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Drawing the Iron Curtain: Jews and the Golden Age of Soviet Animation

(New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 288 pp., \$34.95 (pb), ISBN 9780813576626.

Soviet animation achieved a remarkable level of excellence, winning numerous international awards. In fact, Iurii Norshtein's *Tale of Tales* (*Skazka skazok*) was called the best animated film of all time. Jews were involved in the production of many of these outstanding works. Why were Jews so prominent in the field of Soviet animation? Were they conscious of their Jewish heritage and did they express their Jewish identity in their films? According to Katz, the Jews who worked at Soiuzmultfilm, the studio that produced most of the best-known works, were indeed aware of their identity and intentionally incorporated it into their works. Animation was considered a secondary art. It was not the high art of painting, classical music, and literature. The fact that children were its intended audience trivialized the field. Jews were second-class citizens. Thus, according to Katz, Jewish marginality fit the secondary status of animation and many artists found jobs and expressive outlets in the field.

In the introduction, Katz discusses previous, primarily Western, views of the role that Jews played in the Soviet Union. She then proceeds to give a history of Jews in Soviet animation, showing how the production system changed. When studios were purged of questionable employees, a cadre of freelance workers was created. Freelance work, while placing artists in an insecure position financially, allowed more creative freedom and produced more imaginative work.

Working chronologically, Chapter 2 presents a case study of *Blek end uait* (*Black and White*). A story of the exploitation of blacks in America, the film was planned as a live-action feature. It failed because the American blacks brought in to lend the film credibility were not black enough to fit Soviet pre-conceptions and Soviet ideas about the nature of racism did not correspond to the experiences of actual black people. The script was then turned over to animators and helped establish Ivan Ivanov-Vano. His animated version succeeded, Katz argues, because it universalized discrimination. Drawing on the experience of Soviet anti-Semitism, she explains, it was able to convey the pain of all abused peoples.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the Brumberg sisters, Valentina and Zinaida. They produced *The Samoyed Boy* (*Samoedskii malchik*), the story of an outsider who, like the Jew, seeks integration into the Soviet world. They were also responsible, Katz points out, for offering a haven to unemployed Jewish artists. When the theater actor Mikhail Ianshin lost his job, the sisters hired him to voice

their film *Fedia Zaitsev*. In it, the boy of the title is pursued by his graffiti, which comes to life and will not leave him alone until he confesses his crime.

The films *The End of the Black Swamp* (*Konets chornoi topi*), *The Story of a Crime* (*Istoriia odnogo prestupleniia*), and the series *Just you wait!* (*Nu pogodi!*) are the subject of the next chapter. According to Katz, all of these assert that the urban environment is a Jewish sphere. The first film lays claim to folkloric creatures and says that they now belong in animation. The second film and the *Nu pogodi!* series talk about adjusting to city life and moving through the urban environment, things at which Jews excelled.

The iconic figure of Soviet childhood, Cheburashka, is the subject of the next chapter. Katz interprets this creature as emblematic of Soviet Jews. She justifies this interpretation by noting that this creature arrives in a crate of oranges, a fruit associated with Jaffa oranges and, thus, with Israel. Cheburashka is also Russian because he is a bear of sorts and the bear is a symbol of Russia, used as such in the Moscow Olympics. Cheburashka, like real Jews, tries his best to fit in and do the right thing. But he fits no official category and is excluded. Katz posits that, while Cheburashka is a generic Jew, the other characters in the series are modeled on Jewish Soiuzmultfilm workers.

The *Pioneer's Violin* (*Skripka pionera*) and *Polkan and Shavka* are films that deal with the Second World War. The first shows the brutal execution of the boy who plays The International on his violin. It is based on the defiance of a real Jewish boy. The other film valorizes resistance and, according to Katz, treats the topic of Nazi collaborators who turned in their Jewish neighbors. The *Story of a Doll* (*Istoriia odnoi kukly*), she explains, is also about a real incident and uses the creation of a marionette to articulate perseverance.

Chapter 7 deals with the flowering of animation that occurred during the Khrushchev Thaw. During this time, Jews working at Soiuzmultfilm sought to claim their role as innovators and as bearers of culture. *There Once was Koviazin* (*Zhil-byt Koviazin*) is not just about mindless bureaucratism, Katz claims. It is also about the creative role of major artists, Jews included.

The final chapter is about Norshtein's *Tale of Tales*, the award-winning work mentioned at the beginning of this review. In it, Katz discusses Norshtein's struggles with his censors, his international recognition, and his perception of himself as auteur. This film, the author points out, is patterned on Norshtein's personal experience of the war, much of which was affected by his Jewish identity. The book's conclusion summarizes Katz's goals.

This should be a book that explores a neglected aspect of Soviet animation and makes an important contribution. Unfortunately, its analyses are dubious. The book is dependent on Russian sources, many of them archival, yet the author's knowledge of Russian is questionable. Misspellings abound.

Katz claims to use a modified Library of Congress transliteration system. She does not; in fact, many letters are rendered several different ways. The author seems not to know Russian grammar such as the fact that nouns have gender, number, and case. All this makes one question how well she understood her sources. The absence of a bibliography is not reassuring. Some errors can only be attributed to sloppiness. For example, on page 209, there is a photograph of the suburb where Norshtein grew up. The caption states that it is a photograph of Aleksandr Zhukovskii, but there is no person in the picture, while the name of the alleged photographer is that of the suburb. The plethora of errors sabotages what should have been an important book.

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