THE ABSENCE OF A JEWISH RUSSIAN LEGACY IN FRANCE: BEN-AMI’S TESTIMONY AND THE SCHWARTZBARD AFFAIR

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In the second half of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century, Jews who had been living in France since the Middle Ages were particularly zealous in their desire for Jews coming from other countries, especially Russia, to become French. French Jews were afraid of being ostracized and of seeing their fragile integration put into question; this was because of the conspicuous appearance of their ‘Russian’ coreligionaries. They were aware that they could be reminded that in France they were nothing more than guests whose presence was merely tolerated, as the Dreyfus affair had demonstrated. In presenting two episodes from the history of the relationships between French Jews and Russian Jews, and of the misunderstanding between the two groups, I will attempt to explain the failure to promote the cultural heritage of Jewish immigrants coming from the Russian Empire. The first episode is the testimony of Ben-Ami and the second deals with the way the French press and the Russian Jewish press reacted to the Schwartzbard affair.

Ben-Ami (1854–1932), whose real name was Mordekhai Mark Rabbinovich, immigrated to Paris in 1881 as a representative of the group Am-Olam.2 He came to France to make contact with the Alliance Israélite Universelle organization. There is little information about his stay in Paris. However, he regularly wrote for the Russian-Jewish magazine Voskhod, using the pseudonym Reish Gelusha, which in Hebrew means

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2 In response to the pogroms of the early 1880s, two reform-minded organizations of Russian Jews sought opportunities outside their native Russia. One group, BILU (Beit Ya’akov Lekhu Ve-nelkah, or ‘Let the house of Jacob go’), chose Palestine as its destination. The other group, ‘Am ‘Olam (‘The Eternal People’), with its largest concentration of members in Odessa, saw the United States as the land of opportunities.
‘The Chief of Diaspora’. He also wrote at least a dozen ‘Letters from Paris’ to the same magazine (not just two letters, as Laura Salmon has suggested). The first was published in January 1882 in *Nedel’naia khronika Voskhoda*, followed by others later that year. The subject matter of these letters can be divided into three categories: a) observation of French society, b) judgement of French Jews, c) observation of Russian Jews living in France.

Ben-Ami had a very positive opinion of France, which he saw as the country of freedom and of human rights. He particularly admired the French ability to summon up help for Russian Jews. He enthusiastically quoted extracts from a book written by the diplomat and politician Count Mirabeau (1749–1791) about Moses Mendelssohn and the importance of the emancipation movement among Jews in 1787. He also mentioned the contribution of Victor Hugo (1802–1885), who used his considerable power and influence to castigate the despotism of the Tsarist government and denounce the situation of Jews in Russia. Ben-Ami mentioned that in May 1882 Hugo had presided at a very well attended protest meeting against pogroms, and in June 1882, the newspaper *l’Événement* had published his drama *Torquemada*, which he had written in 1870. This tragedy, an extract from which is quoted by Ben-Ami, is a virulent denunciation of the Spanish Inquisition but, in the context of the persecution of Jews in Russia, the French press regarded the play as a response to the bloody pogroms. Victor Hugo, who in 1882 was president of the Committee for the Support of Jews from Russia (Comité de Secours pour les Israélites de Russie), was not alone in this battle. In spite of a prevailing religious anti-Judaism, French society reacted with sympathy to the situation of Jewish victims of pogroms and to the anti-Jewish laws in the Russian Empire. In magazines such as *La Vie moderne* or *Le Petit Journal*, people could read about the ‘colonie russo-juive’, and articles entitled ‘Les Juifs

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6 *L’Événement*, June 1, 1882.

7 On June 21 1882 this committee sent a letter to the mayor of Paris signed by its president, Victor Hugo.