FROM THE PALE TO THE UNIVERSITY: THE MEMOIRS OF VLADIMIR OSIPOVICH GARKAVI

The memoirs of Vladimir Osipovich Garkavi cover the years from 1846 to 1864 and deal with the breakdown of traditional Jewish society, the growth of Russian Haskalah and the consequences of Alexander II's reforms. More specifically, the memoirs chronicle the author's integration into Russian society via secular education. They are one of the relatively few written records of the period by a Russian Jew.¹

Garkavi's is a success story. Vladimir Osipovich came from the right family, was born at the right time and grew up in the right place. Both sides of his family, the Garkavis and Strashuns, belonged to the Jewish aristocracy of Talmudic scholars and successful businessmen. Money was not an obstacle to education; the relatively prosperous Garkavis saw to it that their son lived more comfortably than most of his friends at the university. Garkavi grew up in Vilnius, the “Jerusalem of Lithuania,” and center of the Haskalah for the northwestern part of the Russian empire. His uncle, Mates Strashun, belonged to the circle of Vilnius maskilim (adherents of enlightenment), which included the two founders of Neo-Hebraic literature, Mordehai Aaron Ginzburg and Avraam Dob Ber Lebenson, the historian Samuil-Josif Finn, the Vilnius censor Vol’f Tugendgol’d, and the educator Girsh Katsenelenbogen. The memoirs make it clear that Garkavi’s father, Joseph, was even more liberal than Strashun and that young Garkavi felt hemmed in by the world of his maskil uncle. Alexander II’s 1859 ukaz made it possible for Garkavi to enter the university, graduate with a law degree and leave the Pale forever. The judicial reform of 1864 permitted Jews to become lawyers and judges.

¹ The Garkavi memoirs were published in volume 4 of Perezhitoe, a collection of articles, memoirs and archival materials on Jewish life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Using the same plates, the memoir was also issued as a brochure in a very small edition. I am indebted to the members of the Ugrimov-Reshchikov families, to Josephine and Lydia Pasternak, and to Professors Allan Arkush and Samuel Morell, Department of Judaic Studies, State University of New York at Binghamton for their help.
Two external factors influence the character and tone of the memoirs. Garkavi wrote the first two sections of his reminiscences in 1889 and the third in 1910. Both were years of reaction under Alexander III and Nicholas II and, in fact, the impetus to writing the memoirs may have been the predicament of Russian Jews in the 1880s. There were waves of pogroms in 1881–82 and 1903–06. The May Laws of 1882 limited Jewish students in St. Petersburg and Moscow to 3 percent of total enrollment. An 1889 decree restricted the admission of Jewish lawyers to the bar. Viewed from the vantage point of the eighties, the memoirs gain a polemical edge. Garkavi is describing the halcyon days of opportunity for Jewish students, yet his story of Alexander II and the melamed quietly points to the underlying problem, past and present.

In his reminiscences Garkavi describes the restrictive nature of the world of his youth, thereby justifying his assimilation into Russian society during his years at the university. Unlike the Jews of Poland who sided with the Poles during the 1863 rebellion, Lithuanian Jews typically had strong Russian sympathies. Garkavi’s love of Nekrasov, Nikitin, Turgenev, Goncharov and especially Ostrovskii and the Malyi Theater is evident, but as a member of one national minority, he cannot (almost in spite of himself) help sympathizing with another, the Poles, as he tells the story of how Ivan Susanin was forced by the Russian audience to “kill” the Poles at the Bol’shoi. Garkavi’s portraits of his materialist fellow university students are fascinating because they validate the unexaggerated reality of a Bazarov or Rakhmetov.

All the same, Garkavi is clearly writing from the perspective of one who has returned to Judaism, albeit a different Judaism from that of his grandfather and uncle Strashun. The ecstatic passage about his acceptance into Moscow University ends with a Jewish orchestra at the Ermitazh restaurant and memories of the Pale. In spite of young Garkavi’s impending flight from Judaism, there is no irony in his description of the parting with grandfather Strashun, who tells him never to forget he is a Jew. In the third section of the memoir, Garkavi presents himself as different in his intellectual interests from his assimilated friends, who are all materialists specializing in the natural sciences, and different from his Russian friends in his attitude toward women and family life, yet the same in his search for a modus vivendi combining religion and secular knowledge. All of this points to a later return to Judaism.

The language of the memoir is sometimes rather clumsy and seems almost foreign, as Russian was to Vladimir Osipovich. The text almost possesses the quality of oral speech in its repetitions and awkward phrasings, which I have not tried to change in the translation. That the memoirs were written at two different times and years apart perhaps accounts for the sudden shift from the narrative past of “Childhood” and “Vil’na” to the present of “Entry into the