CHAPTER FIVE

ROMANTIC POSITIVISM

The geographical odyssey of Dubnow’s life to this point can be summarized as follows. Born and raised in a traditional Jewish home in Mstislavl, he left home at age seventeen for Vilna, Dinaburg, and Smolensk in what turned out to be unsuccessful attempts to get a certificate of graduation. As a result, Dubnow was a quintessential autodidact, self-educated in what he considered to be the pertinent fields of “higher learning.” He began his literary career in 1880 as a journalist in St. Petersburg at the age of twenty but was forced to leave the capital in the spring of 1884. Most of the next six years were spent at home in Mstislavl except for occasional forays in search of residence rights, books, and medical advice to Warsaw, Kiev, and St. Petersburg. In the fall of 1890 the Dubnows settled in Odessa, where they lived for the next thirteen years.

The existential crisis that surfaced in the mid-1880s somewhat resembles that of his youthful hero John Stuart Mill, as depicted in the latter’s famous autobiography (and may even to some extent be modeled on it). Dubnow’s emotional and philosophical discontent abated in 1888, leaving him with a greater sense of the concreteness of human life, of personal rapport with nature, and secure acceptance of an ongoing positive bond with the Jewish people. Underneath the specific revisions of his worldview, the resolution of his unrest represented a shift in tone and perspective rather than an abrupt about-face. He was never to give up his sense of personal autonomy, devotion to high principle, and an overriding need to find a higher meaning for his life. Young Dubnow’s most provocative calls for radical reforms of Jewish culture, religion, and education had been written between 1883 and 1885. He later wrote that after that, “the evolutionary method in the investigation of history and contemporary affairs replaced my previous revolutionary approach.”1 “Evolutionary method” had several meanings for him, including that he was and remained a staunch liberal in an age of increasing political extremism.

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1 KZ, I, 201.
It took time for him to evolve his mature position in the many articles he published between 1886 and 1897. Along with an ever increasing involvement in historical study, for financial reasons he had to continue writing book reviews on a wide range of subjects for *Voskhod* until 1895. He began editing and authoring books on Jewish history which he published by himself, but he continued to submit essays to *Voskhod* until the journal’s demise in 1906.

On the ideological level, the greatest shift during these years was, as we have seen, a modification of his universalistic rationalism. The earliest indication of his growing identification with the Jews of Eastern Europe can be detected in 1886. The years between his qualified repudiation of Positivism and his ardent Jewish nationalism in 1897 constitute a distinct, if extended, transition in his thought.

In 1887 he had visited Warsaw to collect sources for his history of Hasidism, his first original piece of historical research. This was soon followed by a trip to Kiev where he found a physician who was able to cure the headaches induced by astigmatism. His writing in his articles on history during this period was more open, poetic, and imaginative than before, or for that matter than at any other period in his life. The move to Odessa was motivated by the desire to live in a large city where he could more easily carry on historical research. Once there, at a historic moment of Russian political ferment, he became a stalwart member of an eminent, influential, and creative group of Jewish cultural nationalists. In the summer of 1897 he vacationed in Mstislawl, made a trip to Switzerland, and began to publish the first of his series of “Letters on Old and New Judaism.”

*The Influence of Renan and Graetz*

Dubnow’s early Comtean Positivism had been based on empiricism and on faith in inexorable progress as humanity passed through certain clearly-defined steps to self-understanding. He came to qualify the latter conviction somewhat, but never the former. Dubnow always emphasized the intrinsic importance of precise and accurate collection of facts and preferred, whenever possible, to stress the similarities between history and the natural sciences. He recognized that human consciousness should be conceived as an independent level of existence with its own internal principles of development. He later called his approach to history sociological but he owed even more to the late nineteenth-century Darwinian “science of society”. The new departures that were beginning to