfaithfulness with attention from

a victim's position, while he is yearning for his first wife unceasingly. This yearning elicits in Luria, who has turned his back on Judaism, to put human finitude to the test and he as a herald running ahead makes a promise to professor Shrage to send him a message from beyond the grave, provided that it exists after he has met his dead wife again. At this point, Luria and Shrage's fates interlock. In vain do they turn up in the same table society as Makaver's guests; in the late period of his life Shrage is not the personality whose presence would make social life flourish, indeed his social activity has been degraded just to a passive presence due to his withdrawal behind his personal boundaries. Shrage's ancestors were educated and well-to-do Warsawian Hasids. His master was the Hájim Zelig Slonimski who rose to the forefront of Mathematics as an Orthodox rabbi. Shrage as a mathematician made a significant academic career; however, he has made psychological research during the past two decades. Using his knowledge he tries to get in touch with his wife Edze who was a victim of soa. For the time being he lives together with Mrs. Clark, the widow of one of his American scientist colleagues. Mrs. Clark was born either in Galicia or in Bukovina. She is obsessed with communication with the transcendent world; the framework of communication is given by séances and various automatic creative procedures, which eliminate personal control. Just like in the case of Slonimski Judaism and modern science do not conflict; also Shrage detests those who believe in the supremacy of human understanding and positive science. On the other hand, he rejects the letters dictated supposedly by his deceased wife and put down by his life-partner, similarly to the paintings made of his wife by the so-called automatic creative method. He does not take them seriously and considers them rude deception. Yet he does not totally refuse Mrs. Clark's activity because there are certain signs, which warn him – even if they do not warn others – to be cautious and they lead him towards understanding.

Accordingly, Luria visits professor Shrage and brings it to his knowledge that he wants to die because he does not have any strength to live and he is not able to endure the lack of his deceased wife. Mrs. Clark who cannot exactly assess Luria's situation wants to offer palpable certainty and inner satisfaction to soothe the two men. In secret co-operation with Justina Kohn, a third rate actress, the séance is realized. In the darkened room the spirit of Luria's deceased wife appears in the blurred shape of Justina Kohn who gives good answers to Luria's questions in possession of the biographic data. Although Edze's appearance does not take place because of some mishap, the effect of the séance is beyond expectation in the case of both men. As far as their consequences are concerned, however, the opposite of the desired

process has been accelerated in Luria. In the next few days, Luria preparing to meet his wife is getting ready for the suicide in a practical way. It will not take place, though. The spirit of Luria's deceased wife appears again in the very last moment before his natural death, because of his bad health condition he is gradually breaking away from existence and he is setting off to meet her.

Although professor Shrage has lived in New York since 1939, he still cannot find his way in the city. The system of numbered streets is in vain; the mental map is missing from where the problem solution could start. He feels lost in the Empire of Chaos. Neither does he find his bearings in the traffic, which is no wonder as he ignores the use of scientific and technical achievements of the past century. He does not answer the phone, turn on the radio, switch on the light, and get in the lift and if it is possible he walks. He thinks that the use of technical devices reduces spiritual abilities. Like in the case of his master, Slonimski, also in the case of Shrage we can speak about the alliance of modern science and Jewish thinking shaped by tradition. In their relationship, the rationality of science is becoming less and less dominant. He shudders in darkness because he is aware of the evil-minded ghosts swarming around him. The boundary between live and inanimate nature is growing blurred. Also, the objects are alive and they turn him into ridicule sometimes hiding somewhere, sometimes emerging from nowhere unexpectedly. He does not like light either because it harms his more and more failing eyes. The light chases away ghosts, thus, emptying his surroundings and also blunting his transcendent perceptual faculty. In reality, Mrs. Clark and he remain strangers to each other. He does not understand Mrs. Clark's way of thinking, he does not understand what she does and why she does it, likewise, he is not able to follow the digressions of her attention and its jumping from one ill-matched topic to the other. His explanation to this is that Mrs. Clark is like substance: helpless, impenetrable and sinister. He is longing incessantly after a spiritual being i.e., his deceased wife.

Shrage's death agony takes place during a winter snowfall. He has been ill for a long time and he has a foreboding of recovering no more. Heading for death and leaving life behind, he can see dreams, which he interprets as keys to his life. He longs after certitude about the world to come, which indicates a reviving or rather never-ceasing conflict between the two pillars of science. With his eyes closed he catches sight of Edze, then apparitions emerge, over which he can have more and more declining control. His last apparition is the most appalling one. He finds himself in a small village probably

somewhere in Central-Europe surrounded by mud and dung. The scene is not about accomplishing spiritual goals, he should just get to the shitter near the dunghill very urgently, but someone has got there ahead of him. This realization makes him escape, which leads him back to wakefulness. However, he has only a few more moments just enough to stare in the face of his agony that puts a full stop at the end of his life.

Solomon Margolin

The physician, Solomon Margolin, and Makaver attended the yeshiva together as adolescents. He declines Makaver's growing affection to the prescriptions of orthodoxy as a primitive anachronism, on the other hand, he is the only one who calls him Slojmele and this is of higher worth for Margolin than anything else. Makaver is his only true friend who understands what he thinks and what he wants to say. This reveals one of Margolin's secrets. Neither has he succeeded in becoming an American totally and exceeding his Jewishness although he has always felt attracted by the upper classes. He dresses, speaks their language in such a way and plays sports that can be expected of the members of this group to do. He does not give up this behavior either in Berlin or in New York because his patients come from higher social classes, which adds something to his budget.

Margolin handles Jewishness from a historical-relativistic point of view, which opens up a way for the modern, scientific world view. After the soa, Makaver feels a stronger and stronger urge for the partial reproduction of the ancestors' lifestyle. In Margolin's opinion, he just absolutizes the state of affairs they have experienced at their fathers' on Polish land, partly under Russian supremacy. He throws light upon this matter in the course of a conversation with Grein later on, when Margolin explains in connection with Grein's by no means customary search for God that time is up for religions and there is no turning back. The existing model whose representatives the Polish Jews are and whose world is very well known by both of them makes an exception in general and within the Jewry.¹ The grandness of the Polish Jews is in connection with the fact that the experiment cannot be repeated. Referring to the common roots Margolin states that the way the Polish Jews

1 Hannah Arendt formulates something similar in connection with Rahel Varnhagen's life story and the northern German Jewry who step on the path of assimilation. She writes concerning prejudicelessness and outcastness as the precondition of greatness that she as a biographer tries to measure and correct the parvenu with the standard of the pariah (Arendt 2000; Vajda 2007, 146–175).

used to live and think was an experiment to ignore the world, nature's laws and the matters of history. This resulted in a peculiar tradition and a round worldview that existed as an inclusion but it was destroyed. As this one-time and unrepeatable world has been eliminated, no ways can exist in the present, which would lead to it. This would have two essential conditions: faith based on conviction and outlawry. If faith is missing assimilation starts, if a country of your own is born, the traditional behavior culture ceases to exist. Grein's mistake is that these conditions cannot be accomplished artificially. Margolin, however, is envious of Grein because he has the ability of moral indignation that can be brought in connection with the prophetic tradition. In spite of his partial understanding, finally he evaluates Grein's existential condition within the boundaries of his own science, i.e., he identifies it as schizophrenia. After all, by means of this gesture, he distances himself from all those questions and dilemmas that Grein is struggling with.

Margolin draws the conclusions from his recognition rationally; however, emotionally he cannot get rid of the common past that makes an effect on him and he cannot substitute it with anything in the world of homelessness. Modern science is for him the fundamentals of spiritual existence and its strict consequences of thought and their projection onto life consternates the members of the table society several times. It seems as if Margolin's historic relativism would suffer damage. Logical thinking has its boundaries even in the case of his rigorous behavior.

Margolin converts existential questions into scientific ones, which offers him the security of a round and tight worldview, on the one hand. On the other hand, he is aware of the fact that through his decision he places himself under intellectual defense. Anyway, the astounding consequences of his thinking demonstrate that natural science and psychology that conceives itself as science do not offer adequate help with the investigation into the world of life of the Jewry that keeps the law or into the urge outgrowing from its memory.

Hertz Dovid Grein

Makaver and Margolin knew Grein, who was a generation younger than them, in Warsaw already. At that time the Polish and Yiddish papers often spoke of Grein as a child genius because of his mathematical talent. As long as the Makavers lived in Warsaw, Grein often turned up at their place and helped the child Anna with her school progress. After a time, he gave up his Jewish studies and started to learn philosophy in Warsaw and Vienna. Later

on, he got married with a poor country-girl with whom he arrived in New York making a detour to Vienna quite a time before the war. His parents and relatives, who stayed in Warsaw, were killed. After the war, Grein came into conflict with himself, as his faith in moral teachings was shaken.

Grein's family is characterized by chilly connections. He abandoned his wife, Leah, and his two grown-up children, Jack and Anita, emotionally. We do not know how much he has neglected them, though; he has kept a sweetheart for a long time. His children are not Jews any longer; they are experimenting with construing new identities. In the course of this process, the progressive left-wing thought gets an important role, which is difficult for Grein to endure. In his opinion, Jack is practically a Communist, in the case of Anita the progressiveness means rather the rejection of the parental world. He feels a deep abyss between himself and his children. The situation is much more pressing than what various political worldviews might account for. Though the identity without faith and Torah relieves Jack of all kinds of things, that his father is struggling with, however, he will have to pay dearly for that in Grein's eyes. Jack's personality seems to be simple, so to say he beams with problemlessness that throws light upon his attitude towards Jewishness; namely, all the Jewish inheritance that he tries to clear up his relationship to, again and again, is not a question for Jack any longer, it has lost its importance.

Grein doesn't only feel urged to withdraw from the existing situation because he is amidst the turmoil of his personal life. The repeated attempts to escape give hope of the solution of existential questions. He and Leah flee to America together. He flees with Anna from New York to Florida in the hope of common life. However, he recognizes that he cannot and does not want to become American, similarly to his children and Anna who has become a successful businesswoman in the meantime. Grein can see that Anna is characterized by a calculating habit of mind and the wish to enjoy her success in business. In relation to this, she tries to extend control over the others. However, Grein does not want to participate in this sort of life with Anna. Then Margolin directs his attention to the fact that he cannot escape anywhere as he cannot hide from himself. In spite of this, he makes another attempt of breaking free when he renounces the world and retreats to a distant farm to do intellectual creative work. However, he has no chance for a long-lasting retreat with his other lover, Esther, because the woman cannot endure the thought of being buried alive. At this moment Grein realizes that there is nobody left to connect with for the rest of his life, and he would not do that again anymore because he gets startled by the consequences of his

deeds and condemns himself morally. The distancing between his thought and deed becomes intolerable for him, thus, he gives up action. He does not want to commit further sins. He blames himself for Luria and Leah's death. He deprived Luria of Anna, the only person who connected him with the world. In the case of Leah, he blames himself for the evolvement of her fatal disease. It makes the situation even worse that also Leah perceives Grein's role like this. Then he gives up all his connections realizing that he has only one possibility of withdrawal, i.e., if he breaks away from the world with a radical gesture and looks for a place for himself in the dimension of existence that is well-known for him from his childhood and that was created by the Polish Jews in the course of centuries. This world came into being and perished in the ghetto. Experiments are made to evoke it at two places: in Williamsburg and in Jerusalem in the Me'ah Shearim quarter. Grein chooses the latter one.

The question is whether the story is about the hardships of a man who cannot find his own way in the web of human relationships and whether he was beyond his depth in the end. The shaping of Grein's fate can also be evaluated in this way if the last episode is interpreted as a punishment inflicted on him. At this point, we remain on the ground of ethics on the whole. Save that, Grein does not exclusively want to be an ethical individual but he wants to exist as a Jew without compromises and to come up to the moral expectations of Jewish teachings. He would like to be a good Jew whatever practical consequences it might have. This decision was not made abruptly, but it was maturing in him for a long time. The failure in bringing up the children, the disintegration of his family life, the volatile nature of satisfaction in his relationships with women, which gradually becomes more and more disgusting accumulate in him and he interprets his personal problems on a horizon that has some significance beyond his particularity. He realizes that he lives in a world where his ancestors' laws cannot be adhered to as everything acts in opposition to it. The Torah becomes out-of-date, thus, everybody who takes their Jewishness seriously becomes anachronistic. As the fathers' world is the primary point of comparison, they have to decide: it is impossible to live in two worlds at the same time. Grein attains to the total rejection of modern civilization. This old-new life is very dull and can be maintained only at the expense of enormous efforts. Grein retains his ability to scrutinize his situation from an external point of view, thus, he can see that the way he lives is mere stagnation.

What would it mean to answer the question: What makes a Jew "Jewish", taking the American city-life conditions as given and starting out from Grein's situation? Mihály Vajda made similar research in many of his writings

(Vajda 2007, 58–67, 68–90, 146–175). Taking the assimilated urban Jews into account, Vajda thinks to have found the answer to this question in the behavior culture that broke away from the traditional living circumstances but is still connected to it. However, there is a significant difference here. Makaver's table society is strongly attached to the traditional Jewish world of their ancestors, the distance in time is little, and what is more, the soa obstructs the way towards smooth assimilation. There is no other point of comparison than their fathers' world that they experienced directly and that burnt in their entrails, and which was extraordinary in its way. They have to shape their relationship according to the non-existent world of the non-existent Polish Jews. Not once does another possibility occur. However, not everybody thinks like them. The characters in the story know it very well that the examples of successful assimilation in their wider neighborhood could be enumerated for a long time. The examination of such cases is beyond the scope of the story namely the writer of the fictive characters is interested in it to a lesser extent.

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