

Features

Pillars of court; FICTION

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Moyshe Kulbak

THE ZELMENYANERS

A family saga Translated by Hillel Halkin 267pp. Yale University Press. £18.99 (US \$25).

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Moyshe Kulbak's surreal family saga, charting the modernization of Soviet Belorussia, was serialized in the Soviet Yiddish journal *Shtern* (the Star) between 1929 and 1935. As Sasha Senderovich notes, in his comprehensive introduction to this first English translation, the Soviet Union changed radically during this brief period, a development Kulbak attempted to capture in the story of a single family. In 1927, Kulbak chose to return to Minsk, his birthplace, after living in Berlin and Vilnius. He went back partly out of Communist conviction, and a desire to be reunited with his family, and partly because of the depth of state-sponsored Yiddish culture in Minsk. Two years after the publication of his satirical novel he was shot as a "Polish spy" at the age of forty-one.

The *Zelmenyaners*: A family saga begins with the move of its patriarch, Reb Zelmele, from "deepest Russia" to a courtyard on the outskirts of Minsk. His wife, Bubbe Bashe, has seven children who quickly populate the mythical yard. The focus is on Zelmele's four sons as "pillars" - Itshe the tailor, Folye the tanner, Yuda the carpenter and Zishe the watchmaker - and the rise and fall of the courtyard during the 1920s and 30s. As the novel progresses, the offspring of the four sons (the "whippersnaps") embrace the modernizing fruits of Soviet Belorussia, such as the electrification of their homes, which the elder *Zelmenyaners* comically resist as "electromania". To this extent, Kulbak conforms to the virtuous guidelines of Socialist Realism.

Thankfully, Kulbak never quite manages to dampen the novel's subversive spirit, which is reinforced delightfully in Hillel Halkin's impeccable translation. Published in two volumes, the novel explores the differences between the early and late versions of the family. At first, the *Zelmenyaners* are characterized by a series of eccentric family traits, such as the smell of "musty hay mixed with something else", which subverts the social forces encroaching on them. Their "sangfroid", or "silence", or "stillness" is immovable as they fight against "Zelmenyanercide". By the second volume, however, the younger generation is in the ascendancy. Bereh returns as a war hero and Bolshevik, Tsalke undertakes an ethnographic study of the decaying family remnant (the "Zelemeniad"), and Tonke denounces her family to the local factory as "unreal". Marrying out, a carved pig and lewd drunkenness contrast with the traditional Jewishness of their parents. Nonetheless, for all their assimilation into Sovietism, the younger members remain a part of a distinct and memorable family. Such was Kulbak's "crime" against Stalinism.

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