

NEW LIGHT ON THE FATE OF ZORAKH GRINBERG

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Since 1988 much new information has come to light on the Jewish writers, scholars and cultural activists who fell victim to the purges of Stalin and especially the purge of 1948–1952. The subject had been taboo for a long time. In Khrushchev's day the purge as such was not discussed in public or in the media.¹ In the more restrictive Brezhnev era even the fate of individual victims of the "personality cult" was generally no longer mentioned.² The rule was: the less said about this, the better.

This rule has by now been reversed completely, due to what in the West would be called investigative reporting, as well as to the Party itself looking into the "Jewish Antifascist Committee Affair": i.e., the trial, studded with illegalities, of 14 members of the JAC, which resulted in the execution of 13 of them on August 12, 1952.³ In this connection the name of Zakharii Grigorevich (in Yiddish: Zorakh) Grinberg has resurfaced in the capacity of a witness against the JAC.

During his long career in Soviet education and culture, Zorakh Grinberg (1889–1949) moved in and out of the Jewish scene more than once. He avoided the limelight, and we doubt that he answered the questionnaire sent by Zalman Rejzen from Vilna to Yiddish writers all over the world in preparation for his lexicon.⁴ Now that the veil of secrecy has been lifted from the last chapter of Grinberg's life, and the widespread impression that he was shot in

1952 corrected,⁵ let us try to reconstruct his career as much as is still possible.⁶

Zorakh Grinberg was born in Belaia Tserkov', Ukraine, on March 13, 1889, into the family of a *melamed* (elementary teacher of the traditional type) but managed to get a secular education, and studied agriculture. For a time he taught history and geography in a private Jewish high school in Minsk.⁷ According to his official biography he was a member of the Bund from 1906 to 1914 and of the Communist party from 1917 to 1922. After the revolution he held high positions in the Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros) including serving as head of the organizational sector; it seems, however, too much to say that he was the right-hand man of the Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatolii Lunacharskii.⁸ He spent three years in Berlin with the Narkompros purchasing mission, and it is not clear under what circumstances he left the party in 1922 or was, as Sheila Fitzpatrick claims, "peremptorily" recalled from Germany in 1924.⁹ After this date he lived in Moscow, and was a member of the administration of the Historical Museum and deputy director of the Kremlin Arms Museum. From 1927 to 1945 he was engaged in teaching and research at the Second Moscow State University and the Gorky Institute for World Literature, and in 1940 published a bibliography on behalf of the Institute.¹⁰ Here again it is not clear whether he was forcibly retired in 1945.

His "Jewish work" ("Yidarbets," as Jewish Communists called it then) came in spurts. With all his work in Narkompros he also found time to co-edit the early Yiddish collections of the new regime, and to himself propagate the ideas of the new society in Yiddish "in the Jewish street."¹¹ He felt it his duty

* The author thanks Dan Haruv of the staff of *Kratkaia evreiskaia entsiklopediia* (The Shorter Jewish Encyclopedia in Russian) for supplementing the bibliography at his disposal.

1. The only exception known to this writer is found in the memoirs of Il'ia Erenburg, which caused Khrushchev considerable irritation.
2. The Soviet Yiddish monthly *Sovetish heymland* omitted their fate from its serialized "Lexicon of Soviet Yiddish Literature," but has reversed course since 1988. The editors now include a memorial section for Stalin victims in numerous issues. About Grinberg they know little, and even copied the wrong date of birth—cf. *ibid.*, 1989:8, 113.
3. In 1989 there appeared a long article on the topic by Arkadii Vaksberg, a Soviet journalist and jurist who has long been concerned with abuses of Soviet law (*Literaturnaia gazeta*, March 15, 1989); I thank Mr. Vaksberg for sending me some added information by letter. A more succinct and systematic report appeared in *Nedeliia*, 7 (1989). The latter item in full, and the earlier in excerpted form, have appeared since in English translation with the present writer's annotations: *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, 19:2 (1989), 60–70. The protocol of the party investigation, dated December 29, 1988, appeared in *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, 12 (1989), 34–40.
4. The biography of Grinberg in Z. Rejzen, *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur...* (Lexicon of Yiddish literature), v. 1, 3rd ed. (Vilna, 1928), does not include his picture, date of birth, Bund membership, or career after 1919, and may be based on information furnished by persons other than the subject.

5. See my "A Note on the Tradition of the Twenty-Four Soviet Jewish Martyrs," *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, 17:1 (1987), 49–52.

6. We base ourselves mainly on the following: Rejzen (see note 4 above); *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur* (Lexicon of new Yiddish literature); *Nauka i nauchnye rabotniki* (Science and scientific personnel), v. 4 (Leningrad, 1930); V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Complete works), 5th ed. (Moscow, 1971), v. 53, p. 471; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment ... 1917–1921*, p. 301. Prof. Fitzpatrick kindly communicated to me the reference to the biographical sketch in Lenin's works (Lenin mentioned Z.G. in one of his letters). Z.G.'s death in prison goes unmentioned.

7. Reported in the memoirs of a one-time pupil of his: Lova Levite, *Bereshit ve-sa'ar* (A stormy beginning), (Tel-Aviv, 1978), p. 16.

8. So Daniel Charney, *A yortsendlik aza* (Such a decade), (New York, 1943), pp. 298–299. A Jewish journalist wrote that Z.G. was instrumental in procuring exit permits for the writers Bunin, Merezhkovskii, and Gippius (Ben-Zion Katz, *Zikhronot* [Memoirs], [Tel-Aviv, 1963], p. 291). Fitzpatrick (see her book cited in note 6 above, index) gives Z.G. only occasional attention.

9. Fitzpatrick, p. 301, who may have gathered this information from Soviet archives.

10. *Bibliografiia M. Gor'kogo; proizvedeniia Gor'kogo i literatura o Gor'kom, 1936–1937* (Bibliography of M. Gorky; works of Gorky and literature about Gorky, 1936–37), (Moscow & Leningrad, 1940).

11. He co-edited *Kultur-fragn* (1918), dealing with the educational problems of the new society; and *Di velt*, a popular-scientific journal with a mix of natural science and geography (2 issues, 1920). For a list of his writings and editing on Jewish themes, in Yiddish and Russian, see: Kh. Shmeruk, ed., *Pirsumim Yehudiyim bi-Verit ha-Mo'atsot, 1917–1960* (Jewish publications in the Soviet Union, 1917–1960), (Jerusalem, 1961); and M. Altschuler, ed., *Russian Publications on Jews and Judaism in the Soviet Union, 1917–1967* (Jerusalem, 1970).

to do so because in 1918–1919 there were few Jewish Communists both willing and able to do so.¹² He assisted Jewish research by giving stipends and access to the archives even to bourgeois scholars.¹³ In the late twenties he became interested in Jewish ethnography, was a member of the ethnographic section of the Moscow-based “All-Russian Society for Studying the Jewish Language, Literature, and History,” and was sent by it to train local workers in the towns Khislavich and Liubavich.¹⁴ At that time he also taught Jewish history in the Pedagogical Faculty of the Second Moscow State University.¹⁵ This work ended with the liquidation of minority institutions in the thirties, if not earlier.

Grinberg, as would be expected, worked with the Jewish Antifascist Committee in World War II. In 1946 he was co-opted to its newly formed historical section.¹⁶ He even managed to send off a brief article to New York on Jewish writers in Gorky's work.¹⁷ In those years he was also writing a book, presumably in Russian, on the Jewish historian Josephus.¹⁸ However, if the recent revelations are accurate, at the time the report on this book appeared in New York he was already under arrest, and forced to provide evidence concerning the “nationalism” of JAC.¹⁹ In 1949, long before the trial in 1952, Zorakh Grinberg died in prison. His papers, I have been told by Eliezer Podriachik, went to *Sovetish heymland* after his rehabilitation.

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12. He himself says so in *Emes*, September 6, 1921, as cited in A. Abtshuk, *Etiudn un materialn ...* (Studies and materials), (Kharkov, 1934), p. 21.
 13. See my *Jewish Scholarship and Scholarly Institutions in Soviet Russia, 1918–1953* (Jerusalem, 1978), p. 7.
 14. *Visnshaftlekhe yorbikher*, 1 (1929), pp. 247–248, 251.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
 16. *Eynikayt*, March 2, 1946.
 17. The article appeared in the pro-Soviet Yiddish monthly *Yidishe kultur*, 1947:7, pp. 39–40.
 18. See *Morgn frayhayt*, January 4, 1948.
 19. According to *Izvestiia TsK SSSR*, 12 (1989), p. 37, he was arrested on December 28, 1947; a senior economist named I. I. Gol'dshtein had been arrested for the same purpose on December 19. We can only surmise that those who ordered the arrests attached special weight to the evidence of senior personnel from scholarly institutes.