

the particular historical circumstances of early Soviet Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. But in contrast to the title, what this means is not always Soviet and almost never kosher. In fact, Shternshis's book could just as well be called "Jewish and Non-Kosher."

The book opens with the evocative anecdote about an old Jewish woman cooking "kosher pork." For her, pork is kosher simply because it is cooked by a Jew. Needless to say, her recipe, or rather her ingenious interpretation of Jewish dietary law, would leave even the most liberal rabbi reeling. However, what is significant in that story is that kashrut, however ephemeral, still continues to exist for Shternshis's ex-Soviet respondents as a point of reference and as a cultural category that defines them and sets them apart from their non-Jewish countrymen.

The point of Shternshis's groundbreaking work is not to lament and count losses, but rather to understand in a very nuanced way the Soviet Jewish identity, and how it came to be. This understanding emerges from a close analysis of a wealth of data – 255 life-story interviews with ex-Soviet Jews, living now in Russia, Germany, and the US. The interviews are examined in the context of other data – documents, archival sources,

published materials, excerpts from popular press and brochures. In this way, the readers get a taste of the materials that Shternshis's respondents recall and discuss.

Naturally, these life-stories interviews (which since publication of the book have become available to other researchers) cover both personal and collective milestones. Shternshis's respondents lived through birth and decline of Soviet Yiddish culture, through *korenizatsiia* ("nativization" of minorities), through experiments with Jewish agricultural colonies in Crimea, and with Jewish autonomy in Birobidzhan, as well as through powerful waves of migration from the former Pale to Soviet urban centers. All these experiences are reflected in and influenced by the cultural production of the time: the songs, poems, performances, movies, and printed media that the respondents enjoyed and, in some cases, created. What emerges from Shternshis's analysis is a portrait of a generation of Soviet Jews through their cultural tastes, their way of creating, consuming, and circulating a panoply of cultural products.

Shternshis's innovation is her focus on the receiving end of the Soviet culture industry. Several recent books discuss Yiddish cultural production.¹ They examine the work



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Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006). xxi+252 pp., ill. ISBN: 978-025-334-726-8.

As its title promises, Anna Shternshis's new book examines Jewish popular culture in the pre-war Soviet Union. In the course of this examination, the reader will learn what it means to be, feel, and act Jewish in

¹ Jeffrey Veidlinger: *The Moscow Soviet Jewish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage*. Bloomington, 2000; David Shneer: *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture, 1918-1930*. Cambridge, 2004; Gennady Estrakh. In *Harness: Yiddish Writers'*

of Yiddish writers, poets, theatre and film professionals – the new Soviet elites, who were responsible for bringing the Soviet message to the Jewish masses. What was missing is examination of what the “masses” did with the message. How did they understand and use new Soviet Yiddish culture? The answers that Shternshis provides are nuanced and multifaceted. She shows how her respondents used the hegemonic products to their own ends.

The first chapter examines the Soviet antireligious propaganda geared at Yiddish-speaking, often traditional Jews. This propaganda includes parodies of Jewish texts, antireligious meetings, concerts, stage performances, and alternative Jewish celebrations (e.g. Passover seder with a *Komsomol Haggadah*). Shternshis finds that participation in antireligious activities at school was often motivated by social rather than ideological factors, and in addition was mitigated by religious observance at home. Still, religious observance gradually stopped being a defining part of Jewish identity. Shternshis’s analysis shows how the original transformation of Jewish identity from religious to ethnic took place, and how, in the words of another researcher, being Jewish

in the USSR came to include such characteristics as: “cultivation of intellectualism, respect for hard effort and know-how in one’s line of work, strength of family networks, in-group solidarity, moderation in . . . lifestyle, quiet negation or sheer manipulation of the Soviet system.”²

The second chapter explores Soviet efforts to shape Jewish literary tastes, from literacy courses to the worker-correspondent movement. This chapter provides a fascinating example of how hegemonic media can be put by audiences to their own use. For instance, worker-correspondents used the media (letters to the editors and contributions to the “wall newspaper”) in order to have a chance at social advancement or to feign loyalty to Soviet authorities. Sometimes the worker-correspondents’ criticism of their families’ “old-fashioned” practices was supported and lauded by those very families! They were proud of their children’s publications and social advancement. The harsh ideological content of the publications was ignored. In this way, both the correspondents and their readers found ways of interpreting ideology if not against the grain, then at least regardless of the grain.

Chapter three tells a similar story about amateur Yiddish theaters. Despite the propaganda content of the stage productions, the audience found ways to use them in their own ways. Audiences identified with the Yiddish language and with the performers of the plays – members of their communities – and found a way to ignore the staple propaganda message.

Chapter four examines the music and songs popular among Jews at the time, particularly officially sponsored Yiddish songs about Stalin, the Party, agricultural settlements, and the Red Army. Shternshis traces how these songs were sung, understood, and sometimes, altered. Again, the way in which these songs became popular at times had nothing to do with their intended message – as in the case when a Soviet propagandist song was sung as a parody, or when songs disparaging “the old days” were imbued with nostalgia. In addition to published officially sanctioned songs, Shternshis uncovers a corpus of folk songs that were previously unpublished. The comparison between published and unpublished songs is revealing. Often, unpublished songs are hardly “anti-Soviet” – inclusion of Hebrewisms, references to traditional Jewish customs, or even romantic content was enough to bar their publication. But those are the songs that Shternshis’s respondents loved and remembered all their lives. This is an

illuminating example of critical and even subversive cultural expression that was possible even in the conditions of a totalitarian regime.

Chapter five examines the relationships between broader Russian-language Soviet culture and Yiddish-language Jewish popular culture. On the one hand Jews became cultural producers of the broader Soviet society, while on the other hand, Jewish culture itself took new forms, such as emergence of Jewish elements in the mainstream culture. The Jews became highly sensitive to these elements and identified and interpreted them to their ends – to maintain and perform their new Soviet Jewish identity, russified, secularized, and characterized by ethnic solidarity. A good example here is Shternshis’s analysis of the reception of the Soviet Jewish film, “Seekers of Happiness” (1936) about Jewish resettlement in Birobidzhan. The film was addressed to the broader Soviet audiences, but became popular only with the Jews, who saw it as an expression of their identity. Although most of the Jewish characters in the film are progressive Soviet people, there is one negative character: Individualistic, greedy Pinya with unmistakably Jewish mannerisms is depicted as an embodiment of old-fashioned Jewishness. Clearly, the film aimed to disparage this kind of character. Yet, the intention of the filmmakers misfired and Pinya,

Romance with Communism. Syracuse, NY, 2005; Vladislav Ivanov. GOSET: Politika iiskusstvo, 1919–1928. Moscow, 2007.

² Larissa Remennick. Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration, and Conflict. New Brunswick, NJ, 2006. P. 31.

played by the great Soviet Jewish actor Veniamin Zuskin, became the most popular and beloved character on screen. Pinya's lines entered the Soviet Jewish vernacular for generations to come. In their warm recollections of Pinya, Shternshis's respondents easily cited him, but couldn't remember the propagandist plot of the film. Once again, Shternshis' analysis demonstrates the gap between the propaganda message and the way people on the ground interpret this message.

Shternshis's conclusions about such critical and selective use of media would not come as a surprise to scholars of popular culture, especially to scholars of audience research. Already Stuart Hall,³ a pioneer of this approach to popular culture, has argued that some people may interpret mainstream hegemonic messages in a negotiated or even oppositional way. However, most of the audience researchers study the contemporary US and UK context and virtually never venture into Eastern European history. In applying the paradigm of audience research to the cultural and historic context of the pre-war Soviet Union, Shternshis makes a great contribution to this field. She shows in a very detailed way how her respondents performed exactly this kind of op-

positional reading and to what end. It is my biggest hope that "Soviet and Koshel" will find its way into the Anglo-dominated field of audience research. Perhaps a more theoretical conclusion drawing connections with this field would have made this book more accessible to scholars and students of cultural studies, popular culture, and cultural anthropology.

As it is, there is no doubt that Shternshis makes an important contribution to the fields of her own training (also rich and multidisciplinary), including Russian Jewish history, Yiddish language, and Jewish culture writ large. Within these fields, the value of Shternshis's approach, combining a "thick description" of Jewish-Soviet cultural production with oral history, is evident. Shternshis's writing is clear, precise, and evocative: she has a great sense of humor and an eye for detail. Shternshis is equally at ease in Russian and Yiddish, and her book treats readers to an array of examples from published texts and interviews (in English translation and translation). It is helpful that the text is richly illustrated with images taken from Yiddish antireligious propaganda and from workers' press, as well as with photographs of the locales, stage performances, and portraits of respondents.

In sum, the book has the potential to appeal to wider audiences – it is highly recommended to anyone interested in Jewish and popular culture, but more immediately, it is invaluable for scholars of Soviet Jewry and early Soviet culture.



³ Stuart Hall, *Encoding/Decoding* // S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, and P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979*. London, 1980.