

SEMYON REZNIK

CHAIM
-AND-
MARIA



OR

BLOODTHIRSTY LOVERS

HISTORICAL PHANTASMAGORIA BASED ON A TRUE STORY



“Semyon Reznik’s use of historical material can be only associated with the skills of a professional historian. It seems that not even the smallest detail, contributing to the recreation of the 150-year-old characters and events, has eluded the author. Then the historian yields the spotlight to the prose writer, or more precisely, enjoys a fruitful coexistence with him. Semyon Reznik draws his creative freedom, which he uses skillfully and tactfully, from the inevitable need to fill the gaps in the fabric of history—a phenomenon common to any historical novel.”

— Edward Kapitaikin, *Novoye Russkoye Slovo*
(New Russian Word—Russian language daily),
New York, 1986

*“As you may know, I sit on the book review committee of *The Washington Times*, and I can assure you that most of the books that come across our desk are not half as interesting or readable as your novel. It seems to me that there ought to be a real possibility for your book to find an audience here in the United States. Not only it is a fine piece of literature in its own right, it would also come at a time when we are witnessing a resurgence of anti-Semitism—and that not just in Russia but in many parts of Europe and the United States as well. Reminding people of its grim history is very important in my view.”*

— Helle Bering-Jensen,
The Washington Times, 1991

“That kind of a novel—rare nowadays—that by all means will be read fifty years from now and more. It really does not happen often that someone writes a tempestuous, laughable and tear-eliciting novel that is read from cover to cover.”

— Agnes Gereben,
from the afterword to the Hungarian edition,
Budapest, 1990

“The book reads like a masterpiece novel, and is a significant contribution to contemporary literature. As the reader opens the book he is right away struck by the ornate epic style, originally conceived by the author of this story. Truth and parody become so intertwined that the reader no longer knows in what vein to read it. This confusion derives from a professional literary approach, which reminds me of the novels by Gabriel Garcia Marques. Reznik calls his style a documentary phantasmagoria, perhaps, an adequate although a rare term to describe a novel. The book is full of bitter sarcasm and cutting irony both of which are so typical of the contemporary Soviet Jewish culture. Reznik clearly writes for (even if not quite about) his contemporaries, occasionally indulging in pop Soviet anachronisms, which further aggravate the purposeful dissonance of his creation.”

— Yakov M. Rabkin,
Departement d'histoire,
University de Montreal, 1988

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HISTORICAL PHANTASMAGORIA BASED ON A TRUE STORY

Translated from Russian by Vladimir Tumanov

Edited by John Varoli

M-GRAPHICS PUBLISHING

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Semyon Reznik

Chaim-and-Maria or Bloodthirsty Lovers

Edited by John Varoli

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*To my grandchildren
Leo and Elana Reznik*

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

It is widely considered that anti-Semitism was born with early Christianity. As the New Testament says, the Jews had not accepted the divinity of Jesus Christ, and demanded his crucifixion, saying: “His blood is on us and on our children”. So, “the children” have been paying the price for 2,000 years.

In fact, the roots of anti-Semitism go even much deeper. When and how did it begin? There is no precise answer to this question. According to the Old Testament (Torah), Jewish slaves suffered immensely in Ancient Egypt. That was the main reason for their *exodus*—around 1,200 years before Jesus was born. But what preceded that?

Abraham also had to leave his homeland due to the hostility from his neighbors.

The ancient neighbors of the Jewish tribes, even the most numerous and powerful, sunk into oblivion. Other nations emerged; some achieved great might and a high level of culture. But they disappeared as well, while the Jews remained. And anti-Semitism remained as well.

The age of anti-Semitism is almost the same as the age of our civilization. According to Albert Einstein, “anti-Semitism is the shadow of the Jewish people... I am a physicist, and I know that every item casts a shadow. The shadow of my people is anti-Semitism.”

If it is so, then perhaps the Jews themselves are responsible for anti-Semitism. Do they carry some specific traits or properties that make them hated and despised by other peoples and ethnic groups?

Some scholars believed this was the case. Professor Solomon Lurie (1891–1964), a prominent Russian-Jewish philologist and

historian of Antiquity, substantiated this idea. In his book *Anti-Semitism in the Ancient World*, he described how ancient Greeks and Romans disdained the inhabitants of conquered provinces, contemptuously calling them *meteks*. But, a couple of generations later, *meteks* absorbed the religion beliefs, language, and customs of the conquerors and dissolved among them while the Jews remained different, suspicious, ridiculed, and rejected. Lurie supported his observation by quoting the best minds of Antiquity, from Aristophanes and Thucydides to Plutarch, Tacitus, and Seneca.

The book was published in Soviet Russia in 1922. It was appreciated by Alfred Rosenberg, one of the leading ideologists of Hitler's National-Socialist Party. A Baltic German, Rosenberg grew up and was educated in Russia, so he was fluent in Russian. With his support, the book was translated into German and used by the Nazis as a propaganda tool—a side effect not foreseen by the author.

Lurie's analysis that covered antiquity looked rather convincing. However, in a broader historical framework, it is less credible. Thus, the Jews were driven out of the British Kingdom at the end of the 13th century and allowed back only under Cromwell, i. e. in the middle of the 17th century. For three and a half centuries no Jews lived in Britain. But a certain *perception* about them remained in the British public consciousness, and that kind of perception was brilliantly expressed by William Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*.

The fierce bloodthirstiness of Shylock, the main character presented as a typical Jewish moneylender, overcomes even his passion for gold. Where did Shakespeare get the idea about Jewish cannibalism? Obviously, not from the Jews themselves. The plot was borrowed from a German chronicle of the 10th century that triggered the author's imagination. Shakespeare utilized this image, and did it so brilliantly that the play has been performed again and again, in different languages, all

over the world, regardless of whether Jews were around or not. Contrary to the laws of physics, the shadow of the Jewish people is endowed with an amazing ability: to separate from the item, and live independently far away.

The history of Russia presents plenty of similar examples.

Eastern Slavs prayed to many pagan gods until the late 10th century, when Kievan Grand Duke Vladimir forced them to be baptized into Greek-Orthodox Christianity. Kiev was the most important city, and a certain number of Jews there lived alongside Christians. An Orthodox preacher, St. Theodosius, founder of the famous Pechersky Monastery (11th century), often visited the Jewish quarter (*Zhidovi vorota*). He was eager to challenge the Jews, to argue with them on religious matters, to convince them to be baptized, quarreling with them, and provoking them. He believed that the Jewish religious rituals required the sacrifice of innocent Christians, and his passionate desire was to be killed in the name of Jesus Christ. To his disappointment, he was not holy enough to have such an honor.

In the time of Kievan Grand Duke Vladimir Monomakh (1053–1125), the first recorded Jewish pogrom took place in Kiev.

After the Mongol invasion of Russia (1237–1242), the Jews disappeared from there. The leading position of the Kievan Duchy gradually diminished, and the Moscow Duchy became supreme. The Grand Dukes of Moscow liberated the Eastern Slavs from the Mongol yoke and united them into one state. The Jews were not allowed to settle there or even to come for business or a short visit. There were no Jews in the country for eight centuries. But the anti-Semitic outlook was strong and even played an important role in the inner political struggle.

In the 15th century, under Grand Duke Ivan III (1462–1505), there was a group of reformers headed by Fyodor Kuritsyn, and initially supported by the Grand Duke himself. They attempted to introduce some changes both in religious and secular life, but were opposed by some leaders of the Russian Orthodox

Church. To discredit Kuritsyn and his group, they were labeled *Judaic heretics (Eres' Zhidovskaia)*. Some of them were burned at the stake, others thrown into the dungeon. No one, of course, was related to Jews by blood or religion.

Only in the late 18th century, after Poland was defeated and divided between three mighty neighbors, the Jews became subjects of the Russian Empire. The authorities did not know much about them, but were certain that Jews were harmful, so their rights and activities should be restricted as much as possible. To justify the discrimination, persecution, and pogroms, the authorities blamed the victims. Jews were accused of everything—from the “alcoholization” and “exploitation” of the naïve and simplistic Orthodox peasants, to avoiding military service; as well as the ritual killing of Christian babies, and organizing political uprisings. This propaganda of hate culminated with *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* fabricated by the Russian secret police. The Nazis skillfully turned the forgery into a *Warrant for Genocide*.¹

After World War I and the Russian Revolution, Poland became an independent state again. Jews were hated there just as before the revolution. Under German occupation in World War II they were eliminated by the Nazis, who were gladly assisted by the local population. Those Polish Jews who managed to survive during the Holocaust were squeezed out of Poland by the Communist regime in the late 1960s. Since that time, practically no Jews have lived in that country, but anti-Semitic sentiments are widespread there.

Hatred toward the Jews in Muslim countries, including those where no Jews ever lived, is also well known.

No Jews ever lived in Japan, but some people in this country strongly believe in the World Jewish Conspiracy. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* have been published there again and again, finding zealous readers.

¹ Norman Kohn. *Warrant for Genocide. The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* // New York & Evanston: Harper&Row, 1967.

The virulent anti-Semitic book, *The Jews in Russia and the USSR* by Andrei Dikiy, a Russian émigré, was published in New York in 1967. It was mostly overlooked in the West, but greedily consumed by Russian nationalists in the Soviet Union. In post-Soviet Russia, the book was reprinted there and became a catechism for so-called ‘national patriots’. Its influence could be seen in “patriotic” accounts by prominent mathematician and former dissident Igor Shafarevich, by Nobel Prize winner Alexander Solzhenitsyn, not to mention less famous preachers of the so-called Russian Idea. The Idea, in fact, is not so much Russian, but very much anti-Semitic.

What exactly the Jews have been accused of depends on time and place. As rabbi Jonathan Sacks put it with bitter sarcasm, Jews were hated because they were rich and because they were poor; because they were capitalists and because they were communists; because they live apart from the rest of the population and because they are too much integrated; because they are too religious and because they are too secular. This list can go on and on. The Jews poison the wells, they drink the blood of Christian children, and they spread diseases... During the Soviet period they were said to be guilty of shooting Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin, while in the post-Soviet period they have been accused of the ritual killing of Nicholas II, the last Russian czar. In the Soviet period they were Doctor-Killers and Zionist-Traitors disloyal to the Soviet government, while in the post-Soviet period they have been labeled as the main supporters of Bolshevism.

In his book *Three Thousand-Year Enigma*, the internationally recognized mathematician and independently minded former Soviet dissident, academician Igor Shafarevich “proved” that the Jews had always strived for supreme power over the world, nothing less was enough for them.

In the West after the Holocaust, it became unacceptable to publicize anti-Semitic views, so Jew-haters had to keep a low profile for several decades.

This is not the case anymore, and anti-Semitism is on the rise in many U.S. college campuses. The result is that Jewish students are finding out the truth the hard way. Public speeches by Louis Farrakhan attract large audiences, and his sarcastic statements, such as “*I am not an anti-Semite, I am anti-Termite,*” have been cheered by thousands of his ardent supporters. Close on the heels of Farrakhan are the widely publicized announcements by some newly elected congress(women), whose activities have been founded by organizations such as Miftah—“*a rabidly anti-Semitic group that has accused Jews of using ‘the blood of Christians in the Jewish Passover,’ has published neo-Nazi propaganda questioning ‘the Jewish ‘Holocaust’ tale’ in quotes and has celebrated terrorists who murder Israeli children*”, as *The Washington Post* columnist Marc A. Thiessen put it (August 20, 2019).

They claim that the U. S. Government is secretly ruled from behind by the Jews, whose loyalty belongs to Israel, not to the United States, and the *New York Times* illustrates this great discovery with a cartoon depicting U.S. President Donald Trump wearing a yarmulke on his head and blindly following a guide-dog with the face of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Star of David on this collar. The cost of this picture is not a thousand, but a hundred thousand words. The central idea of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is now widely publicized by the mainstream U.S. media.



To the credit of *The New York Times*, she apologized for publishing this cartoon. But, as the Russian proverb says, *the word is not a sparrow, if it flies out, you can't catch it.*

The expression of anti-Semitism might be different, but the reason has been always the same: previous anti-Semitic mythology passed from generation to generation. A slight modernization of old myths helps them to be adjusted to different circumstances. That is how the Dreyfus Case broke out in France at the end of the 19th century, and the Beilis Case was launched in Russia between two revolutions (1905 and 1917). That is why in today's Europe so many people are focused on Israeli's "human rights violations" of Islamic terrorists, instead of being concerned about the intrusion of the potential radical Islamists into their own backyard.

We see a similar trend in the U.S. where so many politicians and even university scholars anathematize anyone who thinks differently—in the name of 'diversity' regarding those who *look* different. Anyone who dares to mention Islamic terrorism is racist, sexist and Islamophobic, but those who "expose" the global Jewish conspiracy are exercising their right to free speech. The virtuosity with which the concepts of *freedom of speech* and the *political correctness* are manipulated would arouse envy the Nazi and the Soviet agitprop departments.

My novel, *Chaim-and-Maria*, is an attempt to remind the public that Adolf Hitler, along with his dedicated butchers, both Germans and non-Germans, did not come from nowhere. They were the fruits ripened on a certain branch of the tree of our great civilization. Their followers and sympathizers are living among us—just as their predecessors lived among our grandparents and great-grandparents.

The novel was written in the late 1970s, when I still lived in the Soviet Union, while the described events had taken place 150 years before that, in Czarist Russia, in the remote town of Velizh in Vitebsk Province.

The Velizh Case is one of about 200 *blood libel* cases recorded in the history of our civilization. It attracted my attention for two main reasons: it was one of the largest and most

ridiculous *blood libel* investigations, and it was almost completely forgotten.¹

The only other historical novel based on *blood libel* accusations known to me is *The Fixer* by Bernard Malamud. It was written about 70 years ago. It is based on the Beilis Case that also took place in Czarist Russia. The novel became an international bestseller, and the author was awarded with the Pulitzer Prize.

I believe that my novel *Chaim-and-Maria*, with its gripping plot, life-like characters, and relaxed narrative, might attract readers from all walks of life. The bitter irony of the title is clear to Russian readers, but it should be explained here.

There is a common field flower, *violet* (*Viola tricolor L.*). In Russian, it is called *Ivan-da-Maria* and is a symbol for love. By replacing the typical Russian male name, *Ivan*, with the typical Jewish name, *Chaim*, the title parodies the symbolic meaning of the beautiful flower.

What kind of love story is developing between *Chaim* and *Maria*?

There is no other way to figure it out, but to read the novel.

**Semyon Reznik,
Springfield, VA
September 2019**

¹ The case was researched recently by Dr. Eugene M. Avrutin, professor of Illinois University. See: *The Velizh Affair. Blood Libel in a Russian Town*. By Eugene M. Avrutin / Oxford University Press, 2018.

INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST RUSSIAN EDITION

Since the time I remember myself, I remember that I am Jewish, and while there is nothing shameful about that, as I was taught by my parents, I should be ashamed anyway — such were the lessons of life. The shame for my ethnicity (religion was out of the question) I was squeezing out of myself drop by drop, as Anton Chekhov squeezed out his slave mentality.

Many Russian Jews of my generation experienced similar feelings.

In the past, anti-Semitism was explained by religious prejudices, by ethnic differences, and, after the Marxist-Leninist ideology “captured the masses and became the material force,” by the class struggle within in capitalist society.

Anti-Semitism has much deeper roots, to be sure. It is a thousands-year long cultural tradition going back as far as to the beginning of civilization.

Anti-Semitism was very useful to tyrants.

In Imperial Russia, hatred toward the Jews was cultivated and widely exploited by groups eager to preserve the bankrupted Czarist regime at any cost. Hitler was mostly betting on anti-Semitism. In the USSR it reached its peak at the end of Stalin’s era, when the witch-hunt against “rootless cosmopolitans” culminated in the “Conspiracy of the Doctor-Killers.”

After Stalin’s death, the arrested Jewish doctors were the first to be released from prison and pronounced innocent. It was the earliest sign of *the Thaw*.¹ It happened even before Khrushchev’s campaign for the “rehabilitation” of the innocent

¹ The first years after Stalin’s death were called after a short novel, *The Thaw*, by Ilya Erenburg.

victims of Stalin's purges began. In the following years, anti-Semitism was going up and down, following the fluctuation of the half-hearted policy of "liberalism" initiated by Nikita Khrushchev.

The remains of liberal illusions in Soviet society were crushed by the 1968 military invasion of Czechoslovakia, where the new Communist leaders started reforms in the hope of building "socialism with a human face." The violent attack on the "brotherly Socialist country" should be somehow explained to the Soviet people, so the Jews were used as scapegoats again. The large-scale campaign of exposing the "Zionists" as "the internal enemies of socialism, the real rulers of American imperialism, and the deadly enemies of the Russian Spirit" was unleashed. It has continued up to this day, although the initial trigger for it (the aborted *Prague Spring*) is mostly forgotten.

The "new" slogan—"Denunciation of International Zionism"—is just the forgotten old one: "Beat kikes, save Russia." The executors of this campaign have not invented anything new, they parasitize on the so called Russian patriotism, stealing ideas, quotations, "facts", and large fragments of texts from the pre-1917 ideologists of the *Black Hundreds*.

As a journalist and prose writer, a member of the Union of Soviet Writers and the Union of Soviet Journalists, I attempted to confront this "patriotism" in polemical articles, parodies, book reviews, and essays. I submitted them to the most liberal Soviet periodicals, but not a single line was accepted for publication.

The novel *Chaim-and-Maria* was one of those attempts. The events described in the novel took place about 150 years ago, but *The Present* exists between the lines. In spite of all the catastrophes Russia went through during the last century (three revolutions, a civil war, two world wars, waves of mass terror), certain aspects of the "Russian spirit" remain very durable. The

INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST RUSSIAN EDITION

novel passed the test on modernity in the USSR, where all my attempts to publish it failed because it was too challenging to mainstream “Russian patriotism.” As a severe hereditary disease, anti-Semitism contributed much to ruining Russia in the past, and continues to ruin the country today with its destructive impulses.

*Semyon Reznik,
Washington, DC
August 1985*

CHAPTER ONE

1828

Surely you know Maria Terentyeva! What? You've never heard of Maria Terentyeva? You've never heard of that pale skinned, ox-eyed beauty, who can break a man's heart with one graceful swing of her luscious hips?!

It's true that there are no signors singing love serenades under her balcony. But then where would you find signors in the sleepy town of Velizh tucked amid thick forests and boggy swamps, and clinging to the banks of the river Dvina? As for balconies, there are none in the little one-story town of Velizh, which is hemmed in by plank fences. Balconies are not what Maria Terentyeva dreams of. Does she have a house or even a tiny little nook of her own? Not on your life! From the day she was born, Maria Terentyeva has never had even a bit of space even in some wreck of a backyard shed with wind howling through the cracks and rain seeping in between the boards. If some kind soul gives her shelter for the night, Maria praises her Lord Jesus Christ, but as for the next night... who knows? Maria does know one thing: the Lord would never abandon her.

Oh, Velizh, Velizh, you wonderful little town! Quiet, cozy, with a lively trade market, stately beards trimmed into circles, with many merchants, churches and drinking establishments. Life in Velizh is milk and honey for Maria Terentyeva. She just has to fix her messy but colorful gypsy skirts, roll her curvy shoulders, wiggle her luscious hips, flutter her huge fan-like eyelashes, and any man will offer her some bread and a glass of vodka. Of course to get this, Maria Terentyeva does have to sin a bit... But what of it! She is no infidel or something. Her God is not cruel and merciless like the kike's god; her God is friendly and tender, looking down from icons with

his sad eyes, looking at her, Maria, pitying the poor soul and forgiving her sins.

Maria loves, nay, adores her Lord Jesus Christ. She also likes His temples. Say, it's freezing cold outside, and you can feel the biting wind going right down to your bones, or say, it's raining cats and dogs, and soaking your colorful dress... No, thanks! It's dry and warm inside a church, and the icons shimmer from the light of the odd candle. It's quiet in the temple of God; shadows lurk in the corners; it's a mysterious place, somewhat frightening, but serene at the same time. Maria can feel the gazes of all the saints upon her. She just has to kiss an icon and warm her numb soul with a fervent prayer.

Maria prays with great devotion, bowing like a rocking chair, crossing herself piously, and moving her lips in a whisper. What is she whispering? Sometimes she can't even tell herself, but He, Christ the Savior, He can always decipher her words. He will understand everything, forgive everything and never condemn her.

Maria feels good all over because Christ understands, pities, and forgives her, and warm, happy tears keep rolling out of her beautiful ox eyes, fanned by thick, long eyelashes, and down her cheeks.

And how Maria loves to join the common feast during a church celebration! With decorum, piety, hymn singing and icon kissing. And what fun it is, what great fun! If anyone can live it up in honor of their saints, it's the Russian Orthodox people.

Tables overflow with food, rivers of wine, and all are welcome, all dear to the host! The host, you see, has been greatly honored by the feasting parish, for a saint's icon will now adorn his house for a whole year. And so the host has gone out of his way to treat the guests: please, sit, dear friends; eat drink and kick up your heels: there IS a great celebration for all you Orthodox Christians!

"Ting-ting-ting..." The gold, silver and copper coins are hitting the bottom of a plate in the middle of the table. As those feasting fill each other's bowls and glasses, each tries to outdo

his neighbor: you threw one kopeck into the plate, well, watch me pitch in five! Look, good people, how Orthodox Christians honor St. Nicholas, or the Virgin Mary, or whoever it IS that we are supposed to be honoring today!

The coins drop into the plate one by one, but they disappear from it in handfuls—all headed for the nearest tavern, into the great big apron pocket of the fat, formless Jewess. Her apron is torn and dirty, but from under it you can catch a glimpse of her satin dress. Earrings with precious gems glitter in her ears, and her wig is adorned by a gilded diadem, just like a czarina's crown.

As the Jewess rolls out a wine keg, she gives everyone a flattering smile and speaks in her sing-song, hypocritical voice with a burr. Go ahead, drink your fill if your celebration calls for it, have fun all in good health. You'll never find better wine in all of Velizh. And if that's not enough, then have more; for you—anything! All the while she keeps fingering the little coins as she counts them for a second and third time.

“What's this, Jewess? Not enough? Here. Here is more!” And the clinking coins drop out of sticky hands. “Take it all, Jewess, go ahead, and suck our Christian blood! See how Orthodox Christians sing praise to their saints!”

And that's how good Russian Christian folk make merry. Some clap their hands, some stomp their feet, while others are already breaking benches on their neighbors' heads. There is a great ruckus and a sour smell of barf in the air. The people are joyful, and joyful is Maria Terentyeva. Like a little fish in the clear waters of the river Dvina, like a young mare on a green meadow, like a lark soaring near the firmament—that is how Maria feels at these feasts.

“These festivities are characteristically marked by the singing of distorted religious songs, drunkenness and fighting,” sadly relates the Orthodox Christian scholar.

But Maria Terentyeva never learned to read, so she knows nothing of this research. Oh she just gives an angry look to one man, flutters her long eyelashes at another, and sticks out her

long tongue and makes a face at a third one: “You lay your dirty paws on me, and I’ll scratch your eyes out, you filthy scum! A girl also has her pride too, you know. First, you give me a glass of vodka, offer me something nice to eat, and treat me with respect. Then it’ll be another story. Look at you! You still have pieces of cabbage sticking out of your beard, but already you’re going right for my ass! I’ll show you such ass that you’ll forget right away all the saints and God himself...”

And what a dancer Maria Terentyeva is! Just watch her inside the circle of other dancers, as she lets her shawl, which is dirty and torn but full of gypsy colors, slide from her shoulders down to her elbows, turns her swan-like neck, waves her handkerchief, and... need I say more? It’s not easy for the men of Vezh even if there are no serenade signors among them! It’s not so bad for the bachelors, you know, but the married ones, who have taken a vow before their God and according to the laws of their faith—be they Russian Orthodox, members of the Uniate Church, or Roman Catholic, or, pardon the expression, the Jews—to bear the burden of matrimonial fidelity until their last dying breath, God’s will be done. So these poor souls must suffer the sight of Maria Terentyeva as she wiggles her way down the street in her gypsy skirts and her gypsy shawl, her luscious hips swaying invitingly back and forth, and her eyes, adorned by long eyelashes, giving the world mocking winks...

How can a man’s instincts lie dormant at such a sight? How can he control his sinful lust, which is normally bridled and suppressed in the depths of the subconscious? Would you guarantee that you could resist the temptation? Good for you! But Chaim Wheezer could not.

You probably think: so what if he couldn’t resist! Who cares anyway? We are all sinners, and God, thank God, is merciful. But that’s exactly what I am trying to say! If Chaim Wheezer was so eager, he could have simply waited for Maria to go by some lonely nook, and then, for a drink or two, she would have

readily pulled up her colorful skirts and gone for a roll with him in some ditch. As for her prudery, she just goes on about it for fun—nothing else. Who doesn't know in Velizh that Maria is always ready to swap her pride for a glass of vodka.

But Chaim Wheezer is Chaim Wheezer. That's just the way he is. If he tackles something, he'll always think it over thoroughly and will do the job meticulously, like a real Jew.

I guess you have already figured out what he did. Precisely! Chaim Wheezer married Maria Terentyeva.

You probably think that he converted to Christianity and wed Maria according to the Christian tradition.

Look, would I waste your time with such trifles? What would have been so special about that? So, another Jew, trying to make it in the world, forsakes the faith of his fathers. Big deal! That you can find anywhere. Have you ever heard of Podzersky, the Catholic priest? Well, you will: he used to be a Jew and is quite well off now! There is a lot of nice round potential in his line of work, being a Christian pastor that is. And how about Anton Grudinsky? Haven't heard of him either? That's all right. You'll also find out about him, I promise. He too is a converted Jew, even though he has remained as dirt-poor as before. And Fedorov, a private in the Finnish Royal Guard Regiment, is also a former Jew, if you can fancy that! So don't worry—I wouldn't be bothering you with such pettiness. I am telling you a different story. The story of Chaim Wheezer.

Our Chaim didn't come from a rich family either.

They seem to think that all Jews are loaded. Why do *they* think that? How should I know? I suppose it's God's will that *they* have this impression. The grass is always greener in somebody else's garden... And then there's this ridiculous passion for dressing up. How many times have the *kahals*¹ proclaimed that Jews are

¹ Councils of Jewish elders.

strictly forbidden to strut about in expensive clothes and jewelry, seeing as it causes nothing but the ruin of Jews themselves and unnecessary jealousy on the part of the surrounding gentiles? Rabbis have threatened to punish disobedience with a *herem*.¹ Can a devout Jew imagine a fate worse than a *herem*, which excommunicates him from the synagogue? Well, you won't believe it, but even that doesn't seem to work!

And so, for example, while a husband is rocking away over the holy books at the Beth Hamedrash,² a wife may have no other occupation than buying a herring for six kopecks, cutting it into eight pieces and selling each piece for one kopeck. Why, she may spend the whole day sitting at the market with her herring, and sometimes even more than one day; but comes the Sabbath, and like a peacock she IS sporting her gold diadem and pearl necklaces. And no one would suspect that her house is empty, the family is up to its neck in debt, the children haven't been fed and there is even nothing from which to bake the Sabbath *kugel*.³ But then you and I know that Jews are just like Russians, or Belorussians, or Poles: for every pocket full of money there are ten pockets full of wind.

Chaim's father was a freight mover. Usually freight movers are fairly well off; that is, if they have their own pair of horses and wagon, and provided they can afford to hire a helper. But Ghirsha, Chaim's father, was not one of those who hired workers; others hired him. Through rain and snow, through thick or thin, he transported other people's goods and never even had the chance to own a horse. Sometimes he earned some extra money—just enough for a horse, but then it would be time to pay the double taxes imposed on the Jews. And the contribution to the *kahal* was no joking matter either. In the meantime, Ghirsha's lawfully wedded wife kept nagging: "I can't look good

¹ Anathema.

² School of higher ecclesiastic Jewish studies.

³ Traditional Jewish cake.

people in the face! All of the neighbors' wives have new dresses, and what, am I worse than others?"

All Ghirsha could do is sigh, turn his pockets inside out and hit the road again. And so Ghirsha spent his whole life driving other people's horses. He had a constant cold, always wheezing—that's where the nickname "Wheezer" came from. His son inherited it as a last name.

Ghirsha's relationship with God wasn't simple either.

He could barely muddle his way through the Torah, but that was only half the trouble. To compensate for that, you just have to make regular contributions to the *kahal*. That is the wise way of the Lord: if you are not a scholar, others will study the Torah and the Talmud for you, and will put in a good word for you before God. To give them the opportunity to work peacefully on your behalf, you have to toil hard and regularly contribute to the *kahal*, for men of learning shouldn't have to worry about their daily bread. It's a win-win situation: reliable, convenient, and mutually beneficial. You take care of their earthly needs, and they look after your heavenly ones. Division of labor, you see. However, there was one "but" that bothered Ghirsha the Wheezer a great deal. He knew for a fact that the scholars' work on behalf of his soul would only count if he observed the 613 *mitzvahs*¹—all without exception. There was no way around this.

Mind you, it's easy to say: observe all the *mitzvahs*! Let me tell you something. Say you are stranded in a field in the middle of a snowstorm, and you've lost your voice because the cold goes right down to the marrow of your bones. And say you come upon an inn where the innkeeper puts a bowl of rich, steaming borscht in front of you. You are not going to make any special effort to find out whether the meat in the soup is kosher or not, are you? And say you've been held up on your way home, and the Sabbath comes. Well, you'll just pray to God for a bit and

¹ Jewish code of behavior.

continue on your way, although it's strictly forbidden. In other words, Ghirsha the Wheezer knew that he was far from being a model Jew, and this was a source of great anguish for him. But he consoled himself with the thought that when his son grew up and started to work, they would save enough money for a horse and hire a helper. Then, Ghirsha would not have to do any more long hauls. He would diligently study the Torah, observe all the mitzvahs and say ardent prayers in the synagogue. And before you know it, the Almighty might absolve him of all his sins.

However, man proposes and God disposes. And God chose to dispose otherwise. On the fifth year of Chaim's life, Ghirsha took him down the street to the ramshackle house of Rebe Mendel, the local melamed.¹ His merciless birch rod was well-known to his students, especially to those whose parents didn't pay for their dues on time.

And so, on the way to school, as he held Chaim's little hand, Ghirsha kept trying to say something cheerful in his raspy voice. But his heart ached, and he was afraid of looking his little boy in the face. Ghirsha knew how many additional insults and smacks the little boy would have to suffer from the strict melamed because of his father's poverty. And that's why Ghirsha felt profoundly guilty towards his little son.

He was terrified of the melamed! The moment he glimpsed the man on the street, he would bow before even coming near Rebe Mendel, always begging him to wait a while longer for the school fees. But the melamed would just spread his arms, give Ghirsha an ear-to-ear smile and say: "Oh, Reb Ghirsha, don't even mention it! I am the one who ought to pay you. I have been a melamed for thirty years now and have never seen a boy like your little Chaim! God willing, he will become a great rabbi. Knock on wood!" And Rebe Mendel would spit three times over his shoulder.

¹ School teacher.



In the middle of the XVIII century, bloody libel persecutions of the Jews were widely spread in Europe. The most notorious were cases in Poland: Poznan (1736), Dunaevtsy (1748), Zhytomyr (1753), Yampol (1756), Wojcłowice (1761). According to the king Sigismund II Augustus, blood libels were caused “by the desire of some royal subjects under false pretexts to eradicate Jews in royal cities.”



Division of Poland at the end of 18 century between Russia, Prussia and Austria. Sitting at the left is Ekaterina the Great, the empress of Russia.



The murder of the emperor Paul the First by the conspirators. His eldest son and heir to the throne Alexander was involved in the conspiracy.



Vitebsk province. The 19th century map.



The emperor
Alexander the First,
the Blessed.



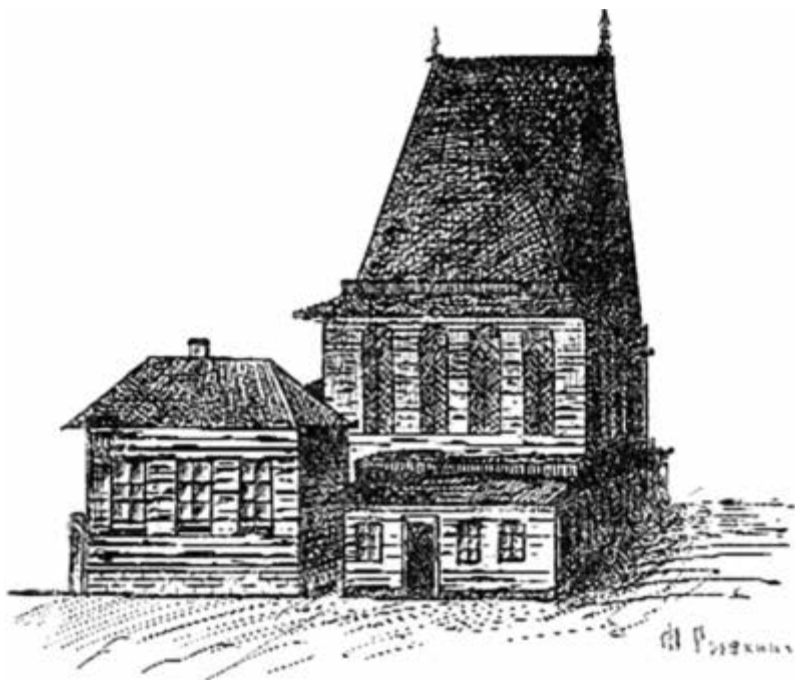
Governor-
General of Vitebsk
Province Prince
N.N. Khovansky.



Street of Velizh, in the background the Uniate Cathedral. Uniate church was created in Poland on the East-Slavs (traditionally Orthodox) lands, as a kind of compromise between Orthodoxy and Catholicism. It kept most of the Orthodox rituals but subordinated to the Pope.



Velizh, Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, 1823.



Velizh, Synagogue.



Tsar Alexander the First on his deathbed. Taganrog. November 1825.



St. Petersburg. Decembrist revolt. December 1825.



Emperor Nicholas
the First after crashing
the Decembrists.



St. Petersburg. Meeting of the State Council.



Member of the State Council Count N. S. Mordvinov, who proved the innocence of the Jews of Velizh, accused of ritual killings of Christian babies.



Semyon Reznik is an award-winning Russian-Jewish émigré writer, journalist, historian, and author of over twenty fiction and nonfiction books, mostly about Russian scientists and Russian/Soviet anti-Semitism. According to Wikipedia, “He is noted in particular for his study of the blood libel and the resurgence of Neo-Nazism in Russia.”

Before his emigration from the Soviet Union in 1982, Mr. Reznik was the longtime editor of the prestigious Russian biographical book series, “Lives of Remarkable People,” to which he also contributed as an author. In the United States, he became a radio personality and a writer for the Russian desk of the Voice of America. He is a member of the International PEN Club, and a member of the Union of Writers of Moscow.

The historical novel *Chaim-and-Maria* was written back in the Soviet Union, in the late 1970s. It challenged the anti-Semitic propaganda that dominated the Soviet media and could not be published due to government censorship. The first Russian edition appeared in the United States in 1986. The book was also translated into Hungarian and published in Budapest in 1990. It came out in Russia only in 2006.

Chaim-and-Maria is the second book by Mr. Reznik in English translation. The first was a nonfiction account, *The Nazification of Russia*, 1996.



“Semyon Reznik’s use of historical material can be only associated with the skills of a professional historian. It seems that not even the smallest detail, contributing to the recreation of the 150-year-old characters and events, has eluded the author. Then, the historian yields the spotlight to the prose writer or, more precisely, enjoys a fruitful coexistence with him.”

—**Edward Kapitakin**, *Novoye Russkoye Slovo*, New York

“The book reads like a masterpiece novel, and is a significant contribution to contemporary literature.”

—**Yakov M. Rabkin**, *University de Montreal*, Département d’histoire

“It really does not often happen that someone writes a tempestuous, humorous, and tear-eliciting novel that is read from cover to cover.”

—**Agnese Gereben**, from the afterword to the Hungarian Edition

“...This book is not only a fine piece of literature in its own right, it would also come at as time when we are witnessing a resurgence of anti-Semitism—and that not just in Russia but in many parts of Europe and the United States as well. Reminding people of its grim history is very important in my view.”

—**Helle Bering-Jensen**, *The Washington Times*

As I read this book for the third time, I can’t but help think how timely it is for modern America. The book was written decades ago about an absolutely different country and environment, and covered absolutely different historical events in the distant past. Nevertheless, instead of Inspector Strakhov and Inspector Shkurin, we could easily put some well known U.S. political figures of today. And in place of all the ‘witnesses’ and victims we can easily find similar personas.

—**John Varoli**, the editor. December 2019

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