Degree Project
Level: bachelor’s
Jewish Religion on Trial

Understanding Isaac Babel’s Short Story “Karl-Yankel”

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Subject/main field of study: Russian
Course code: RY2014
Credits: 15hp
Date of examination: 17 December 2018

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Abstract

The subject of this thesis is the short story “Карл-Янкель” (“Karl-Yankel”) by Russian-Jewish writer Isaac Babel (1894‒1940), published in 1931. The story depicts a trial following the circumcision of a boy against his parents’ will, and thus directly addresses issues of high relevance at the time, namely the transformations of religious life in the early years of the Soviet Union. Firstly, I have analyzed the references to Jewish culture that appear in the story. Further on, drawing on research by other scholars, I have examined the shift of the traditional Jew into a Soviet Jew—a highly secular subject deeply involved in the socialist society and far removed from the traditions of the Pale of Settlement. Lastly, I have studied the narrator’s perspective, which, being far from objective, plays a major role in portraying the trial and is of key importance for understanding the transformation of Jewish life that occurred in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. At the end of the story, the narrator deprives the reader of the verdict and gives instead his attention to the circumcised boy. I argue that he thus focused on the future rather than on the conflict between tradition and secularism.

Keywords: Isaac Babel, Karl-Yankel, Judaism, identity, Russian-Jewish literature.

Note on quotation, transliteration and translation

In order to benefit both readers and non-readers of Russian, the original text and its translation shall be used hand in hand in this study. The Russian shall be provided in the original Cyrillic, as to preserve its readability. However, when transliteration is the case—as in personal and geographical names—I have used the Library of Congress system, except for names that already have an established form in English, such as Isaac Babel or Maxim Gorky (instead of Isaak Babel’ and Maksim Gorkii, respectively).

In the case of Yiddish, I have used the YIVO system of transliteration.

Titles are presented in the original language the first time and in English translation at further instances, simply to improve the flow and readability of the text.
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1. Introduction

Isaac Babel (1894‒1940) is a central—and complex—figure in the Russian-Jewish literature, a writer that was deeply anchored in the Jewish culture of Odessa and the Pale of Settlement\(^1\) and at the same time equally anchored in the Russian cultural heritage. The short story “Карл-Янкель” (“Karl-Yankel”) tells about a boy who is taken to the local circumciser by his grandmother, a pious Jew, and is circumcised without his parents’ approval. The child’s father subsequently takes the grandmother to trial and provokes a great deal of debate about traditional Jewishness in the new order of the Soviet Union. The story not only evidences the growing repression of religious life, but also reflects the transformations of identity that Jews went through during this period and is thus a significant source of information both on the author and on the events that shaped Jewish life in the early Soviet Union.

2. Aims and material

The aim of this thesis is to examine the presence of Jewish culture and identity in the short story “Карл-Янкель” and its importance both within Babel’s oeuvre and in a wider, historical context. Given the transformations that occurred after the 1917 Revolution for—among others—the Jewish population, it is interesting to see how these changes are coped with by the characters and the narrator. I would like to understand the meaning of the trial in relation to the growing secularization at the time and the conflicts of identity that might have arisen from it. The main questions for this study thus are:

(1) Which Jewish cultural references and motifs can be found in the story?

(2) What kind of conflict between the traditional Jew and a “new”—i.e. Soviet—Jew is depicted?

(3) Building on these two, the rather more hermeneutical question: What can be said of the narrator’s identity?

The central source for this thesis is Babel’s short story “Карл-Янкель” itself,\(^2\) as well as the Norton edition of Babel’s works for the English translations.\(^3\)

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\(^1\) The territory of the Russian Empire in which Jews were allowed to settle. This restriction existed from the late eighteenth century until 1917. “Pale of Settlement”, *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, accessed November 30, 2018, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Pale_of_Settlement.


3. Previous research

Admittedly, there is a plethora of studies regarding Babel’s Russian-Jewish identity, and researchers like Efraim Sicher, Gregory Freidin and many others have done relevant pieces of scholarship about it. However, “Karl-Yankel” has not received as much attention as the short story cycles Одесские рассказы (Odessa Tales) and Конармия (Red Cavalry), the short story “Шаббоас-Нахаму” (“Shabbos Nahamu”) or the play Закат (Sunset) have. Harriet Murav certainly mentions “Karl-Yankel” in Music from a Speeding Train, but only relatively briefly, as she focuses on Yiddish-language authors in her analysis and thus gives me the chance of further providing some new—and hopefully pertinent—reflections on it.

Secondary sources that are central for this study are mainly articles by Efraim Sicher, one of the leading Babel scholars. Scholarly works in Russian I have used consist mostly of research done by Michael Weisskopf. On Odessa, the лuftmentsh and Russian-Jewish literature in general,

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4 See for example, Gregory Freidin, “Сидели два нисчихи, илак делалас’ русская еврейская литература: Бабель и Мандельштам” in Isaak Babel’ v istoricheskom i literaturnom kontekste: XXI vek. Sbornik materialov Mezdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii v Gosudarstvennom literaturnom muze 23–36 iyunia 2014 g. (Moscow: Knizhniki, 2016), pp. 419–451, where the author compares the fates of Babel and Mandelstam and the way they coped with their double Jewish-Russian identity. He demonstrates the undeniable place that they occupy in Russian literature, and that both of them showed being capable of using both their Jewish and their Russian heritage.


6 See Alice Stone Nakhimovsky, “Isaac Babel” in Russian-Jewish Literature and Identity. Jabotinsky, Babel, Grossman, Galich, Roziner, Markish (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1992), pp. 70–106, in which the author provides a short description of the Babel’s conflicts between his Russian and his Jewish identity. In describing his biography, she finds some correlation between these identity conflicts and the historical context in which he was active. She thoroughly analyzes Red Army and Odessa Tales and distinguishes among several types of Jewish groups that Babel came into contact with, as for example those of the rural штетлех, the Hasidic communities and, lastly, the urban, Russian-speaking populations of cities like Odessa. Another example of close reading of Red Cavalry is Val Vinokur. “Isaac Babel’s Dirty Ethics” in The Trace of Judaism. Dostoevsky, Babel, Mandelstam, Levinas (Evans- ton, Illinois: Northwestern UP, 2008), pp. 60–92, where he analyzes the presence of the skaz literary device in the stories of Red Cavalry and the moral and ethical implications of the descriptions that appear in them. On another perspective, namely the presence of cyclical, “Jewish” time perspective in Odessa Tales and Red Cavalry, see Efraim Sicher. “Isaak Babel’s ‘Odessa Tales’: Inventing Lost Time and the Search for Cultural Identity” in The Russian Review 77 (January 2018), pp. 65–87.


8 The play’s resemblance to the tractate of the Talmud Pikre Avot has been shown by Iakov Liberman, as mentioned in Weisskopf. MezhduD ogennykh sten. Kniga ob Isaake Babele (Moscow: Knizhniki, 2017), pp. 65–69.

9articles by Sicher mentioned above (cfr. notes 5–7).

10 Weisskopf. MezhduD ogennykh sten.
Harriet Murav’s *Music from a Speeding Train: Jewish Literature in Post-Revolution Russia*¹¹ and Anna Shternshis’ *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union 1923–1939*¹² provide a background against which my interpretation concerning “old” and “new” Jews is built, as well as giving insights on the particular events that shaped the life of Jews in the Soviet Union during the 1930s.

The necessity of limiting the study to only one short story has mostly to do with the established dimension of this thesis. A more general study of the collections of Babel’s short stories, be it his *Odessa Tales* or *Red Cavalry* would, on the one hand, be too ambitious for the scope of this study and has, on the other, already been done by renowned scholars of Babel, as noted above. The choice of specifically “Karl-Yankel” arises from the fact that this short story condenses a great amount of interesting content and provides relevant material for the inquiry upon Jewish identity and the transformations of Jewish life in the early Soviet Union.

**4. Babel’s life and his Jewish identity**

As could arguably be said about any personality, some understanding of Babel’s life, his origins and his tragic fate is important in order to recognize the significant place that his writings occupy in both the Russian and the Jewish literature. I find it thus imperative to provide a background about his life and some thoughts about the central position that Jewish culture has in his work.

Isaac Emmanuilovich Babel was born in 1894 into a well-off Jewish family in Odessa, although soon after his birth the family moved to Nikolayev, 150 kilometers away from there.¹³ Twelve years later, in 1906, Babel’s family moved back to Odessa and Isaac enrolled in the Commercial School there. At about this time he started writing stories in French. Babel had a secular upbringing, although he, in his own words, «по настоянию отца изучал до шестнадцати лет еврейский язык, Библию, Талмуд»¹⁴ (‘on [my] father’s insistence, [I] studied Hebrew, the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud’¹⁵ until the age of 16’). In 1913, at the age of 19, he published his first story, “Старый Шлойме” (“Old Shloyme”). Three years later he moved to St. Petersburg, where he met Maxim Gorky and started to contribute stories for the journal *Лемонись* (Chroni-
cle). After serving briefly on the Romanian front during WWI, he deserted, returned to Odessa and afterwards travelled to St. Petersburg, where he worked as a translator for the counterintelligence department. In 1920, he served as a war correspondent on the Polish front with the Cavalry Army of Budyonny. These experiences inspired one of his major works, *Red Cavalry*, published in 1923. During the 1920s he also published most of the *Odessa Tales*, which were later turned into the film *Беня Крик* (*Benya Krik*) in 1927. The film was soon taken out of circulation because of ideological reasons, and he subsequently disowned it in further publications. During the 1930s Babel spent some time abroad, mostly in Paris. These periods abroad, together with some for the Soviet powers unfitting relations with foreign writers, had a tragic effect on his fate. He was mostly unproductive during this period because of the growing artistic limitations in the Soviet Union and the difficulty of publishing uncensored work. On May 15, 1939, he was arrested on grounds of spying for France and Austria, severely tortured and finally executed on January 27 the following year. Only in 1954, with the Khrushchev thaw, was he officially rehabilitated and, three years later, his works republished.

A lot has been said regarding Babel being both a “Russian” and a “Jewish” writer, and a survey of his persona or work apparently cannot begin without a comment on the subject, with remarks ranging from «Еврей с русской душой»16 (‘A Jew with a Russian soul’), as expressed by Soviet writer Vsevolod Ivanov, or that by Michael Weisskopf, who wittily paraphrases from Babel’s short story “Дорога” (“The Road”) and defines him as «Русский, в рабина отдавай»17 (“Russian indeed, so Russian one can appoint him a Rabbi”18). For Western audiences, it may seem an unnecessary distinction, but given the fact that both of Babel’s identities are deeply interwoven into his work, it is not of minor importance. Weisskopf takes a step further and regards him a sort of “Russian Kafka”, as the latter’s place in both the German and the Jewish literature makes him quite analogous to Babel.19

Babel’s “Jewishness” does not restrict itself to his identity or ethnicity, but is, as stated above, deeply interwoven in his work. References to both the Bible, the Midrash20 and the Talmud, as well as multiple Jewish cultural practices have been found in his short stories and plays by many a researcher, as already has been mentioned. Sicher argues that Babel was doing a “double bookkeeping” in that he was writing for a multilingual—Russian-, Hebrew- and Yiddish-speaking—readership that had knowledge of the classical Jewish texts and was “versed in reading subtexts, as Jews were after centuries of cultural repression in various lands”. Jewish culture

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17 Weisskopf. *Между огненных стен*, p. 63.
20 Biblical exegesis.
provided a background against which Babel could create a large amount of intertextuality that his multilingual readers could grasp, some of them even hidden unintelligible to the unlearned reader. In that way, “intertextuality became a secret code known to the initiated who had grown up before the Revolution and were attuned to the Jewish cultural polysystem”.  

5. Odessa and the luftmentsh

The Odessa in which Babel grew up underwent deep changes after the 1917 Revolution and the subsequent civil war. It had been a cosmopolitan city with a high number of Jews—Babel himself uses the not-so-hyperbolic expression «Половину населения его составляют евреи»22 (‘Half of its population is made up of Jews’). A prominent kind of Jew in the city and in other parts of the Pale of Settlement was the so-called люфтме́нтш (luftmentsh, lit. ‘person of air’, the Jewish dealers that seemed to make their living out of nothing). 23 These luftmentshn were, given that trading and speculating was central to their way of life, deeply rooted in the capitalist, bourgeois Odessa and had no place in the socialist economy of the Soviet Union.

In the Odessa Tales (which have come to include “Karl-Yankel”24), Babel gives an idealized picture of Odessa’s cosmopolitan past—that curious mixture of bourgeois culture, criminality and Jewishness—which does not concur with the Bolshevik ideals of a classless, atheist society. Sicher argues that “Babel was neither describing an existing reality nor inventing a fictional Odessa”25 and thus sets the work in the context of the Odessa myth that grew in the 1920s, which was neither entirely true, nor entirely fictional, as any nostalgic yearning for an idealized past. This nostalgia is tangentially present in “Karl-Yankel” as well, as will be seen when I shall analyze the narrator’s perspective.

6. Analysis

The story narrates of Karl-Yankel, the son of a Soviet man of politics and Paulina, herself the daughter of Brana Brutman, an Orthodox Jew. While Karl-Yankel’s father is away and his mother ill, Brana, who is appalled at the prospect of not having any Jewish grandchildren, takes the boy, by then still called Karl—after Karl Marx—to Naftula, the local мohel (ritual circumsicer), has him circumcised and gives him the name Yankel (Yiddish diminutive ofיעקב, ינקט, ‘Jacob’, i.e. Israel, the patriarch of the Jews). When the child’s father comes back and

24 Modern editions include nine stories (among them, “Karl-Yankel”), although only four of them were published under the title Odessa tales when they first appeared in 1923-1924, as well as in the 1957 edition following Babel’s rehabilitation. Cfr. Sicher. “Isaak Babel’s ‘Odessa Tales’”, p. 68.
notices the intervention, he demands justice and a trial commences. After much debate and the calling of several witnesses, the verdict remains undeclared as the narrator swifts his attention to Karl-Yankel, who is being breast-fed by a Kirghiz woman in the Red Corner. 26 He then thinks to himself in a double-negative that the boy cannot by any means fail to grow up and be happier than himself, as nobody ever fought for him as much as society seems to be fighting over Karl-Yankel.

The story was first published in the periodical Звезда (The Star) in the year 1931 27 and is often regarded as not one of Babel’s masterpieces, even by Babel himself, who held that “what’s being published [at the time] is a quite insignificant part of my work”. 28 Besides from the potentially unpopular political implications of depicting a trial to religious practice, the story’s lack of popularity compared to other works might be due to the fact that the events are depicted in a rather solemn way, and that the bizarre, comical, or even grotesque passages found in Red Cavalry or the other Odessa Tales are mostly missing, or somewhat hidden. However, behind the realistic portrayal of the trial in “Karl-Yankel” lies, in my opinion, as much transformation and poetry as in many of Babel’s more popular works, as I shall demonstrate below. Furthermore, I will argue that it is through the narrator’s subjectivity that this transformation is to be understood.

Regarding the historicity of the facts depicted in the story, it should be noted that such trials to religious practices as Babel describes them did in fact occur and were actually rather common in early post-revolution Russia. Sicher mentions that “the ‘trials’ of Judaism in the twenties had formed part of the repression of the traditional Jewish past; usually, there was less semblance of justice than in Babel’s story, and death sentences were handed out to those found guilty of religious practices. Anyone who opposed the will of the ‘people’ in these proceedings was often arrested”. 29 Furthermore, Anna Shternshis argues in Soviet and Kosher that “the theatrical trials against the Sabbath, Passover, and Yom Kippur served both philosophical and practical purposes. In their philosophical function, the trials were supposed to prove the negative effects of religion in general and its influence on Jews in particular”. 30 There seems even to have been a particular trial that shows some similarities with that of “Karl-Yankel”, a trial of circumcision staged in 1928, which shall be treated later on. 31

26 “A reading room in public buildings that contained Communist Party literature and the works of Marx and Lenin” (editor’s footnote in Babel. CW, p. 626).
30 Shternshis. Soviet and Kosher, p. 94.
31 Ibid., p. 95.
6.1. References to Jewish culture

The short story “Karl-Yankel” is deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition of Eastern Europe and contains numerous individual references to Jewish culture. Murav warns in her book *Music from a Speeding Train* that these “‘cultural bits’ can be important when examined in dynamic interaction with other literary factors, but an exclusive focus on their accumulation is not productive, because it reduces both Jewish identity and Jewish literature to static monoliths”\(^{32}\). However, far from wanting to reduce them to a static monolith, the account that follows is aimed at providing an overview of the actual references to Jewish themes that appear in the story.

I shall start with the lexicon, which is highly specialized at times, even to the degree that words like «בריס» (‘Bris’, or ‘circumcision’, derived from the Yiddish pronunciation of the Hebrew בְּרִית מִילָה, *Brit milah*, ‘Covenant of circumcision’),\(^{33}\) uttered by Naftula, appear as a footnote in the 1966 edition of Babel’s selected works (*Избранное*). This shows that Babel’s readership at the time most probably was not acquainted with the term.\(^{34}\) The word *tsaddik* (from Hebrew צַדִיק, ‘The righteous one’)\(^{35}\) is also used throughout the story, referring to the Hasidic Jews.\(^{36}\)

Incidentally, Hasidic themes appear all through the story, and already in the first page of the story, a comment is made regarding the religiousness of Karl-Yankel’s grandmother: «[она] ходила в синагогу два раза в неделю – в пятницу утром и в субботу утром; синагога была хасидская»\(^{37}\) (“[she] went to the synagogue twice a week, on Friday evening and on the morning of the Sabbath. It was a Hasidic synagogue”\(^{38}\)). Additionally, the stories of Baal-Shem are also mentioned. Baal-Shem Tov, actually Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (ca. 1700–1760), was a Rabbi from the shtetl of Medzhibozh (where, incidentally, Karl-Yankel’s grandmother is from) and the founder of Hasidism;\(^{39}\) the reference thus gives both a cultural and a geographical anchor to the story.

Later in the story, the comment by Pauline, Karl-Yankel’s mother, about her own mother is worthy of observation (emphasis added): «Надо принять во внимание – в какой семье мать

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\(^{34}\) Babel. *Izbrannoe*. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1966), p. 266.


\(^{36}\) Hasidism is an ultra-Orthodox Jewish religious movement that originated in Eastern Europe during the first half of the eighteenth century and has continued to exist until the present day. Its main characteristics are the close reading of the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, as well as Kabbalistic books like the *Zohar*. “Hasidism”, *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, accessed November 30, 2018, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Hasidism/Historical_Overview.


выросла... Местечко Меджибож всем известно, женщины там до сих пор носят парики...» 40 ("You must take into consideration in what kind of family my mother was raised. Everyone knows the shtetl of Medzhibozh, the women there are still wearing wigs."
41), referring to the orthodox custom of married women wearing wigs in public, given that they are forbidden of showing their natural hair. The fact that she declares it in a pejorative way, as an old custom that doesn’t belong to the present, might be a statement of her own secularity, an observation further reinforced by her comment «— Мать очень набожна, это все видят, она всегда страдала от того, что дети ее неверующие, и не могла перенести мысли о том, что внуки ее не будут евреями.» 42 ("My mother is very devout, everyone knows that, and she always suffered because her children were not religious. She could not bear the idea that her grandchildren would not be Jews."
43).

These references—and there appear many more—provide the cultural framework for the story and serve as the basis for further analysis on the nature of the transformation of religious life that follows.

6.2. “Old” and “new” Jews

The change that occurred for the Jewish life in Odessa—and, generally, in other parts of the Soviet Union—had two aspects: firstly, the above mentioned economic abolition of the luftmentsh, and secondly, the active repression of religious expression in form of trials and censorship that set a tangible limit to the Jewish tradition and fostered the secular lifestyle that had its place in the socialist society. As Murav puts it, “the stoop-shouldered, anemic, sickly Jewish male, the shtetl luftmentsh was to be transformed into an able-bodied, muscled, heroic worker”. 44 The former—bear in mind that Murav’s description purposely builds upon stereotypes—is to be regarded as the “old” Jew, deeply rooted in tradition and with a high sense of local belonging and community. In contrast, the latter—the “new” Jew—aims at the one deeply involved in the Soviet project, who is highly secular and practically no different from non-Jews, both physically and ideologically. Surely, most people fell between these two categories, but the point in conceptualizing the split is to understand precisely the transformation itself and the conflicts that arose from it. In “Karl-Yankel”, ritual circumciser Naftula and Karl-Yankel’s grandmother Brana Brutman are examples of the old Jew, whereas Paulina and the prosecutor Orlov are to be regarded as new Jews. The most interesting character to analyze may be Karl-Yankel himself, who shall be given his own section below.

41 Babel. CW, p. 623, emphasis added.
43 Babel. CW, p. 623.
44 Murav. Music from a Speeding Train, p. 73.
One of the most evident conflicts of the story is the dialogue between Naftula and Orlov. The fact that Naftula had circumcised the latter while he was still called Zusman and that he thus had attempted to distance himself from his roots is very telling of the sacrifices or adjustments that Jews had to make in order to become members of the new Soviet society. The narrator’s depictions of the “old” world of Naftula, with his blood-stained beard and unhygienic practices are quite tendentious and perspire some kind of negative idea, too. “Babel seems to be asking, is this who we are to ourselves, is this who we remain to non-Jews?”, Murav reflects. The open depiction of blood may also be a reference to the infamous blood libel trial of Mendel Beilis in 1913 and the anti-Semitic writings that circulated at the time, e. g. Vasilli Rozanov’s article “The Jews’ Olfactory and Tactile Reaction to Blood” (published 1914). However, such depictions of bloodthirsty Jews were absent in the agitprop trials on circumcision of post-Revolution Russia.

Most strikingly, the conflict between Naftula and Orlov seems to have its origin in a real trial, at a circumcision trial staged in Odessa in 1928, where the accused mohel is said to have replied to the accusations with “I look at you, my audience, and I see that 90 percent of you are ‘my productions!’”. As observed by Murav, the similarities with “Karl-Yankel” are quite evident:

У покойного мосье Zusмана, – сказал он [Нафтула], вздыхая, – у покойного вашего папаши была такая голова, что во всем свете не найти другую такую. И, слава Богу, у него не было апоплексии, когда он тридцать лет тому назад позвал меня на ваш брис. И вот мы видим, что вы выросли большой человек у Советской власти и что Нафтула не захватил вместе с этим куском пустяков ничего такого, что бы вам потом пригодилось...

“This late Monsieur Zusman, your late Papa,” Naftula said to him with a sigh, “he had a head the likes of which you can’t find nowhere in the world. And praised be God, that your papa did not have an apoplectic fit when he had me come over to perform your bris. And we can all see plain enough that you grew into a big man in the Soviet government, and that Naftula did not snip of along that little piece anything you might have needed later on.”

This reply not only proves to be a very effective way of ridiculing Orlov, but also reflects the development of the “Soviet” Jew out of the traditional Jew. Naftula’s uncovering of Orlov’s identity serves in my opinion a double purpose: on the one hand that of identifying those who belong to both worlds—or have in a way betrayed their former identity—and, on the other, that of exposing the very fact that the process of transformation is happening. I would argue that some of Orlov’s attitudes are even anti-Semitic, as can be read between the lines in the opening words of the trial:

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45 Ibid., p. 95.
– Пусть в Бога верит тот, кто выиграл двести тысяч, – ответил старик.
– Вас не удивил приход гражданики Брутман в поздний час, в дождь, с новорожденным на руках?..
– Я удивляюсь, сказал Нафтула, – когда человек делает что-нибудь по-человечески, а когда он делает сумасшедшие штуки – я не удивляюсь...

“Do you believe in God?” he [Orlov] asked Naftula.
“Let him who won two thousand believe in God,” the old man answered.
“Were you not surprised when Comrade Brana Brutman came to you at such a late hour in the rain, carrying a newborn in her hands?”
“I am surprised when a person does something reasonable,” Naftula said. “When a person does idiotic things, then I’m not surprised.”

The logic of this dialogue is somewhat revealing. Does it suggest that what Naftula usually does (circumcisions and other religious rituals), and therefore considers unsurprising, is to be regarded as “idiotic things”? Furthermore, the fact that Naftula wittily, albeit quite rudely answers Orlov might reflect some stereotypes about the Jewish chutzpah (extreme self-confidence or audacity, usually in a negative way), and the custom of answering a question with another question.54

Nevertheless, such comments do not restrict themselves to the old Jews: another such example of audacity—even with a trace of absurdity, very characteristic for Babel—can be found in the following dialogue between attorney Lining and Paulina:

– Скажите, свидетельница, – рыбий ряд синих выпадающих его зубов затрещал, – вам известно было о решении мужа назвать сына Карлом?
– Да.
– Как назвала его ваша мать?
– Янкелем.
– А вы, свидетельница, как вы называли вашего сына?
– Я называла его «дусенькой».
– Почему именно дусенькой?..
– Я всех детей называю дусеньками...

“Will the witness please tell us”—his fishlike rows of bobbing blue teeth were clacking—“if you had been aware of your husband’s decision to name his son Karl?”
“Yes.”
“What name did your mother give him?”
“Yankel.”
“And what about you, witness? What do you call your son?”
“I call him ‘sweetie.’”
“And why ‘sweetie,’ of all things?”
“I call all children ‘sweetie.’”55

52 Babel. CW, p. 622.
56 Babel. CW, p. 624, slightly modified.
Babel thus used diverse references and literary devices in order to create a setting for the depiction of a trial on Jewish religious practice, where different anti-Semitic themes are mixed in a combination of grotesque and factual. This, together with what could be regarded as the alienation or false consciousness of characters like Orlov, the traditionalism of Naftula and the narrator’s view on them, represent the zeitgeist of the period.

6.3. The boy, Karl-Yankel

Murav argues that just as circumcision is the symbol for the covenant between God and the nation of Israel, an analogous covenant can be seen between the Soviet Union and the new Soviet person: the wound. In that case the metaphorical circumcision was done by the person’s own will: “Instead of describing the Jew as merely passive victims of Soviet nationality and culture policies, […] subjects perform actions on themselves. The action that [the heroes in Soviet-Yiddish literature] perform on themselves directly relates to circumcision.”

The body becomes thus a religious and political arena. This is in a way true for “Karl-Yankel”, since it is the very fact that the child’s body has been modified that represents a political and even moral act, as expressed by the secretary that Ofsey consults upon learning that the boy has been circumcised: «Тебя морально запачкали, – сказал ему Бычач, – ты должен двинуть это дело».58 (“You’ve been morally bespattered!” Bychach told him. ‘You must pursue this matter further.’59).

Karl-Yankel is positioned between the worlds of the old and the new Jews, but, unlike Orlov-Zusman (or the Soviet writers that Murav regards as having “circumcised themselves”), he is already born into the limbo and does by no means circumcise himself. He can be seen as the ideal Soviet-Jewish citizen of the future generation, in that he doubtlessly belongs to the Israeli tradition while at the same time equally doubtlessly being a subject and a functioning part of the new socialist society. During the last scenes of the story, when conflict arises because Karl-Yankel should be fed, the Kirghiz woman that is breast-feeding him exclaims «Галас какой подняли, найдется кому покормить»60 (‘What are they shouting for? There’s always someone who’ll feed the baby.’61). I would argue that the boy is already prepared for the socialist society, where everyone is provided for by means of the society, rather than necessarily by their parents. The woman’s origin is also very emblematic, as it represents the brotherhood of nations that the Soviet Union stood for. Also at this very scene, Karl-Yankel’s future is discussed by the people present in the Red Corner—a highly symbolic setting given the quasi-religious status of

59 Babel. CW, p. 620.
61 Babel. CW, p. 626.
the room and its historical tie to the Icon Corner of pre-revolution Russia—with him: is he to become a fighter? Is he to become a pilot? He seems careless of the question himself, and looks thoughtlessly at the narrator while he sucks at the Kirghiz woman’s nipple. He might be aware that just as he has established the covenant with God as a Jew he has also established the covenant with the Soviet promise.

6.4. The narrator

Given the fact that the trial is seen through the eyes of the narrator, who is present at it and appears to personally know the members involved, it is a matter of great interest to try to understand his subjectivity in relation to the story.

Firstly, it can be argued that the narrator is Jewish, since he refers to the already mentioned cultural practices that would be known almost exclusively to Jews. Moreover, this is also evident in some of his comments during the trial, e. g. «Если бы синедрион существовал в наши дни, Лининг был бы его главой»62 ("Were the Sanhedrin63 to exist Nowadays, Lining would have been its head"64), and further on as he claims that Lining wrote governmental writings «ничем не отличавшиеся от трактатов Талмуда»65 ("indistinguishable from the treatises of the Talmud"66). Besides, he shows feelings of communal belonging with the characters, as seen, for example, in the lines (emphasis added) «Поля выбрала Овсея Белоцерковского. Мы не поняли этого выбора»67 ("Paulina chose Ofsey Byelotserkovsky. We could not understand why she chose him"68).

The narrator appears to be rather secular, as can be observed in the comment «На пересыпском берегу я впервые задумался о могуществе сил, тайно живущих в природе.»69 ("It was on the beach of Peresyp that I first reflected on the power of the forces in nature,"70). Had it been a pious Jew, it would by no means have been a reflection upon the forces in nature, but, of course, the powers of the Creator. However, there could be a hidden dimension in this observation, namely that of censorship, or self-censorship that made it impossible to express such feelings of religious devotion. Notwithstanding this possibility, there is still reason to believe that the narrator is secular. The mention made earlier about his views on Brana Brutman’s religiousness could also be seen as a pejorative view on Hasidism: «синагога была хасидская, там

63 “The highest court of the ancient Jewish nation” (editor’s footnote in Babel. CW, p. 624).
64 Babel. CW, p. 624.
66 Babel. CW, p. 624.
68 Babel. CW, p. 620, emphasis added.
70 Babel. CW, p. 619.
доплывались на пасху до исступления, как дервиши”71 (“It was a Hasidic synagogue, where on Passover they whirled themselves into an ecstasy like dervishes”72). This negative view on Hasidism is further reinforced by the way in which Karl-Yankel’s circumcision is depicted: «там в присутствии десяти развалин, десяти древних и нищих стариков, завсегдатаев хасидской синагоги, над младенцем был совершен обряд обрезания.»73 (“there, in the presence of ten doddering wrecks—ten ancient and impoverished men, denizens of the Hasidic synagogue—the rites of circumcision was performed.”74).

What regards the narrator’s opinion on the trial itself, it is very revealing that he leaves the room just before the verdict is passed and chooses to focus on the boy and the discussion about his future instead. There, looking at the boy being breast-fed by the Kirghiz woman, he recounts to the reader:

Из окна летели прямые улицы, исхоженные детством моим и юношностью, — Пушкинская тянулась к вокзалу, Мало-Арнаутская вдавалась в парк у моря.
Я вырос на этих улицах, теперь наступил черед Карл-Янкеля, но за меня не дрались так, как дерутся за него, мало кому было дела до меня.
— Не может быть, — шептал я себе, — чтобы ты не был счастлив, Карл-Янкель… Не может быть, чтобы ты не был счастливее меня…75

The straight streets that my childhood and youth walked unfurled outside the window— Pushkin Street went to the train station, Malo-Arnautskaya Street jutted out into the park by the sea.
I grew up on these streets. Now it was Karl-Yankel’s turn. But nobody had fought over me the way they are fighting over him, nobody had cared much about me.
“I can’t believe that you won’t be happy, Karl-Yankel,” I whispered to myself, “I can’t believe you won’t be happier than me.”76

The first part of the quotation reflects the Odessa myth with nostalgic undertones, while the second part bravely looks into the future with hopeful eyes and trust in Karl-Yankel’s providence. All of these observations reveal a non-objective retelling of the trial. Is it because of his own secularity that the narrator believes that Karl-Yankel shall not fail in becoming happier than himself? The story would have been different if the narrator had been one of the Hasidic Jews that came to see «процесс, где, по словам варшавских газет, собирались судить еврейскую религию»77 (“the trial, where, according to the Warsaw paper, the Jewish religion was put on trial”78), the prospect would have been definitely negative, even tragic.

72 Babel. CW, p. 619.
74 Babel. CW, p. 620.
76 Babel. CW, p. 627.
78 Babel. CW, p. 627, slightly modified.
7. Conclusion

As this study has demonstrated, “Karl-Yankel” deserves as much merit and attention as the rest of Babel’s writings and holds an important place in his oeuvre. It is laden with references to the customs of the traditional Jewry and those of the Soviet reality and thus deeply connected to the situation of Jewry at the time of its writing. These references are both broadly and locally anchored in a webbing of intertextuality and subtexts that gives the story a deep meaning.

“Karl-Yankel” is a tale of individuals and a tale of the society that circumscribes them, a tale of continuity and of change. The emergence of Karl-Yankel as a heir to both Israel and to socialism marks the beginning of the era of the Soviet Jew and the end of the traditional world of the Pale of Settlement. This transformation of the “old” into the “new” Jew, as described above, is not without complications, both for those that stay in the past and those that rush to the new era, as the interaction between Naftula and prosecutor Orlov shows.

Regarding the narrator, it can be said to play a key role in presenting the events of the story through a subjective way that is equally revealing for the processes that were taking place in the Soviet Union in the 1930s as the events themselves. Far from being a journalistic depiction of facts, the narrative enriches the historical implications of the trial.

“Karl-Yankel” is a product of its time, and the work seems even somewhat prophetic: the repression of religious life that took place in the Soviet Union would not succeed in completely eradicating religion from society, even after more than seventy years of existence. Through both resistance and adaptation, religious life, be it Jewish or of another faith, did indeed survive—if maybe not intact. What was to have the greater toll on the Jewish population were the calamities that followed. On that level, Babel’s story is all but prophetic: the ignorance of what would be the tragic fate of the Jews of Eastern Europe during the Holocaust gives the story a bitter naïveté and the last words by the narrator become dreadfully sad when one thinks about the meager odds of happiness that a Jewish child in Odessa could expect from the near future.

8. Future research

As a continuation of the analysis of the narrator’s perspective in the story, a further question—and certainly a difficult one—would be how much the narrator resembles Babel himself. Sicher argues that “Babel may himself have harbored great hopes for the socialist state under construction and there is genuine excitement in his correspondence with his family abroad at the enormous changes that were transforming Soviet Russia, but by the mid-twenties he also felt cramped by the increasing restrictions on artistic freedom and the stifling atmosphere in Mos-
cow as the hardliners took control”. If it is true that Babel had some confidence in the future of the Soviet Union, could this be reflected in the words by the narrator at the end of the story? Attempting to answer such a question would certainly require a thorough study of historical documents, letters and other sources both by Babel and his contemporaries, making it another kind of inquiry, but could have a big potential for a better understanding of both Babel’s life and his work.

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