CHAPTER EIGHT

ASSIMILATION OR CULTURAL ENCOUNTER?
THE PICARESQUE IN G. BOGROV’S NOTES OF A JEW AND
I. EHRENBURG’S THE STORMY LIFE OF LASIK ROITSCHWANTZ

Olaf Terpitz
(University of Vienna, Vienna)

With the arrival in the last few decades of postcolonial studies and of the diverse “cultural turns” in particular in scholarly discourse, notions and concepts of “assimilation” and “anti-Semitism” became highly contested and diversified in their ramifications. Generally speaking, the focus shifted from static descriptions of phenomena usually associated with “assimilation” to the dynamics of inter-cultural contact and entanglement. More attention began to be paid to the specifics of the temporal, spatial, ethnic, and social settings in which cultural encounters took place in the past and continue to take place today. Historiography no less than literary studies embraced thus notions of “encounter,” “integration,” and “contact,” particularly in the English-speaking academic world.

In Russian Jewish literature of the 19th and 20th centuries, works by Grigori Bogrov and Ilya Ehrenburg have long been associated with what was referred to as “anti-Semitism,” an elastic notion stretching so far as to encompass Jewish self-hatred and a blurry notion of “assimilation.” The writings of these two authors are striking representatives of the interaction among Russian, Russian Jewish, and European cultures and audiences. Different as the two writers’ artistic and ideational agendas are from each other, taking a close look at elements of their biographies, their cultural disposition and

---

1 “Cultural turns” refers to shifts in theoretical focus and interest taken by researchers and thinkers in the modern multi-disciplinary setting. Instances of cultural turns include the spatial turn, the linguistic turn, and the translational turn. Cf. Doris Bachmann-Medick, Cultural Turns. Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 2006). See also Peter Burke, What is Cultural History? (Cambridge, 2004).

societal position can yield a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics involved in the processes of reception and perception, which are vital to the unfolding of cultural encounters.

**Preliminary Remarks on Reception and Genre**

The history of the reception of Grigorii Bogrov's autobiographical novel *Notes of a Jew* is fraught with polemics and conflicting opinions. Simon Dubnov appreciated his encounter with the novel as a milestone in his own intellectual development. In his memoirs Dubnov wrote:

[... ] usililos' moe otritsatel'noe otnoshenie k ortodoksal'nomu evreistvu pod vliianiem dvukh knig: "Avtobiografi" Solomona Maimona i [...] "Zapisok evrea" Bogrova, pechatavshikhsia v luchshem russkom ezhesmiachnike "Otechestvennye zapiski". Maimon namechal mne moi sobstvennyi put' iz starogo mira v novyi, Bogrov zhe svoimi rezkimi oblicheniami starogo poria
dka v evreiskikh obschinakh obostril vo mne oppositsionnost' k okruzhaiu-
schei srede.3

A similarly appreciative statement was penned by Jacob Teitel, the one and only Jewish judge in the history of the Russian Empire. In his autobiography, "Iz moei zhizni" (From my life), Teitel noted:

V chisle lits, kotorym ia poslal svoe vvozzvanie, byl G.I. Bogrov, avtor "Zapisok evrea", pechatavshikhsia togda v "Otechestvennykh zapiskakh", izdavavshikhsia Kraevskim i Nekrasovym. Eti talantlivye ocherki proizvodili sil'noe vpechatlenie na russkoe obschestvo.4

By contrast, the Russian Jewish newspaper Den' published a judgment diametrically opposed to this, authored by Adolf Landau using the pseudonym of "Gambit." Landau accused Bogrov of exaggerating and defaming his real subject: "G[ospodin] Bogrov, kotoryi, po-vidimomu, blizko prismotrelsia k zhizni, no ochevidno umyshlenno iskazil ee raznymi preuvelicheniami [...]."5

Interestingly, both Dubnov and Landauas well as others agree on the thoroughly bleak and dismal picture Bogrov paints of the Jews' predicament under Tsar Nicholas I during the 1830s and 1840s. They differ, however, in

---

5 Gambit (Landau), *Den'*, 1871, N°9, p. 139.