

# The Design of Books and Lives: Yiddish Children's Book Art by Artists from the Kiev Kultur-Lige\*

---

## 1 Introduction

An appreciation of children's book art as a separate genre goes hand in hand with a need for a historical narrative: understanding children's book illustrations to have their own conventions of content and/or form requires a story of how and when this art form came about and developed over time. In the critical literature, the desire to historicise may be linked to formalist theory, drawing on Bakhtin's conception of genre as a 'form-shaping ideology' that 'lives in the present but always *remembers* its past'.<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, histories of children's book art may reflect simply the wish of practitioners and recipients alike to embed a given work in a context and tradition, to categorise and thereby add meaning to their artistic experiences. Whether intended as a contribution to the discussion of genre or a descriptive overview, studies and coffee-table volumes of children's book illustrations construct and present both national and pan-national narratives, documenting influences, interactions and intercultural exchanges in children's book art.

A frequent staple of such works is reference to a 'golden age' of children's books and book illustrations. Various recent publications have located such a period in the Soviet Russia of the interwar years,<sup>2</sup> where, in the context of revolutionary transformation, children's books and the artwork in them were elevated to previously unknown status and creative significance.<sup>3</sup> Contemporary interest in the avant-garde further fuels this fascination with post-Revolutionary Russian children's books, for in these books appear household Constructivist names like Vladimir Tatlin and El

---

\* For help and assistance in preparing scanned images of the illustrations used in this article, I am grateful to Moira Fitzgerald, Head of Access Services at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; Dr Lyudmila Sholokhova, Head Librarian and Acting Chief Archivist at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research; and Masha Stepanova, Coordinator of Cataloging and Slavic Librarian at Miami University.

<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 106.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Martin Salisbury and Morag Styles, *Children's Picturebooks: The Art of Visual Storytelling* (London: Lawrence King, 2012), and *Inside the Rainbow: Russian Children's Literature 1920-35: Beautiful Books, Terrible Times*, ed. by Julian Rothenstein and Olga Budashevskaya (London: Redstone Press, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> The status and importance given to children's books can be seen in the fact that in February 1924, the Central Committee of the Communist Party decreed the development of children's literature to be one of the Party's major goals in the realm of publications, with the result that during the first half of the 1920, nearly one hundred state publishing houses (in addition to private ones) printed children's literature; see Alla Rosenfeld, 'Figuration versus Abstraction in Soviet Illustrated Children's Books, 1920-1930', in *Defining Russian Graphic Arts: From Diaghilev to Stalin, 1898-1934*, ed. by Alla Rosenfeld (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), pp. 166-197 (p. 168).

Lissitzky.<sup>4</sup> However, while rightly inviting us to marvel at the radicalism of, for example, Lissitzky's *The Suprematist Tale of Two Squares* (1922), the 'Russian' narrative of children's book art obscures the fact that in this 'golden' place and time, children's book illustration was neither an exclusively Russian phenomenon nor served a single agenda. Thus, the majority of Lissitzky's book illustrations were created for a Yiddish readership and produced from within the Yiddishist movement, with its stated aim to build a modern Jewish collective identity from Yiddish secular culture.

This contribution aims to add another narrative to the history of children's book art, discussing illustrations in Yiddish children's books from the circle of Kultur-Lige artists.<sup>5</sup> It develops two arguments. First, the programmatic discussion of what Yiddish children's book art should look like that was conducted by the Kultur-Lige's artists can be shown to mirror the debate about the nature of modern Yiddish literature which took place amongst Yiddishist writers and literary critics. The parallels observed in these two different fields of artistic activity attest to the all-encompassing nature and ambition of the Jewish cultural project in interwar Eastern Europe. Second, Yiddish children's book illustrations provide evidence for communication and exchange of creative ideas beyond the Jewish context, showing not only that Yiddish children's book production reflected aesthetics and practices in Russian children's book culture, but also that Russian children's book art was influenced by Yiddish publications.

Both of these arguments can be found in previous publications.<sup>6</sup> What distinguishes this contribution from the extant literature is that the two arguments are illustrated and given form by discussing concrete examples of children's book art. More specifically, four publications by four different artists are considered here: Joseph Chaikov's illustrations for *Temerl* (*Little Tamar*, Moscow, 1917), Issachar Ber Ryback's illustrations for *Mayslekh far kleyninke kinderlekh* (*Little Stories for Little Children*, Petrograd, 1922), El Lissitzky's illustrations for *Elefandl* (*The Elephant's Child*, Berlin, 1922), and

---

<sup>4</sup> Speculating on the motivation for Western interest in early Soviet art, Evgeny Steiner adds the polemical suggestion that it serves 'the psychological need for a good scare', allowing 'Westerners who see terrifying pictures of the builders of the Communist future marching bravely ahead, or scenes of world capitalism's "final hour," [to] deal with their own fears' about the defeat of their capitalist society; see Evgeny Steiner, *Stories for Little Comrades* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press), p. xii.

<sup>5</sup> The Kultur-Lige was established in Kiev in January 1918. It sought to create and promote a new Jewish secular culture based on Yiddish, and, for a while, became the representative organ of Jewish autonomy in Ukraine. For an overview of its history, see Gennady Estraikh, 'The Yiddish Kultur-Lige', in *Modernism in Kyiv: Jubilant Experimentation*, ed. by Irena R. Makaryk and Virlana Tkacz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), pp. 197-217. For a discussion of the history and achievements specifically of the Kultur-Lige's art section, see Hillel Kazovskii, 'The Art Section of the Kultur Lige', *Jews in Eastern Europe* 22 (Winter 1993), pp. 5-22, and Hillel Kazovskii, *Khudozhniki Kul'tur-Ligi/The Artists of the Kultur-Lige* (Moscow: Mosty kul'tury; Jerusalem: Gesharim, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of the role of indigenous Jewish sources in the development of modern Jewish art, see Seth L. Wolitz, 'The Jewish National Art Renaissance in Russia', in *Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art, 1912-1928*, ed. by Ruth Apter-Gabriel (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1987), pp. 21-42. The claim that Russian and Jewish artistic circles influenced each other is similarly found in Wolitz; Estraikh, p. 201, makes the point for contact between Kiev-based Ukrainian and Jewish artists.

Meyer Akselrod's illustrations for *Nekhtn un haynt* (*Yesterday and Today*, Moscow, 1927).<sup>7</sup> The books chosen are original Yiddish works (*Temerl*, *Mayslekh far kleyninke kinderlekh*) as well as translations (*Elefandl*, *Nekhtn un haynt*); they range over different periods and originated in different locations. Some of them were produced by names that have become part of the international art canon (Chaikov, Lissitzky), others by artists that are largely unknown to the wider public (Ryback, Akselrod). Taken together, these works illustrate the diversity and rich creative history of Yiddish children's book art, and, what is more, provide a glimpse into the world as seen through the eyes of a generation of Yiddish-reading children.

The chapter is organised as follows: Section 2 outlines the socio-historical context in which Yiddish children's book art arose as a separate art form, and introduces the debate about a Jewish national art and its concern with the place of traditional folk iconography. Section 3 takes a look at some of the book art produced by two of the protagonists in the ideological debate about modern Jewish art, namely Joseph Chaikov and Issachar Ber Ryback. Section 4 considers the 'art of translation' and the mutual influence of Russian and Yiddish artists on one another, discussing the illustrations for Rudyard Kipling's 'The Elephant's Child' and Samuil Marshak's *Yesterday and Today*. The chapter concludes in Section 5.

## 2 The Place of Familiar Symbols in a Language of New Artistic Forms

The beginnings of a dedicated Yiddish literature for children are commonly dated to coincide with the early twentieth-century development of a Yiddish secular school movement, which brought with it the need for Yiddish-language textbooks and child-appropriate reading.<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding its pedagogical usefulness, there can be little doubt that the fashioning of a Yiddish children's literature also served a wider-ranging, ideological role in the context of what Benjamin Harshav has termed the modern Jewish revolution.<sup>9</sup> In Harshav's conception, the transformation of Eastern European Jewish society and life involved the negation of the three deictic axes of the old Jewish existence ('not here', 'not like now', 'not as we are'),<sup>10</sup> which by its very nature placed children at the forefront of the revolutionary agenda. If 'children embody the future in the present',<sup>11</sup> children represent the possibility and potential of change; it is their education and engagement that determine a movement's success and *raison d'être*. Creating the desired commitment of future generations to the Yiddishist cultural project (which included a continuing attachment to the Yiddish language) therefore had to entail the

---

<sup>7</sup> Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyright material. The publisher apologises for any errors or omissions and would be grateful if notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in future reprints or editions of this book.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Adina Bar-El, 'Children's Literature: Yiddish Literature', in *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, ed. by Gershon David Hundert (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 322-326 (p. 322).

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Harshav, *The meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), chapter 5.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), pp. 17-18.

<sup>11</sup> Arkady Ippolitov, 'Imaginationland, USSR', in *Inside the Rainbow*, pp. 17-21 (p. 18).

dissemination of Yiddishist ideas to the young as well as active concern with how this could be achieved. Children's books, then as today, were a means by which children were introduced and integrated into a culture.

If children's literature must be understood to be an essential component of the Yiddishist movement, children's book art must be understood to be an integral part of children's literature. Throughout ages and cultures, we find comments that pictures speak more directly to young and uneducated readers than text does. One such example is provided by early Yiddish books: in her study of Renaissance Yiddish book illustrations, Diane Wolfthal cites the preface to an edition of *T'sene-rene* (Sulzbach, 1692), the 'woman's bible', in which readers are assured that they 'will recognise and understand that which is printed on the entire page, even before reading the book' due to the accompanying images.<sup>12</sup> Writing in a very different cultural context, the Russian Symbolist Alexander Blok claimed that 'in children words are subordinate to drawing, they play a secondary role'.<sup>13</sup> A similar distinction between primary and secondary experience is made in modern studies of children's book illustrations; so, for example, in Zhihui Fang's assertion that

[a]s first order symbols, pictures represent relatively concrete, familiar experience, something young readers can easily identify with. As second-order symbols, words are more abstract and detached from immediate experience.<sup>14</sup>

What unites these statements from the seventeenth to the twentieth century is that visual images are perceived to perform an ancillary function in the reading process. Illustrations provide 'mental scaffolds' for the inexperienced reader,<sup>15</sup> facilitating his/her understanding of the text by explaining, interpreting and expanding the verbally presented information. The received view is that book illustrations aid linguistic literacy; children's books that do not provide illustrations are viewed as less accessible and hence less educationally useful. The nascent children's literature in Yiddish then had to offer books with illustrations so as to reach its readership effectively, but also so as to be able to place itself in the tradition of other children's literatures.

In addition to linguistic literacy, children's book art may be said to foster visual literacy, developing an aesthetic appreciation of art by introducing children to a cultural context and a set of artistic conventions. In the case of Yiddish children's books, the question of what constituted the cultural context and set of artistic conventions to be transmitted to a new generation was itself problematic. Yiddish cultural tradition, defined as low culture by its linguistic medium, did not have established models of visual art – whether to bequeath or reject. Like other aspects of modern Jewish secular culture, the notion of Jewish art required bringing to life a new semiotic system. Children's books not only provided a vehicle for communicating the new art to children (and their parents), but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, a way of anchoring a tradition of visual art into national awareness and making it a source of collective identity.

---

<sup>12</sup> Diane Wolfthal, *Picturing Yiddish: Gender, Identity, and Memory in the Illustrated Yiddish Books of Renaissance Italy* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), p. 174

<sup>13</sup> Cited by Gerald Janacek, *The Look of Russian Literature: Avant-Garde Visual Experiments, 1900-1930* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Zhihui Fang, 'Illustrations, Text, and the Child Reader: What are Pictures in Children's Storybooks for?', *Reading Horizons*, 37.2 (1996), pp. 130-142.

<sup>15</sup> Fang, p. 138.

In the search for a national high art, Jewish artists and critics followed in the footsteps of the coterritorial cultures, taking inspiration from the Russian and Ukrainian rediscovery of indigenous folk art in the development of national artistic styles. Indeed, the Jewish painter and sculptor Marek Szwarc (1892-1958) credited the very idea of a Jewish art to the Russian art historian Vladimir Stasov (1824-1906),<sup>16</sup> whose support of folk creativity as a source for Russian cultural advancement (in combination with Stasov's liberal-nationalist vision of the Russian empire) led him to encourage Russian Jews to explore their artistic heritage.<sup>17</sup> For many of the Jewish cultural nationalists of the 1910s and 1920s, it seemed requisite that the creation of a new Jewish art would involve merging Jewish folkloric tradition with contemporary art movements. The critic Abram Efros (1888-1954) succinctly expressed this view when writing in 1918:

Either our aesthetic rebirth will not take place at all, or it will grow from those same two roots from which contemporary international art stemmed, namely modernism and folk art.<sup>18</sup>

For Kenneth Moss, 'this negotiation between the modern self and pre-modern Jewish expression has come to seem *the* paradigmatic move of modern Jewish culture', understood to characterise both the literary and visual arts that emerged in the early twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> Whether it is the reworking of Yiddish folktales in Isaac Leib Peretz's (1852-1915) *Folkstimlekehe geshikhtn* (1908) or the inclusion of ornamental motifs from synagogues and tombstones in Nathan Altmann's (1889-1970) drawings in *Jüdische Graphik* (1923), the description of a given artwork as both modern and Jewish/Yiddish is commonly taken to imply 'some sort of fusion between indigenous and pan-European traditions'.<sup>20</sup>

However, there was far from general consensus that the path to a new Jewish culture and identity had to be forged from folkloristic sources. For some, the escape from *kleynshetldikeyt*, or Yiddish provincialism, and admittance into the modern era could be achieved only by a radical and complete departure from the established conventions. In the field of visual arts, two programmatic essays, written by members of the arts section of the Kultur-Lige in Kiev, are frequently cited as representing the two sides in the debate: Issachar Ryback and Boris Aronson's 'Di vegn fun der yiddisher moleray' ('Paths of Jewish Painting'),

---

<sup>16</sup> Marek Shvarts, 'The National Element in Jewish Art', *Literarische Bleter* 48 (3 April 1925), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> 'Stasov induced the erudite and vastly wealthy Baron David Guenzburg (1857-1910) to help him undertake the artistic resuscitation of Jewish plastic traditions by collecting, editing, and publishing the old, original works of Jewish manuscript art'; Wolitz, in *Tradition and Revolution*, ed. by Ruth Apter-Gabriel, p. 24. Stasov's portfolio of illuminations from medieval Hebrew manuscripts was published in 1905; see Christina Lodder, 'Ideology and Identity: El Lissitzky in Berlin', in *The Russian Jewish Diaspora and European Culture, 1917-1937*, ed. by Jörg Schulte, Olga Tabachnikova and Peter Wagstaff (Leiden and Boston: Brill), pp. 339-364 (note 28, p. 349).

<sup>18</sup> Abram Efros, 'Lampa Aladina', in *Evreiskii mir* 1 (Moscow, 1918), p. 301; cited by Lodder, p. 354.

<sup>19</sup> Kenneth Moss, 'Not *The Dybbuk* but *Don Quixote*: Translation, Deparochialization, and Nationalism in Jewish Culture, 1917-1919', in *Culture Front: Representing Jews in Eastern Europe*, ed. by Benjamin Nathans and Gabriella Safran (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), pp. 196-240 (pp. 198-199).

<sup>20</sup> Moss, p. 215.

published in 1919 in the Kiev periodical *Oyfgang*, and Joseph Chaikov's *Skulptur* (*Sculpture*), which appeared in 1921, published also in Kiev.<sup>21</sup>

The article by Aronson and Ryback (who in 1916 had travelled with Lissitzky on an ethnographic expedition along the Dnieper, organised by the Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society in St Petersburg) proudly proclaimed that 'Jewish art is here. It is awakening!' The authors base their critical appraisal of various Jewish artists (including Chagall) on their rating of the artist's success in having 'understood, appreciated and partially recreated, poetically, the Jewish plastic folk-trait', for 'when a Jewish artist sets out to reflect his national material, he must absorb the cultural values of his people amassed over the generations'.<sup>22</sup> Their argument that the creation of a new art cannot arise in a cultural no-man's land but must be a product of 'the accumulated experience' and reflect the forms of the artist's people's life,<sup>23</sup> mirrors Efros's view that aesthetic rebirth grows from two roots (and evokes his warning that the Jewish artist, haunted by self-conscious belatedness, 'may well give up a precious piece of Aladdin junk in exchange for some fashionable gaudy pot').<sup>24</sup>

Two years later, Chaikov explicitly rejected Rybak and Aronson's acknowledgement of the importance of Jewish tradition, writing in the final paragraphs of the introduction to his book on sculpture:

Mir haltn oykh far nisht rikhtik dem tsugang fun di yunge linke kinstler, vos viln antsheydn ot di problem loyt di arkhivn fun unzer fargangener geshikhte un folks-primitiv. Dos firt tsu stilizatsye, un stilizatsye iz estetishkayt, d.h. a lign benegeye tsum hayntikn tog un a kapriz funem individum, vos arbet tsulib sheynhayt.

We also hold as untrue the approach of the young leftist artist who wishes to resolve this problem according to our history and folkloric ("folks-primitive") accomplishment. This only leads to stylization and stylization is aestheticism, i.e. a lie concerning our present day and a caprice of individualism which functions in the service of beauty.<sup>25</sup>

In Chaikov's conception, the 'problem of Jewish sculpture' was to be solved by the form defining the artist and the artist defining the form ('di form bashtimt dem kinstler un farkert'),<sup>26</sup> not by the artist taking inspiration from primitive folk art of times gone by.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Inna Goudz, 'Auf dem Wege zu einer neuen Kultur: Die Kultur-lige', in *Jüdische Illustratoren aus Osteuropa in Paris und Berlin*, ed. by Andrea von Hülsen-Esch and Marion Aptroot (Düsseldorf: Heinrich-Heine-Universität, Seminar für Kunstgeschichte und Institut für Jüdische Studien, 2008), pp. 19-29 (p. 26).

<sup>22</sup> I. Ryback and B. Aronson, 'Paths of Jewish Painting', in *Tradition and Revolution*, ed. by Ruth Apter-Gabriel, p. 229.

<sup>23</sup> Ryback and Aronson, in *Tradition and Revolution*, ed. by Ruth Apter-Gabriel, p. 229.

<sup>24</sup> Nicoletta Misler, 'The Future in Search of Its Past: Nation, Ethnos, Tradition and the Avant-Garde in Russian Jewish Art Criticism', in *Tradition and Revolution*, ed. by Ruth Apter-Gabriel, pp. 143-154 (p. 147).

<sup>25</sup> Yoysef Tshaykov, *Skulptur* (Kiev: Melukhe-farlag, 1921), p. 14. (English translation taken from Joseph Tchaikov, [Excerpts from the book] *Sculpture*, in *Tradition and Revolution*, ed. by Ruth Apter-Gabriel, p. 231).

<sup>26</sup> Tshaykov, pp. 12-13.

By 1921, such views had become prevalent when it came to Yiddish literature, especially in Soviet Russia. Seth Wolitz dates the turning point as 1919, when Moyses Litvakov's review of the Yiddish avant-garde periodical *Eyngns I* (*Our Own*, Kiev, 1918) sparked a harsh debate in the pages of *Bikher-Velt* (*Book World*),<sup>27</sup> the literary journal published under the auspices of the Kultur-Lige.<sup>28</sup> The main protagonists in this battle over the function of literature in society were Dovid Bergelson, one of the main editors of *Eyngns I*, and Litvakov, the 'future commissar of Soviet Yiddish letters'.<sup>29</sup> While the former argued in favour of a Yiddish literature whose role was to give 'aesthetic definition to national and cultural longings',<sup>30</sup> the latter placed literature in the service of revolution, 'reflecting and directing the social/cultural realities',<sup>31</sup> and thus, in post-Revolutionary Russia, obliged to express the universal rather than the ethnically and culturally particularist. The Bergelson-Litvakov debate between February and August 1919 shows the dominant critical discourse to have shifted to a position, where 'far from valorizing traditional indigenous sources',<sup>32</sup> it considered them an obstacle, if not downright harmful, for cultural and societal renewal.

At first sight, Jewish visual art appears to have been a latecomer to the debate: in *Bikher-Velt* 4-5 (1919) – the same issue which contains Bergelson's reply to Litvakov – the critic (and Chaikov's brother-in-law) Yehezkel Dobrushin (1883-1953) published 'Yidisher kunst-primitiv un dos kunst-bukh far kinder' ('Jewish primitive art and the illustrated book for children').<sup>33</sup> In this article, Dobrushin, who shared Litvakov's reservations about *Eyngns*,<sup>34</sup> criticised the Art Nouveau illustrator Ephraim Moses Lilien (1874-1925) for failing to draw inspiration from the *living* sources of Jewish folk art, focusing instead on Jewish religious-nationalist themes.<sup>35</sup> Rather than dismissing the products of Eastern European Jewish traditional culture, Dobrushin thus endorsed the appropriation of Jewish folk iconography, whose role in modern art he likened to that of fairy tale and myth in literature.<sup>36</sup> Like Ryback and Aronson, he praised Chagall for having 'absorbed the Jewish artistic primitives, [for the fact that] he drew from them the form, color and content of his radiant works based on legends'.<sup>37</sup>

Notwithstanding the parallels between the articles by the artists in *Oyfgang* and the critic in *Bikher-Velt*, the conclusion that in 1919, folk art was still an uncontroversial vehicle for a new aesthetic in the visual arts nevertheless appears unjustified because it is

<sup>27</sup> Moshe Litvakov, *Bikher-velt* 1 (February 1919), pp. 20-25.

<sup>28</sup> Wolitz, in *Tradition and Revolution*, ed. by Ruth Apter-Gabriel, p. 36.

<sup>29</sup> Seth Wolitz, 'The Kiev-Grupe (1918-1920) Debate: The Function of Literature', *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 4.2 (1978), pp. 97-106 (p. 104).

<sup>30</sup> Wolitz, 'The Kiev-Grupe (1918-1920) Debate', p. 99.

<sup>31</sup> Wolitz, 'The Kiev-Grupe (1918-1920) Debate', p. 101.

<sup>32</sup> Moss, p. 199.

<sup>33</sup> Yekhezkl Dobrushin, 'Yidisher kunst-primitiv un dos kunst-bukh far kinder', *Bikher-velt*, 4-5 (August 1919), 16-23; reprinted in Yekhezkl Dobrushin, *Gedankengang* (Kiev: Kooperative farlag Kultur-Lige, 1922), pp. 115-19. Translated by Batia Baum as 'L'art primitif juif et le livre d'art pour enfants', in *Futur antérieur: L'avant-garde et le livre Yiddish (1914-1939)*, ed. by Nathalie Hazan-Brunet (Paris: Musée d'art et d'histoire du judaïsme and Skira Flammarion, 2009), pp. 223-225.

<sup>34</sup> David Schneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture, 1918-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 138.

<sup>35</sup> Dobrushin, in *Futur antérieur: L'avant-garde et le livre Yiddish (1914-1939)*, p. 225.

<sup>36</sup> Dobrushin, in *Futur antérieur: L'avant-garde et le livre Yiddish (1914-1939)*, p. 225.

<sup>37</sup> Dobrushin, 'Yidisher kunst-primitiv un dos kunst-bukh far kinder', p. 18; cited by Wolitz, in *Tradition and Revolution*, ed. by Ruth Apter-Gabriel, p. 36.

the development of children's book art, rather than Jewish art more generally, that Dobrushin addresses in his essay. In Dobrushin's opinion, folk art, in particular the Jewish version of Russian *lubki* (popular prints that are 'primitive in style but lustily drawn')<sup>38</sup> is the foundation on which to build the illustrated book for children. The *lubok*, Dobrushin argues, is ideally suited to the psychology of the child, who is in essence a collective being, due to the print's immediacy of expression, compositional clarity and non-didactic universality.<sup>39</sup>

There are two ways of interpreting Dobrushin's manifesto for the illustrated children's book. On the one hand, his endorsement of Jewish folk art, with its trope of the 'child as primitive' who experiences reality differently from an adult, seems to affirm that folklore is of lesser value than European high art. Potentially useful in childhood, where it can provide a means of engagement and a stepping stone towards other art forms, the crude primitivism of the *lubok* is soon outgrown and left behind, unfit to play a more enduring part in the cultural transformation of adult Jewish life. On the other hand, Dobrushin's article may be read as evidence for children's literature and the art within it providing greater creative freedom than art aimed at adults. If art and artists in post-Revolutionary Russia were judged by their success in serving 'an ideology beyond ethnicity and aestheticism',<sup>40</sup> children's art and literature – no matter that they were proclaimed to be at the revolutionary frontline – may have found themselves less consistently in official consciousness since their consumers held no immediate power.<sup>41</sup> The view that children's literature can provide an area of less interference is corroborated, albeit for a different period, by comments from the contemporary Russian-born illustrator Vladimir Korunsky, who states that his attraction to children's books stemmed from the fact that '[i]n Russia, it was an area of escape and relative creative freedom, free from oppression'.<sup>42</sup>

The question of which of the two possible interpretations of Dobrushin's remarks is correct may be unsolvable and at any rate ignores the compatibility of the two viewpoints. If children's literature was deemed to be less important than other art forms in the creation of a new secular culture, it could have been an appropriate genre in which to incorporate folkloric traditions, generally judged to be of secondary value, especially if the use of folk art forms was seen as contributing to the child's understanding of the written text. In short, Dobrushin's recommendations seem to allow a certain degree of

---

<sup>38</sup> Janacek, p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> Dobrushin, in *Futur antérieur: L'avant-garde et le livre Yiddish (1914-1939)*, p. 223. It is precisely the *lubok* which Bergelson singles out in his reply to Litvakov as a symbol of the lack of a sophisticated readership for Yiddish literature, complaining that the new literature reaches only 'the uneducated common man, who has not grown to the civilized tradition and understands only pictures containing primitive lines, or the *lubok*'; Estraikh, p. 206.

<sup>40</sup> Wolitz, 'The Kiev-Grupe (1918-1920) Debate', p. 99.

<sup>41</sup> This is by no means to suggest that children's literature existed in a space of free expression in Soviet Russia, as even a cursory reading of the literature will disconfirm. See, for example, David Goldberg, 'Itzik Kipnis's Books for Children', in *The Field of Yiddish: Studies in Language, Folklore and Literature*, vol. 5, ed. by David Goldberg (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), pp. 153-202, for a discussion of the attitudes of Soviet Yiddish critics towards fantastic children's literature between the years 1919 and 1935. On the topic of ideological criticism of the 'king of the children's book', Vladimir Lebedev, and the artists of his circle, see Rosenfeld, p. 194, and Steiner, pp. 174-175.

<sup>42</sup> Salisbury and Styles, p. 105.

pragmatism at the time of heated theoretical debate: it may have been the effectiveness of the medium that ultimately determined and justified its use for a young audience, who, although regarded to be central in the revolutionary endeavour, in actuality occupied only a peripheral position in revolutionary society.

To the modern reader, it is striking that the discussion of what path a modern Jewish art should chart, which was conducted so passionately in early twentieth-century Yiddishist circles, in many aspects prefigures the debate of whether Jewish art exists as a recognisable (and definable) art form, which continues to occupy art historians and writers to the present day. As frequently observed,<sup>43</sup> definitions of Jewish art can pursue biographical ('art produced by Jews'), functional ('art produced for Jews'), compositional ('art that incorporates Jewish material') and programmatic ('art inspired by Jewish metaphysical concerns') approaches. Yiddish children's book art easily fits into three of these categories: it was art produced by Jewish artists for a Jewish audience (as defined by the Yiddish-language medium of the texts in which the art appeared), inspired by the 'metaphysical theme of identity'.<sup>44</sup> Where opinions diverged was on whether it should also be compositionally defined as Jewish, by physically and/or conceptually incorporating the 'semi-ceremonial folk art ... emanating from the daily life of Jewish communities'.<sup>45</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that only 'compositional Jewishness' was negotiable in the creation of a Jewish art of modernity, given that art created as part of a project of Jewish nation and secular culture building cannot, by its very nature, escape biographical, functional and programmatic Jewishness. It is only the realm of Jewish material content that offers room for manoeuvre, as neither decisive rejection nor selective embrace of previous experience will jeopardise the project as a whole.

The dialectic between the demands on a modern secular art and the role for traditional products of folk creativity provides the common thread that links the programmatic discussions of different forms of Yiddish cultural production in interwar Russia. It reflects the more fundamental opposition between a belief in art 'renovating the old' and 'building anew',<sup>46</sup> between the ethnographic affirmation of Jewish national identity and the striving for universal modernity. When considering the debates that involved the *kultur-treger* ('cultural agents') associated with the different sections of the Kiev Kultur-Lige, the observed parallels provide evidence that the Kultur-Lige fully lived up to its ambition of developing and concerning itself with all spheres of Jewish cultural activity. That it did so in the face of both apathy and opposition from the majority of the

---

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Harold Rosenberg, 'Is there a Jewish Art?', *Commentary* 42.1 (1966), pp. 57-59 (reprinted in *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, ed. with commentary by Vivian B. Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 149-152), and Aaron Rosen, *Imagining Jewish Art: Encounters with the Masters in Chagall, Guston, and Kitaj* (Oxford: Legenda, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> Rosenberg, in *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, ed. with commentary by Vivian B. Mann, p. 151. For Anthony Julius (*Idolizing Pictures: Idolatry, Iconoclasm and Jewish Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), pp. 41-42), the Second Commandment 'enlists Jews in a project of idol-breaking', mandating (aniconic) art that seeks to abolish the icon, (iconic) art that domesticates the icon, and (iconoclastic) art that attacks the icon. Understanding the category of Jewish metaphysical concerns to include the Biblical commandments, Yiddish children's book art may then also be seen to meet the criterion of 'programmatic' Jewish content by contesting traditional authority as based on religious belief.

<sup>45</sup> Rosenberg, in *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, ed. with commentary by Vivian B. Mann, p. 151.

<sup>46</sup> See Wolitz, 'The Kiev-Grupe (1918-1920) Debate', p. 101.

Jewish electorate, who ‘either rejected modernization or associated their future hopes with modern culture in Russian and Hebrew’,<sup>47</sup> is a feat indicative of the commitment and single-mindedness of its leading figures.

### 3 The Janus Face of the Jewish Art Renaissance: Chaikov and Ryback

In the debate about the place of folk art forms as a source for modern Jewish art, Issachar Ber Ryback (1897-1935) and Joseph Chaikov (1888-1986) occupied opposed positions. Ryback (writing with Aronson) advocated the recreation of Jewish folk art to reveal ‘living emotions’,<sup>48</sup> whereas Chaikov rejected such ‘caprice of individualism’, arguing that the relationship between man and the world ‘of electricity, industrial technology, iron and cement construction’ could be articulated only by means of abstraction.<sup>49</sup> As members of the art section of the Kiev Kultur-Lige (which Ryback co-founded in June 1918 and Chaikov joined at the end of the same year), both illustrated Yiddish books for children. The question then arises whether the artists’ different ideological orientations are discernible in their children’s book art.

Two books are considered here: *Temerl [a bobbe-maysese]* (*Little Tamar [A Little Old Wives’ Tale]*) by Moyshe Broderzon (1890-1956), published by the Moscow publishing house Khaver in 1917 as no. 4 in their series ‘Kinder-biblyotek’ (‘Children’s Library’); and the first volume of *Mayses far kleyninke kinderlekh* (*Little Tales for Little Children*) by Miriam Margolin (1896-1968), published by the Jewish section of the commissariat for people’s education in Petrograd in 1922, but printed in Berlin (Dr Selle & Co.) like many other titles published by the Soviet State publishers in 1922-1923.<sup>50</sup> Both books are available in digitised form: *Temerl* can be viewed from the Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library website, while *Mayses far kleyninke kinderlekh* (vol. 1) is part of the Center for Jewish History Digital Collections.<sup>51</sup>

The earlier book of the two, *Temerl*, measures 136x345mm and contains nine pages, each of which has a hand-coloured illustration placed at the centre. The front cover is illustrated in black line. Front cover and title page provide the information that *Temerl* was published in an edition of fifty copies, priced at one ruble each.

Broderzon’s story tells the tale of little Tamar, the much-loved daughter of a watchmaker from a *shtetl* in Lithuania, who travels to foreign lands, where she finds and marries her ‘*basherter*’ (‘soulmate’). The tale is framed by a narrative that identifies *Temerl*’s story as the title’s *bobe-maysese* (‘old wives’ tale’), told to the first-person plural narrator by their grandmother. Indeed the story contains a range of fantastical elements. It starts when *Temerl*, reading at home, is visited by exotic animals and asked by a white

<sup>47</sup> Estraikh, p. 202.

<sup>48</sup> I. Ryback and B. Aronson, ‘Paths of Jewish Painting’, in *Tradition and Revolution*, ed. by Ruth Apter-Gabriel, p. 229.

<sup>49</sup> Tshaykov, pp. 13, 14.

<sup>50</sup> Serje-Aljosja Stommels and Albert Lemmens, ‘The Graphic Works of Issachar Ber Ryback (1897-1935): An Outstanding Example of Children’s Book Art’, in *The Russian Jewish Diaspora and European Culture, 1917-1937*, ed. by Jörg Schulte, Olga Tabachnikova and Peter Wagstaff (Leiden & Boston: Brill), pp. 279-299 (pp. 286-287).

<sup>51</sup> Both sets of illustrations are also printed in the exhibition catalogue, *Tradition and Revolution*, ed. by Ruth Apter-Gabriel; see p. 165 for *Temerl*, and pp. 199-201 for *Mayses far kleyninke kinderlekh*.

dove to follow her. The dove, which is implied to have been sent by Temerl's *bashserter*, then pulls Temerl in a giant seashell across the ocean until they reach a land inhabited by 'wild black people'. Temerl teaches reading and prayer to the locals, who in return make her their princess, and, as they learn the skills of civilisation from Temerl, turn white. Temerl returns home with the help of one of the local boys; the couple fall in love and marry, and Temerl gives birth to a daughter called Nekhame. The story ends after Temerl and her husband Zemerl have died (having lived 120 years), while Nekhame is still alive.

Broderzon's curious (and for modern sensibilities, uncomfortably prejudiced) fairy tale is in part reminiscent of Maurice Sendak's picture book *Where the Wild Things Are* (1964), in which a boy, sent to bed without his supper, sails to the land of wild beasts, who anoint him king, before he returns to his bedroom. Unlike the boy in Sendak's book, though, Temerl is neither ill-behaved nor does she return entirely to her own normality. Besides transforming the lives of the 'African savages' through learning, she transforms her own life through her travels, undergoing the journey from a girl to a bride and a mother. Although brought up in a traditional family (her father is described as '*a yid a frumer*', 'an observant Jew'), she is a modern Jewish daughter: she knows and is eager to teach others about 'all there is in the world'. Her knowledge of how to pray, 'sing, play and read' privileges Temerl vis-à-vis the African natives, who in making her princess recognise her superiority. Broderzon's story thus foreshadows what Evgeny Steiner calls the 'Negro theme' in Soviet Russian children's literature, where the child hero embarks on a mission 'to love, to help, to save, to civilize' the natives in faraway lands, with issues of race frequently equated with class.<sup>52</sup> *Temerl* provides a humanistic version of this brand of Soviet internationalism, and imparts a message of racial equality alongside the dichotomy of coloniser and colonised. Not only is Temerl's *bashserter* one of the natives (who, in sending the dove for her, is credited with real agency), but the very notion of ethnicity is presented as a changeable characteristic, such that colour is literally only skin-deep. This message of equality is however undercut by the natives 'graduating' from black to white, which leaves little doubt who holds the real power in '*vunderland*' ('wonderland').

Chaikov provided highly decorative and colorful illustrations for *Temerl* with a clear Art Nouveau flavour. The pictures are characterised by curving lines, writhing forms, and decorative fill, often involving flower or vine-tendrill patterns. They even contain the 'whiplash line' (a swirl similar in look to an unfurling whip), the key motif of Art Nouveau, which is seen, for example, in the portrayal of the white dove hovering over the *chuppah* under which Temerl and Zemerl get married (p. 8 and fig. 1). Other swirling patterns include cresting waves (p. 7) and wing-like ornaments (p. 8). Atlas figures adorn the fireplace that furnishes the living room of the final illustration in the book (p. 9). Chaikov's signature of the illustrations, the Hebrew letter Teth, provides another example of Art Nouveau stylisation: rounded rather than square, it has an onset that is swirled inwards so that the whole form resembles a coiled snake.

---

<sup>52</sup> Steiner, pp. 104, 109.



fig. 1 Joseph Chaikov, Illustration from *Temerl* (Moscow, 1917).  
Image courtesy of Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University.

The decorative body lines of Chaikov's illustrations stand in stark contrast to the faces of his figures, which are contoured only sparingly (or hardly at all in the case of the Africans), with straight and angular strokes, not unlike the mask-like faces found in the work of the German Expressionist painter Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938). Chaikov further departs from pure Art Nouveau in the representation of the trees at *Temerl's* home (p. 2), which are rendered semi-anthropomorphically, their roots like feet grasping the ground, their bodies turned to *Temerl* as if to close in on her (p. 2). The illustrations in *Temerl* then appear to combine stylistic elements from Art Nouveau and Expressionism, showing evidence of Chaikov having evolved his style from the art of the *Makhammadim* group in his Paris years, which in Wolitz's appraisal 'appear as epigones of *Lilien*'.<sup>53</sup>

Redolent of *Lilien* is Chaikov's use of orientalising effects in *Temerl*. For example, he depicts the older, married *Temerl* and *Zemerl* in clothes that seem better suited for sixteenth-century Ottoman Palestine than twentieth-century urban Russia (p. 9). Interestingly, the drawing of *Temerl* on the front cover involves a different kind of pictorial orientalisation. Here, Chaikov shows *Temerl* 'Africanised', wearing a crown fashioned out of animal bones and tusks, and an ethnic necklace strung with large beads and animal teeth. Chaikov's design of the insignia of an African princess, imitates primitive art forms, but rather than turning to the folk iconography of Eastern European Jewry, he alludes to African art, evoking modernist primitivism and thereby aligning himself with the European cultural elite of the early twentieth century.

Like the seventeenth-century reader of the *Tsene-rene*, the reader of *Temerl* can construct a narrative from the accompanying illustrations that closely matches the text. Each of Chaikov's nine pictures provides a stage-setting frame for the individual scenes of the tale: the grandmother who tells the story; book-loving *Temerl* and the speaking dove; *Temerl's* parental home; *Temerl* reading next to the exotic animals; *Temerl* sailing the seas; *Temerl* crowned princess by the Africans; *Temerl's* journey back home; *Temerl* and *Zemerl's* wedding; and, finally, *Temerl* and *Zemerl* with their grown daughter *Nekhame*. Occasionally, the illustrations offer an alternative interpretation of the textual events. Thus, Chaikov situates the grandmother in the living room of an affluent, wallpapered home, with her knitting next to her on the clothed table, looking straight (and somewhat sternly) at the reader. In the text, the grandmother's story engrosses the first-person plural narrator to such an extent that they stop peeling corn kernels, which

<sup>53</sup> Wolitz, in *Tradition and Revolution*, ed. by Ruth Apter-Gabriel, p. 26.

suggests a very different surrounding and social situation. Similarly, Temerl's long ocean journey is pictorially represented as taking her along a luscious green coastline, whereas the text thematises her worries of being on the open sea.

Chaikov's illustrations are not devoid of motifs of Jewish folk art. First, there is the white dove, which, occupying a central place in Broderzon's narrative, appears in seven of Chaikov's nine pictures. The sideways placement of the dove in these pictures alludes to the traditional representation of doves as used in Jewish papercuts,<sup>54</sup> but the variety of forms in which the dove occurs (oriented leftward, rightward, upward or downward, with wings spread, folded or curled in the whiplash line) very clearly moves the motif from folk art into Art Nouveau territory. Second, Chaikov appears to borrow from Jewish ritual and semi-ritual art and decoration in his drawing of Temerl surrounded by the various exotic animals that come to visit her. Broderzon's text lists a leopard, a lion, a green snake and birds, and Chaikov depicts a lion, a green speckled snake, a vulture and a turkey (as well as a green goblin, only half visible at the right edge of the picture). Along with the leopard mentioned in the text, the lion and the vulture make up three of the four animals in the saying of Rabbi Judah ben Tema in Pirkei Avot 5:23 ('Be bold as the leopard, light as the vulture, fleet as the deer, and strong as the lion, to do the will of your Father in heaven'),<sup>55</sup> whose symbolism 'was universally understood in European Jewish communities even if the text was not actually quoted' or only a subset of the four animals was represented.<sup>56</sup> Chaikov's illustration here supplements the text. However, it is arguably Broderzon's allusion to the aphorism that governs the selection of animals that appear in the picture. If so, Chaikov's use of motifs from Jewish folk art may be regarded simply as a response to the text rather than a conscious attempt to create a particular Jewish style.

To sum up, while Chaikov had not yet embarked on the path of abstraction that is outlined in *Skulptur*, *Temerl* provides a solid example of the Jewish artist turning outwards, looking to expressions of contemporary European art making rather than to traditional Jewish visual folklore. Wolitz may well be correct in describing Chaikov as 'living two artistic existences' in 1919,<sup>57</sup> working in, on the one hand, Art Nouveau, and, on the other, Cubo-Futurism, but in both of these existences, Chaikov revealed himself to be more interested in universalism than in a specifically Jewish artistic identity.

The book illustrated by Ryback, *Mayses far kleyninke kinderlekh*, is around 21x27cm in size,<sup>58</sup> and consists of twenty-three pages. It contains ten one-page stories, which appear on the recto pages. Facing each story on the verso is a large, black and white Indian-ink drawing; thus, each story precedes its illustration. The front and back covers are illustrated in colour. As discovered by Albert Lemmens and Serge-Aljosja Stommels,

<sup>54</sup> See Joseph and Yehudit Shadur, *Traditional Jewish Papercuts: An Inner World of Art and Symbol* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002), chapter 3, especially pp. 90-105.

<sup>55</sup> *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. by David Biale (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), p. 683.

<sup>56</sup> Shadur and Shadur, p. 97.

<sup>57</sup> Wolitz, in *Tradition and Revolution*, ed. by Ruth Apter-Gabriel, p. 36.

<sup>58</sup> The Center for Jewish History Digital Collections catalogue entry provides no size information. In *Tradition and Revolution*, ed. Ruth Apter-Gabriel, Ryback's illustrations from *Mayslekh far kleyninke kinderlekh* are listed as sized 265x350mm (cat. 129), 268x352mm (cat. 130-132), 267x357mm (cat. 133), and 205x270mm (cat. 132). A 2012 auction listing for *Mayslekh far kleyninke kinderlekh* (<http://www.kedem-auctions.com/content/childrens-tales-%E2%80%93-illustrations-issachar-ber-ryback-1922> (17 February 2015)) gives the size as 21.5x27.5cm.

the title *Mayses far kleyninke kinderlekh* unites a series of three books, which were all published in 1922.<sup>59</sup> The three books have the same cover illustrations; they are distinguished only by a small Roman volume number in the lower right corner.

Margolin's stories are short, simple narratives of only a couple of lines, which are about children's everyday experiences in a *shtetl* environment. Margolin, who worked as a kindergarten teacher in the Yishuv,<sup>60</sup> describes how children float paper boats after the spring thaw (*'Shifn oyfn vaser'* 'Boats on the water'), take in a lost kitten (*'A farblondz̄hete ketsele'*, 'A lost kitten'), try to catch a bird that has flown in through the school window (*'Di feygele'*, 'The little bird'), torture a butterfly (*'Di zumerfeygele'* 'The butterfly'), fashion a seesaw from a board and rocks (*'Di vig'*, 'The seesaw'), or find a bird's nest fallen from a tree (*'Der puster nestele'*, 'The empty nest'). Adults in the stories make dolls for their children (*'Hershele der stolyer'*, 'Hershele, the carpenter'), buy new plates (*'Di naye telers'*, 'The new plates'), or chase away an aggressive rooster (*'Der beyzer hon'*, 'The nasty rooster'). Only the last (and longest) story of the book (*'Ingele-tsingele'* 'Little boy-little tongue') introduces the fantastical: an old, childless couple chance upon a boy, no bigger than a little finger, who comes to live with them, bringing great joy to their lives.

Ryback's illustrations match the 'flatness' of most of the stories. They lack perspective and depth, having no horizon line, with the figures seemingly floating in the roughly drawn frame that encircles them. The humans, animals and objects that populate these pictures look as if drawn by young children. They appear in their essential or typical form, exemplifying a generic instance of the representational category in question.<sup>61</sup> Thus, humans are shown with arms and legs and a head with eyes, nose, mouth and ears, but have no articulated torso and limbs; houses are drawn with a door, windows, a roof and a chimney, but bear no further ornamentation. Ryback's deliberate imitation of the 'primitiveness' of children's art was motivated by his belief 'that children must be given drawings that they themselves should be able to make'. It reportedly pleased him when children recognised the affinity between his illustrations and their drawings – as the son of the Yiddish writer Dovid Bergelson (1884-1952) did, remarking to his father, 'Papa, I, too, can draw like Ryback'.<sup>62</sup>

The front cover illustration to *Mayses far kleyninke kinderlekh* (fig. 2) reflects the centrality of the child in Ryback's approach to children's book art. The picture is built from various images relating to the stories in the book. These images are placed against a red background and surround the title. The book title itself is written in cursive and set in a yellow-coloured oval in the centre of the page. The title inset extends from (and is connected by a dotted border to) the picture of a boy's head, which is the focal image on the page. The front cover is thus (quite literally) headed by the image of a child. The boy's face, which looks straight at the reader, is half blackened. On one interpretation, the face simply appears sooty and can be read as emblematic of 'the arrival of a new era, the coming of the *chumazye* ("dirty, ... swarthy ones", i.e. lower-class rabble).<sup>63</sup> On

<sup>59</sup> *Russian Book Art 1904-2005*, ed. by Albert Lemmens & Serge-Aljosja Stommels (Brussels: Fonds Mercator, 2005), cat. 44. See also Stommels and Lemmens, 'The Graphic Works of Issachar Ber Ryback (1897-1935)', pp. 287-288.

<sup>60</sup> Stommels and Lemmens, 'The Graphic Works of Issachar Ber Ryback (1897-1935)', p. 288.

<sup>61</sup> See M. V. Cox, *Drawings of People by the Under-5s* (London: Falmer Press, 1997), p. 12.

<sup>62</sup> Sonya Ryback, 'Zayn lebns-veg', in *Yissakhar Ber Ribak*, ed. E. Tsherikover (Paris: Komitet tsu fareybikn dem ondenk fun Yissakhar-Ber Ribak, 1937), p. 19; English translation taken from Stommels and Lemmens, 'The Graphic Works of Issachar Ber Ryback (1897-1935)', p. 288.

<sup>63</sup> Steiner, p. 52.

another interpretation, the boy's face is divided into two halves. Black and white contrasts, which also featured heavily in Chagall's illustrations for Der Nister's *A mayselekh in ferz'n* (*Stories in Verse*, 1917), occur throughout the book, and Ryback frequently uses them within a single figure. Examples include a cat that has a black head and a white body (p. 7), boys that wear trousers or shirts with one leg or sleeve black and the other one white (pp. 5, 11); and a bird that changes from black to white when dead (p. 15, and fig. 3).



fig. 2 Issachar Ber Ryback, Front Cover Illustration for *Mayses far kleyninke kinderlekh* (Petrograd, 1922). Image courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

Notwithstanding the simplicity of the depiction, Ryback's illustrations possess a 'visual grammar'. First, they provide the reader with a foregrounded image that, iconlike, serves to identify the main theme in the story. Second, when read right to left, they make visible how the narrative unfolds, 'showing the different stages of the story in the same picture'.<sup>64</sup> For example, '*Di zumerfeygele*' ('The butterfly') tells the story of how a boy, Motke, catches and then tortures a butterfly to death, ignoring his friend Etele's attempt to intervene. The illustration (fig. 3) shows the 'zumerfeygele' (which Ryback renders as a bird rather than a butterfly, on which more below) in large size, placed just off-centre. By letting the picture be dominated by the *zumerfeygele*, Ryback signposts that the story is about the fate of the animal. Moreover, the illustration makes it possible for the reader to construct how the *zumerfeygele* meets its death. Ryback decomposes the story into four stages: first, the *zumerfeygele* is caught by Motke; then Etele asks Motke to stop torturing the *zumerfeygele*; next Motke continues pulling the wings of the *zumerfeygele*; and, finally, the *zumerfeygele* dies. Each of these four stages is given its own image, and a reader who first glances at the largest image on the page and whose eyes then moves leftward to the bottom left corner (which matches the way in which Motke is oriented) will perceive the four images in the order in which the scenes they represent occur in the story.

<sup>64</sup> Stommels and Lemmens, 'The Graphic Works of Issachar Ber Ryback (1897-1935)', p. 288.



fig. 3 Issachar Ber Ryback, Illustration from *Mayses far kleyninke kinderlekh* (Petrograd, 1922).  
Image courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

The question why Ryback portrays the *zumerfeygele* as a bird rather than a butterfly is intriguing. One suggestion, made by Stommels and Lemmens, is that ‘Ryback seems to have been not altogether fluent in Yiddish’, mistaking *zumerfeygele*, literally ‘little summer bird’, for *feygele*, ‘little bird’. Given Ryback’s Yiddish-language upbringing in central Ukraine and the fact that he received a *keheder*-education,<sup>65</sup> this explanation seems unlikely. A possible alternative explanation is that Ryback’s illustration refers to an earlier version of Margolin’s story, and that the bird in the text was changed to a butterfly only later. Yet another possibility is that Ryback chose to portray a bird so as to establish a clear link between ‘*Di zumerfeygele*’ and ‘*Der puster nestele*’ (‘The empty nest’), the penultimate story in the book. ‘*Der puster nestele*’ once again features a boy called Motke, but this time Motke is an animal-lover. He finds a bird’s nest fallen from a tree, which he puts up under the roof beams of his house, fitted out with soft feathers and bread crumbs so a bird would feel welcome to nest. If this is the same Motke, there are two very different sides to him, as unmatched as the black- and white-coloured legs of his trousers in the illustration for ‘*Di zumerfeygele*’.

Ryback’s pictures in *Mayses far kleyninke kinderlekh* could not be more different from Chaikov’s illustrations in *Temerl*. Where the former are black and white, crude in their execution but dynamic in their composition, the latter are colourful, decorative in line and form, if static. If Chaikov’s work in *Temerl* could be described as an instance of turning outwards, away from Jewish tradition, Ryback’s illustrations may be considered a turning inwards. They provide evidence for him having found inspiration in the ‘lustily drawn’ *lubok* with a pictorial narrative distributed within the frame of the illustration. The amulet-like frames with which Ryback encircled his pictures are themselves suggestive of the curvilinear folk style that Ryback and Lissitzky encountered in the ornamentation of the synagogues visited on their ethnographic expedition. And the vase of flowers on the back cover of *Mayses far kleyne kinderlekh* is unambiguously a ‘motif copied from Jewish cemeteries’.<sup>66</sup> But for Ryback, the ‘turn to primitivism’ did not merely involve recourse to elements of Jewish (and Russian) folk iconography, it also included the borrowing of visual forms characteristic of the artistic expression of children, who were his intended

<sup>65</sup> Stommels and Lemmens, ‘The Graphic Works of Issachar Ber Ryback (1897-1935)’, pp. 279-280.

<sup>66</sup> Chimen Abramsky, ‘Yiddish Book Illustrations in Russia: 1916-1923’, in *Tradition and Revolution*, ed. by Ruth Apter-Gabriel, pp. 61-70 (p. 66).

audience. The picture that emerges is one of the artist exploring the possibilities of the familiar, rather than of him exploring how to familiarise his audience with what had become possible, that is, the adoption of European high art. It then appears that Ryback and Chaikov manifested their ideological differences not only in their programmatic writings but also in their book illustrations for the Yiddish-reading child.

## 4 The Art of Translation: Lissitzky and Akselrod

Of the four artists considered here, El Lissitzky (1890-1941), born Lazar Markovich Lisitsky, is doubtlessly the one best known to the general public. For the art historian Alexandra Shatskikh,

Lissitzky's career is almost a textbook case of the influence of the new ideas about art and society. An ardent champion of Jewish art, an energetic member of the Kultur Lige, and the author of splendid books inspired by Jewish literary culture and avant-garde in spirit, Lazar Lisitsky... was transformed into the internationalist El Lissitzky.<sup>67</sup>

In Shatskikh's interpretation, Lissitzky's name change is a signifier of the 'abrupt and total' shift from the creation of explicitly Jewish works to the production of abstract, non-ethnic universalist art.<sup>68</sup> The decisive break in Lissitzky's artistic practice is commonly dated to have occurred at the end of 1919.<sup>69</sup> Wolitz explains Lissitzky's abandonment of 'the quest for the Jewish style' as a result of the reshaped socio-political structures in post-Revolutionary Russia.<sup>70</sup> Not only did a Jewish background no longer provide an obstacle to the participation in building a new art, but, by 1919, Jewish art imposed a 'growing confinement ... both from within and without' – 'from within' because the consumer of art whom Lissitzky addressed largely operated and functioned in Russian, and 'from without' because Jewish cultural autonomy waned in the wake of the consolidation of Bolshevik power.<sup>71</sup> However, as Wolitz also notes, Lissitzky continued to illustrate Yiddish books even after 1919. In fact, in Lissitzky's autobiography, the period of his Jewish books is given as 1917-1920, which suggests that his artistic trajectory was perhaps less clearly delineated than the schematic view of him as 'comprising two distinct and mutually exclusive entities' entails.<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Alexandra Shatskikh, 'Jewish Artists in the Russian Avant-Garde', in *Russian Jewish Artists in a Century of Change, 1890-1990*, ed. by Susan Tumarkin Goodman (Munich & New York: Prestel, 1995), pp. 71-80 (p. 74).

<sup>68</sup> Peter Nisbet, 'An Introduction to El Lissitzky', in *El Lissitzky 1890-1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museums, 1987), p. 17, cited by Lodder, p. 339. See also Ziva Amishai-Maisels, 'The Jewish Awakening: A Search for National Identity', in *Russian Jewish Artists in a Century of Change, 1890-1990*, ed. by Susan Tumarkin Goodman, pp. 54-70, which discusses Lissitzky's change in signature (from *aleph lamed* to *lamed yud* [ל] and *lamed lamed* [ll]) as a sign of his seeking a new identity (p. 62).

<sup>69</sup> See Wolitz, in *Tradition and Revolution*, ed. by Ruth Apter-Gabriel, p. 38; Lodder, p. 339.

<sup>70</sup> Wolitz, in *Tradition and Revolution*, ed. by Ruth Apter-Gabriel, p. 38.

<sup>71</sup> Wolitz, in *Tradition and Revolution*, ed. by Ruth Apter-Gabriel, p. 38.

<sup>72</sup> Lodder, p. 340.

*Elefandl*, the Yiddish translation of Rudyard Kipling's 'Just So' story 'The Elephant's Child' (1902), appeared in 1922, published by the Berlin publisher Shveln ('Thresholds'). The book is 285x222mm in size and consists of sixteen pages (fourteen of which are numbered). It contains no information on the translator, giving the author's name simply as 'Kipling' on front cover and title page. The illustrations are credited to 'Kraft' ('Strength') on the title page, but unsigned in the book. In addition to the illustrations on front and back cover, *Elefandl* contains ten black-and-white prints which are interspersed with the text, as well as three full-page illustrations (on pp. 8, 11 and [16]).

Lissitzky settled in Berlin in late 1921,<sup>73</sup> possibly sent by the Soviet powers as an 'unofficial representative of advanced Russian culture in the West'.<sup>74</sup> In the years following his arrival, two other children's books were published in Berlin with his illustrations: *Ukraynishe folkmayyses* (*Ukrainian Folktales*, 1922) and *Vaysrushishe folkmayyses* (*White Russian Folktales*, 1923), both translated into Yiddish by Leyb Kvitko and published by the Jewish section of the commissariat for people's education. Notwithstanding the publication date, Ruth Apter-Gabriel argues that 'judging from both style and content', the two books are likely to have been 'executed in 1919 at the latest'.<sup>75</sup> As concerns content, Apter-Gabriel follows the standard view of Lissitzky's biography and claims that by the time Lissitzky moved to Berlin, his work had 'no connection to anything Jewish'.<sup>76</sup> In style, Lissitzky's illustrations in these books are unmistakably modernist, with strongly shaded figures and resolutely flat backgrounds. Moreover, the depiction of 'cylindrical movement' in *Ukrainian Folktales*, Apter-Gabriel argues, recalls 'the more fully developed similar turbulence in *Had Gadya*', the 1919 volume of Lissitzky's lithographic illustrations of the traditional Passover song.

When comparing *Elfandl* to Lissitzky's folktale illustrations of 1922 and 1923, clear parallels emerge. In *Elfandl* too there is Cubist fragmentation of form (see especially the crocodile in fig. 4), strong shading with rapid passage from dark to light (see the elephant in fig. 4), and 'cylindrical movement', as exemplified by the ostrich whose body appears to be bent in two directions simultaneously (fig. 5). Lissitzky's figures are largely two-dimensional, devoid of background and ornamental detail, with absolutely no visual representation of the 'banks of the great grey-green, greasy Limpopo river all set about with fever trees'.

---

<sup>73</sup> See Nancy Perloff, 'The Puzzle of El Lissitzky's Artistic Identity', *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow*, ed. by Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003), pp. 1-23 (p. 7).

<sup>74</sup> Nisbet, p. 25; cited by Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), note 27, p. 56.

<sup>75</sup> Ruth Apter-Gabriel, 'El Lissitzky's Jewish Works', in *Tradition and Revolution*, ed. by Ruth Apter-Gabriel, pp. 101-124 (p. 120).

<sup>76</sup> Apter-Gabriel, p. 121.



fig. 4 El Lissitzky, Illustration from *Elefandl* (Berlin, 1922).  
Image courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.



fig. 5 El Lissitzky, Illustration from *Elefandl* (Berlin, 1922).  
Image courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

The front cover of *Elefandl* (fig. 6) is the only coloured illustration in the book. Enclosed in a black and red frame is a sideways depiction of the little elephant, set in a red circle beneath the title, whose typographical design is also in black and red. The elephant (already in possession of its trunk) is strutting out to the right as if urging the reader to turn the page. It is oriented on the diagonal, which not only creates a sense of dynamism but also aligns the picture with the (Cubo-)Futurist tradition, which is characterised by its prominent use of diagonal lines and constructions. In the rendering

of the artist identified as ‘Strength’, the little elephant is a vigorous child of the Revolution, marching confidently into the future, its trunk lifted high.



fig. 6 El Lissitzky, Front Cover Illustration for *Elefandl* (Berlin, 1922).  
Image courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

The red of the cover underscores the dynamism and revolutionary tenor of the design. Lissitzky, who had produced the propaganda poster ‘Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge’ in 1919 and whose *The Suprematist Tale of Two Squares*, the story of a struggle in which ‘red sets itself over black’,<sup>77</sup> was published in the same year as *Elefandl*, was an artist well-versed in the symbolic use of red. The injection of red on the front cover, then, not only serves to draw the reader’s eyes to the elephant but can also be interpreted as a political statement. While entirely faithful to Kipling’s text, Lissitzky’s illustrations create a pictorial subtext that turns the ‘Just So’ story about the elephant’s child ‘full of satiable curiosity’ into a revolutionary tale in which the young elephant successfully rebels against the established order and thereby brings about an improved society for all.

Given the revolutionary potential of ‘The Elephant’s Child’, it seems fitting that it should also have been published as a Russian children’s book in the early years of the Soviet Union. Like *Elefandl*, the Russian version of ‘The Elephant’s Child’, *Slonenok*, appeared in 1922.<sup>78</sup> It contained illustrations by Vladimir Lebedev (1891-1967), which ‘made an enormous aesthetic impression on Lebedev’s contemporaries as well as generations of critics to come’.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, to this day, Lebedev occupies a prominent place in the critical literature on Soviet book illustration. Discussing the development of Russian book design, Alla Rosenfeld credits Lebedev with having ‘created a specific graphic language attuned to children’s visual perception’ and thereby founded a whole school of Soviet book illustration. Concerning Lebedev’s illustrations for ‘The Elephant’s Child’, she notes

<sup>77</sup> Steiner, p. 27.

<sup>78</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *Slonenok*, trans. by Korney Chukovsky, with illustrations by Vladimir Lebedev ([Peterburg]: Ėpokha, 1922).

<sup>79</sup> Steiner, p. 43.

Lebedev avoids the illusion of depth; instead of using contours, he introduces masses in subtle gradations of black and grey shades. Lebedev ... employs a style characterized by two-dimensionality, absence of illusionistic surface, perspective shrinkage, and light modelling relative to children's perception. Opposed to excessive ornamentation, Lebedev shows in his designs no trace of the mannerist decorativeness of prerevolutionary children's books.<sup>80</sup>

The description – with its vocabulary of ‘gradations of black and grey shades’, ‘two-dimensionality’, and ‘absence of illusionistic surface’ – could just as easily apply to Lissitzky's illustrations. Similarly, Rosenfeld's reference to ‘the architectonic construction of *Slonenok* calls to mind Lissitzky's remarks about the need for ‘a book's architecture ... programming the whole as well as individual pages’.<sup>81</sup> Steiner's comments on Lebedev's illustrations further evoke comparison with Lissitzky, as both artists may be said to employ Cubist constructions, ‘making the figures look as if they consist of separate segments or parts, like jointed marionettes’.<sup>82</sup>

Even to the untrained eye, the similarities between Lissitzky's and Lebedev's illustrations for Kipling's story are unmistakable. In both books, the front cover illustration (see fig. 6 and the left image of fig. 7) has the little elephant seen from the side, prancing in the direction in which the book is to be read (right-to-left in *Elefandl* and left-to-right in *Slonenok*). On both covers, the image of the elephant is set within a circle, either drawn in red (*Elefandl*), or composed of different images (*Slonenok*). For the book title, Lissitzky and Lebedev both use letters that contrast in colour (black and red, and black and white, respectively) but are uniform in size. There is overlap even as concerns the ‘architecturalisms’ of the typefaces, with the dots that Lissitzky places at the end of the strokes and hooks of the Hebrew letters finding their counterpart in Lebedev's design of the numbers of the publication date. The illustrations inside the books show further similarities between *Elefandl* and *Slonenok*, as, for example, in the depiction of the ostrich (see the right image of fig. 7), which in both books is bent into a cylindrical shape and precariously balanced on one leg. With close parallels in composition and execution, the similarities between the two sets of illustrations go beyond the shared Cubist-style schematisation of the animal figures. In their respective drawings for ‘The Elephant's Child’, Lissitzky and Lebedev use not only a common artistic language but seem to speak in unison, articulating a common vision.

---

<sup>80</sup> Rosenfeld, p. 172.

<sup>81</sup> Rosenfeld, p. 171. Lissitzky's remarks on the post-Revolutionary achievements in typography and book design appeared in a guidebook to the All-Union Polygraphic Exhibition in Moscow (1927), cited by Janacek, p. 204.

<sup>82</sup> Steiner, p. 43.



fig. 7 Vladimir Lebedev, Front Cover and Illustration for *Slonenok* ([Peterburg], 1922). (Evgeny Steiner, *Stories for Little Comrades* (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press), pp. 44-45.)

To recap, both books were published in 1922. Lebedev's illustrations were first shown in the summer of the same year at an exhibition of 'new trends' at Petrograd's Museum of Artistic Culture, which also included work by Kazimir Malevich.<sup>83</sup> *Elefandl* was published in Berlin after Lissitzky had left Russia in late 1921. However, given the stylistic closeness between Lissitzky's illustrations for the books *Elefandl*, *Ukraynische Folkmayyses* and *Vaysrusische Folkmayyses*, *Elefandl* was plausibly completed before Lissitzky came to Berlin, possibly as early as 1919, which Apter-Gabriel argues was the date when Lissitzky finished his work for the two volumes of children's folktales. In the years between 1919, the date associated with the end of Lissitzky's 'Jewish period', and 1921, Lissitzky moved from Kiev to Vitebsk, in order to teach at the Vitebsk Popular Art Institute, where he was joined by Malevich in September 1919. After the disbandment of the Art Institute in 1921, Lissitzky arrived in Moscow to teach architecture at VKhUTEMAS, the 'Russian Bauhaus'.<sup>84</sup>

From Lissitzky's biography, it may be reasonably conjectured that in the period of 1919-1921, he was in close contact with Russian (and Ukrainian) avant-garde artists. Wolitz argues for this to be the case for Jewish artists more generally, who 'for the most part moved back and forth between Russian and Jewish artistic and intellectual circles'. It is then not unfeasible that Lebedev and Lissitzky (both of whom knew Malevich) were influenced by each other's work. If the illustrations for *Elefandl* were in fact completed by the summer of 1919, it is possible that Lissitzky's illustrations of 'The Elephant's Child' are of an earlier date than the ones by Lebedev, and that Lebedev responded to Lissitzky's illustrations with a series of pictures that are similar in technique, structure and style. If so, it suggests that even in his Yiddish illustration work, in which he affirmed a Jewish artistic identity, Lissitzky sought – and was recognised – to belong to a wider artistic community that served the revolutionary cause by building the new world, complete with new child and new book. What is more, if true, the hypothesis that

<sup>83</sup> Steiner, pp. 41-42.

<sup>84</sup> See Perloff, p. 7.

Lebedev's illustrations were inspired by Lissitzky's work would mean that, far from irrelevant to Soviet culture as a whole, Yiddish book art exerted influence on graphic artists who were part of the (linguistically and politically) dominant Russian culture.

An example of influence flowing in the other direction – from Russian to Yiddish artistic circles – is the translation of Samuil Marshak's *Yesterday and Today*. The Russian original, *Vchera i segodnia*, illustrated by Lebedev, was published in 1925 by Raduga ('Rainbow'), a privately owned publishing house specialising in children's literature.<sup>85</sup> The Yiddish version, *Nekhtn un haynt*, translated by (L.) Rozenblum and illustrated by Meyer Akselrod (1902-1970, the brother of the Yiddish writer Zelik Akselrod), was published two years later by the Moscow publisher Shul un bukh ('School and book'). In text, the Yiddish translation is entirely faithful to the Russian original, and tells the story of yesterday's kerosene lamp, pen and inkwell, water bucket and yoke, which are not happy about having been replaced by today's light bulb, typewriter and running water, and do not understand the workings of the new technologies. With respect to the illustrations, however, the two books are markedly different.

Lebedev's lithographs for the Russian original show the contrast between new and old in colour and form. The objects that define the old way of life are drawn with 'thin, limp curves', in shades of predominantly brown and black, while the technological achievements of progress are characterised by 'solid flat planes' and 'powerful blocks of color'.<sup>86</sup> The orderly, poster-like compositions of the new life are juxtaposed with pages describing the old world which look cluttered and jumbled. The cover illustration (fig. 8) encapsulates the message: while yesterday was black, represented by hunched-over figures in fading outline, today is red and involves sturdy, upright and brightly coloured figures marching to the left.



fig. 8 Vladimir Lebedev, Front Cover Illustration for *Vchera i segodnia* (Moscow, 1925). Image from the Walter Havighurst Special Collections, Miami University Libraries, Oxford, Ohio.

In Akselrod's rendering, the contrast between yesterday and today is less stark and less ideologically charged. Only the front cover is illustrated in colour; the ten illustrations inside the book are all in black and white. Besides presenting a more uniform

<sup>85</sup> Rosenfeld, p. 168.

<sup>86</sup> Steiner, p. 54.

appearance, the illustrations of Akselrod's design lack Lebedev's abstraction. In *Nekhtn un haynt*, none of the human figures are faceless or, like paper cutouts, lined up in serial fashion, and there is little use of geometric forms and punctuation marks, unlike the arrow, question and exclamation marks found in *Vchera i segodnia*.

The difference in style is evident already on the front cover (fig. 9). While Akselrod follows Lebedev's example in colour-coding yesterday and today, the contrast he draws is not one between black and red. Yesterday's objects are set against a blue background, seemingly more appropriate for the realm of fairy tale than past oppression. The world of yesterday is curved and cursive; its topsyturviness contrasts with the rectangles and square lettering of today. Yet both main words of the title are lettered in black, which, unlike Lebedev's shift from black to red, implies continuity between present and past.



fig. 9 Meyer Akselrod, Front Cover Illustration for *Nekhtn* (Moscow, 1927).  
Image courtesy of Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Akselrod further differs from Lebedev in that he allows elements of the old and new world – for example, electric lamp and candle - to intermingle in one picture (see pp. 5, 7), instead of maintaining a strict division between them. In Akselrod's visual universe, old and new can co-exist. The total eradication of the old does not appear to be a requisite to the building of the new world. In fact, it is sometimes hard to tell the difference between the old and the new in Akselrod's illustrations. As in the Russian book, the second illustration of *Nekhtn un haynt* (p. 3) presents the dinner scene around the table that is wistfully recalled by the kerosene lamp: 'But when they used to light me / Each night, the moths all came / Fluttering through the window / To perish in my flame'.<sup>87</sup> While Lebedev's illustration (fig. 10) shows a bourgeois couple, clearly identified as such by their attire and corpulence, Akselrod portrays a family that is not overtly signified as coming from either a bourgeois or an observant Jewish background. Father and son wear worker's caps (like the one adopted by Lenin), and the mother too is

<sup>87</sup> English text quoted from *The Circus and Other Stories: Four Books by Samuil Marshak & Vladimir Lebedev*, translated by Stephen Capus (London: Tate Publishing, 2013), n.pag.

dressed plainly, lacking the fine clothes and jewellery donned by the woman in Lebedev's picture.



fig. 10 Vladimir Lebedev, Illustration from *Vchera i segodnia* (Moscow, 1925).  
Image from the Walter Havighurst Special Collections, Miami University Libraries, Oxford, Ohio.



fig. 11 Meyer Akselrod, Illustration from *Nekhtn* (Moscow, 1927).  
Image courtesy of Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University.

If the kerosene lamp is a feature of the pre-Revolutionary world, Akselrod's illustration reassures the reader that not every household where it is found belongs to 'the internal enemy'.

In summary, the translation of Marshak's book into Yiddish attests to the popularity and critical acclaim for *Yesterday and Today*, but also demonstrates Russian cultural dominance over the minority national cultures and literatures. As illustrator for the Yiddish version, Akselrod largely followed the original overall design. His individual

illustrations, however, frequently differ in style and content from Lebedev's model, presenting a less polarised vision of the difference between the world of yesterday and today. Whereas the Russian kerosene lamp is at home with the 'fat cats' of the old order, with both soon to be replaced, the Yiddish kerosene lamp is found in the home of a working family, where it may continue to function for a while alongside the new invention. In the world of today, the Russian typewriter is imposingly solid, square and mechanic; in contrast, the Yiddish typewriter is an altogether more *hey mish* appliance – smaller, curvier and less dominating. If Lebedev highlights the schism that exists between yesterday and today, Akselrod emphasises continuity. His reinterpretation of the original visual and textual narrative may be regarded as a kind of 'Judaisation' in the sense that he adapts the Soviet revolutionary tale to fit better with a particular definition of Jewish art. In his affirmation of continuity, Akselrod creates a set of illustrations that harmonises with the concept of a Jewish national art that is rooted in folk tradition rather than advocates a decisive break with all things past.

## 5 Conclusion

The creation of Yiddish book art for children occurred in the hothouse climate of a theoretical debate about the parameters of a modern secular Jewish culture, especially as they concerned the development of the literary and visual arts. The production of visual art, even (or, perhaps, especially) the art aimed at children, meant taking a position in this debate, irrespective of whether the artist also chose to articulate this position in manifesto-like statements. The illustrations for the four books discussed in this chapter – *Temerl* (1917), *Mayses far kleyninke kinderlekh* (1922), *Elefandl* (1922) and *Nekhbn un haynt* (1927) – span a period of ten years, in which the project of Jewish nation building faced increasing difficulties in a shifting socio-political landscape. Nevertheless it appears that the issue of ethnographic loyalty or 'renovating the old' versus a shift to universalism or 'building anew' remained contentious throughout, and continued to preoccupy artists involved in the design of children's books and, by means of these books, children's lives. If Chaikov and Lissitzky may be seen as having turned outwards to European art movements and Russian art circles, Rybakov and Akselrod can be regarded as having turned inwards, seeking to fashion some bond to the world of Jewish existence before the modern Jewish and the Bolshevik revolutions. What both those who turned outwards and those who turned inwards had in common is their belief in an artistic project with the power to create, in the words of Chagall, 'a world where everything and anything is possible'.<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> Edouard Roditi, 'Interview with Chagall', in *Dialogues on Art*, rev. ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: Ross-Erikson, 1980), pp. 8-31; reprinted in excerpts in *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, ed. with commentary by Vivian B. Mann, pp. 147-148 (p. 147).