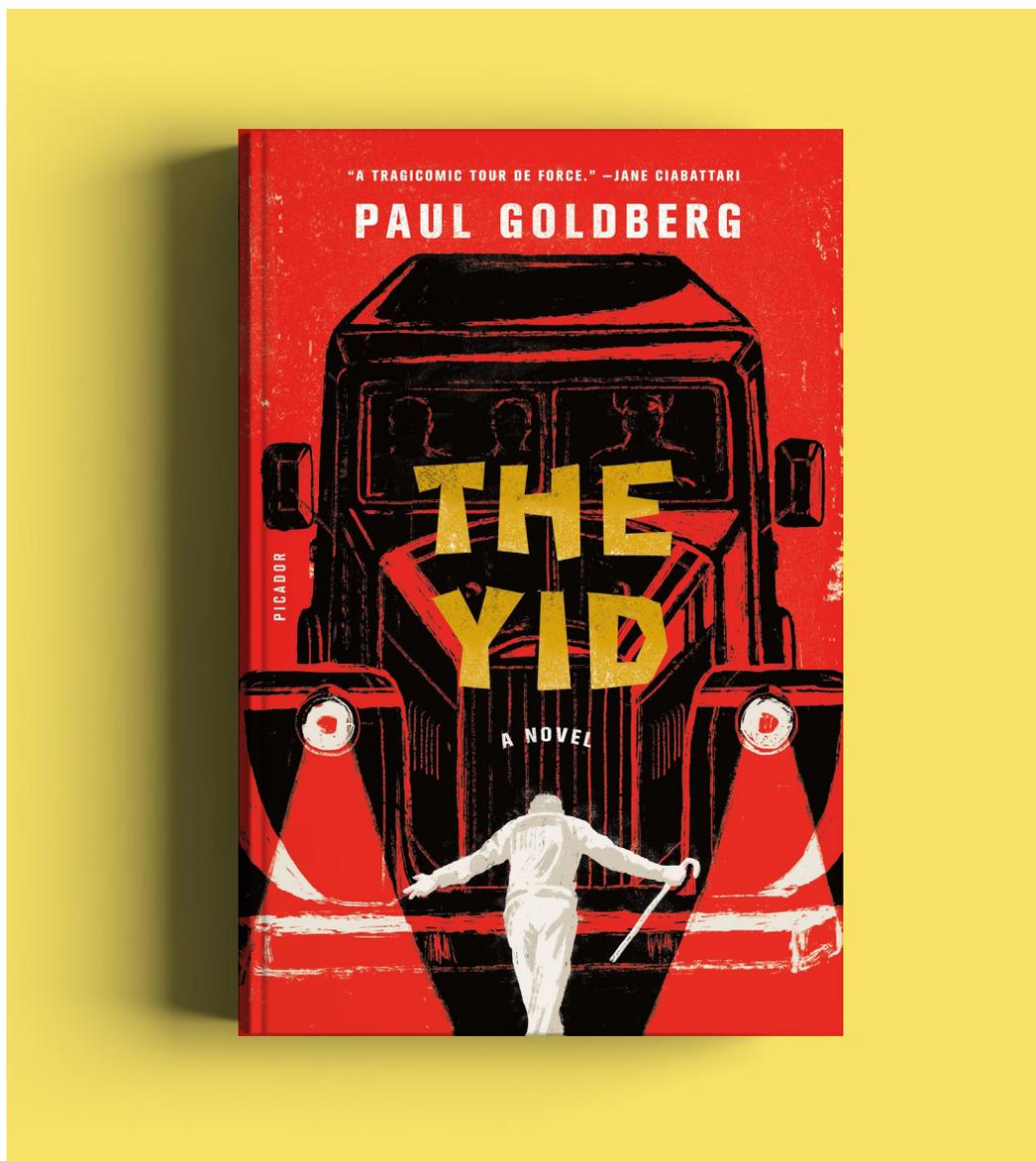


JBC Book Clubs Discussion Guide

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Contents:

20th Century Russia: In Brief.....	3
A Glossary of Cultural References.....	7
JBC Book Clubs Discussion Questions.....	16
Recipes Inspired by <i>The Yid</i>	20
Articles of Interest and Related Media.....	25
Paul Goldberg’s JBC Visiting Scribe Blog Posts.....	26

20th Century Russia: In Brief

After the Russian Revolution of 1917 ended the Czarist autocracy, Russia's future was uncertain, with many political groups vying for power and ideological dominance. This led to the Russian Civil War (1917-1922), which was primarily a war between the Bolsheviks (the Red Army) and those who opposed them. The opposing White Army was a loose collection of Russian political groups and foreign nations. Lenin's Bolsheviks eventually defeated the Whites and established Soviet rule through all of Russia under the Russian Communist Party. Following Lenin's death in 1924, Joseph Stalin, the Secretary General of the RCP, assumed leadership of the Soviet Union.

Under Stalin, the country underwent a period of intense and rapid industrialization. To assist with the growth, Stalin created joint ventures with American companies who helped set up the basis of industrial growth. Meanwhile, personal and political freedoms withered. The State controlled what people read, heard, and created, mandating that anything that was produced promoted the state and glorified Stalin. In 1928, Stalin banished Leon Trotsky, and by the 1930s, Stalin had removed much of the opposition with his Great Purge and consolidated his power. Through a reign of terror that included random arrests, sham trials and confessions, gulags (forced labor camps), executions and assassinations, Stalin kept a firm grip on his dictatorship. It is estimated that nearly 700,000 people were executed during this time, with that number increasing over the course of Stalin's time in power. Stalin died in 1953, and his successor, Nikita Khrushchev, rescinded many of the Stalinist policies

Stalin and the Jews

At the start of the Russian Revolution, though religion and religiosity was considered outdated and superstitious, anti-Semitism was officially renounced by Lenin's soviet (council) and the Bolsheviks. During this time, the State sanctioned institutions of Yiddish culture, like GOSET, as a way of connecting with the people and bringing them into the Communist ideology.

Though Stalin was personally an anti-Semite who hated "yids" and considered the enemy Menshevik Party an organization of Jews (as opposed to the Bolsheviks which he considered to be Russian), as late as 1931, he continued to condemn anti-Semitism. Though the Great Purges of 1936-1937 saw the deaths of many Jews, they were not specifically targeted for being Jewish. The rise of Nazi Germany, however, led to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in which Stalin, to appease the Nazis and avoid war, agreed to "purge the ministry of Jews" and plans were made to relocate Jews to regions of Siberia. The Nazi invasion of the USSR broke this pact, and even into the 1940s, though Jews were increasingly less involved in positions of power, Stalin sponsored the migration of Jewish refugees to Birobidzan, the Jewish Autonomous Oblast that he had set up a few years before.

After World War II, however, Stalin's personal feelings against Jews—that they were not assimilable and were secretly capitalists—became more public, and his Russian nationalism increased. In the fall of 1948, Golda Meir was welcomed to Moscow by huge crowds of Jews; an event which demonstrated to Stalin and his government the strong current of

Zionism among Soviet Jews. One month later, a full-scale ongoing campaign against Jewish culture and Zionism was launched. This included smears in the press against the “rootless cosmopolitans”, shutting down museums, theaters and other cultural institutions, and the arrests or assassinations of leading Jewish activists and writers. Jews were accused of being traitors, spies for the Americans, dangers to the Soviet Union, and bourgeois cosmopolitans. On the night of August 12, 1952, the Night of the Murdered Poets saw the deaths of thirteen of the most prominent Yiddish writers, and from 1952-1953, Jews in power were removed from their positions and many were arrested.

At the start of 1953, Stalin devised his own Final Solution to rid the Soviet Union of all of those of “Jewish ethnicity”, a massive pogrom that would relocate 2-4 million Jews to Siberia and annihilate them. It is believed that the “Doctors’ Plot” was the initial action of this campaign.

In January, 1953, it was announced that Soviet officials had uncovered a conspiracy amongst senior doctors, most of them Jewish, to poison highranking members of the government. Following the arrests of these doctors, the anti-Semitic press ran rampant, with widespread character assassinations and accusations against Jews in general, and many doctors with Jewish names were dismissed and arrested. Nine days before the doctors’ trial was to begin, Stalin died suddenly. Stalin’s successors dismissed the charges on lack of evidence, and it was later discovered that the whole conspiracy was a fabrication.

Note: The day that Stalin died, March 5, 1953, happened to fall on the holiday of Purim. Some communities celebrate Stalin’s death as a “Little Purim”, a day when Jews were saved from annihilation at the hands of evil.

Glossary of Cultural References

Anna Akhmatova

Anna Andreyevna Gorenko (1889-1966), known as Anna Akhmatova, was a modernist poet who is considered to be one of Russia's greatest. Her work and life were greatly affected by the political climates and shifts of the first half of the twentieth century. Her writing was immensely popular—her second book influenced thousands of women to write poems in her style—but was out of political favor for periods of time, first from the Bolsheviks and then under the Stalinist regime.

Stalin's ban on her work post-WWII led to her being expelled from the Writer's Union, with the Secretary calling her "half-nun, half-harlot." One of her most famous works is a long form poem, "Requiem," that was dedicated to the victims of Stalin's terror. Though her popularity kept her from being arrested, her son was jailed for many years. Unlike many artists, Akhmatova remained in the country to bear witness to what was happening, a stance that further endeared her to the Russian people.

Marc Chagall

A Russian-French artist (1887-1985) who was one of the most popular and internationally recognized modernists. He was also considered one of the world's most preeminent Jewish artists.

Bar Kokhba Rebellion

The Bar Kokhba rebellion began in 132 C.E. in Judea. The Jews, who were subjects of the Roman Empire at the time, had been promised land and a chance to rebuild the Temple. Emperor Hadrian, however, changed his mind and issued decrees that perse-

cuted the Jews and sold many into slavery. The Bar Kokhba rebellion (the third Jewish revolt against the Romans) was led by Shimon Bar Kokhba. He was regarded by some Jews as a messiah who would lead the Jews to a victory and a homeland. Under his command, the Judean fighters won significant land, but were ultimately crushed by the Romans, and thousands of Jews were killed. After the rebellion, the persecution of the Jews was increased with Torah study, synagogue attendance and rituals forbidden, many sages and rabbis killed, and Jews banned from Jerusalem.

GOSET

The Moscow State Yiddish Theater (Gosudarstvennyi Evreiskii Teatr) was one of the most famous and successful Yiddish-language theaters in the world, and was often considered one of the best theaters in the Soviet Union at the time. GOSET was established in 1920, at a time when the Soviet government fostered Yiddish culture in an attempt to influence Jews and gain their support.

GOSET's leading actors, Solomon Mikhailovich Mikhoels and Venyamin Zuskin, were so popular that they became national celebrities, and many of the most famous Jewish artists were involved in its productions (for example, the sets were designed by Marc Chagall). Many of the shows were interpretations of pre-revolutionary Yiddish works—by Sholem Aleichem, I.L. Peretz, Mendele Mocher Seforim, etc—that expressed the themes and ideals of the Soviet Union. GOSET was known for modernist productions that emphasized class struggle and anti-religious rebellion.

The theater was directed by Alexander Granovsky until 1928 when he defected while on a European tour, leaving Mikhoels as the new director. Under Mikhoels, GOSET staged a production of *King Lear*, which was widely considered the theater's greatest moment.

After WWII, however, the Soviet political climate was hostile to Jews (among others). Stalin's anti-cosmopolitan campaign turned into a new wave of violence in 1948, with the assassination (under the guise of a truck accident) of Solomon Mikhoels and the arrest of many of the theater's leading writers and artists. Zuskin took over for Mikhoels, but was arrested later that same year. GOSET was one of the last surviving Jewish institutions when it was closed in November 1949.

Alexander Granovsky

Alexander Granovsky (1890-1937) was the founding director of GOSET. He began his training in theater as a young man, and was influenced by the avant-garde and experimental theater of the Russian Silver Age. He studied in Germany under Max Reinhardt before beginning to direct productions in St. Petersburg.

In 1917, Granovsky became the director of the new Jewish Theatrical Society of Saint Petersburg, despite not speaking Yiddish himself. In 1920, he moved the troupe to Moscow, where, with state sanctioning, it became the Moscow State Yiddish Theater.

As theater director, he presented popular Yiddish plays in a modernist style, creating a theater that was immersed in Jewish culture while appealing to a broader audience. He chose plays whose satire against the bourgeoisie was in line with the Communist ideals, and created renditions of old Yiddish favorites that were transformed by his symbolist presentations. He was considered one of the leading experimental directors in the Soviet Union.

During the theater's European tour in 1928, Granovsky defected to Germany. He continued to direct and became increasingly involved in film until his death in 1937.

King Lear

King Lear, one of Shakespeare's tragedies, was originally written around 1605. The play was performed by GOSET to great success and critical acclaim in 1935. It starred Solomon Mikhoels as the King and Venyamin Zuskin as the Fool, and was translated into Yiddish by Shmuel Halkin.

A summary of the play follows:

King Lear, the King of England, is retiring and wants to divide his kingdom amongst his three daughters. He devises a competition whereby his daughters must profess their love for him to receive property. His two conniving daughters, Regan and Goneril, heap praises on him, while his favorite daughter, Cordelia, despite her love for him, refuses such displays of insincerity and is disinherited. The king's advisor, Kent, tries to defend Cordelia, and he too is sent away. The king, along with his knights and Kent who has disguised himself in order to continue to serve the king, takes up residence with Goneril and then with Regan. Goneril soon tires of hosting her father and his entourage, and tries to drive him out of her house.

Edmund, the illegitimate son of the Earl of Gloucester, plans to have his brother, Edgar, disinherited by telling their father that Edgar is plotting to kill him. To avoid arrest, Edgar dresses as a beggar and becomes a servant to Regan's husband Cornwall. Kent fights to defend the king's name and is placed in stocks by Regan and Goneril in a show of disrespect toward their father. Lear, after leaving Goneril's castle, goes to Regan who agrees to take him in, provided that he dismisses all of his knights. Lear leaves in the midst of a storm, accompanied by the Fool and Kent.

The King of France, who is now married to Cordelia, plans to invade England. Gloucester tells Edmund of the invasion and of his plan to help Lear. By betraying his father to Cornwall, Edmund receives his father's title, while Gloucester is tortured and sent away. In the midst of this, Cornwall is killed. Edgar, in his beggar disguise, finds his now blind father and travels with him to Dover. Lear has also made his way to Dover, and he reconciles with Cordelia. Regan

and Goneril, still the wife of Albany, compete for Edmund's affections. The battle between France and England begins, and Cordelia and Lear are captured by Edmund's army. After the battle, Regan and Goneril declare their love for Edmund.

Edgar returns and kills Edmund, and reveals his identity to his father, who dies of a heart attack from the shock. Regan dies, having been poisoned by Goneril, and Goneril kills herself. Edmund had issued an order to hang Cordelia and Lear, and the messengers who are sent to stop the executions arrive too late to save Cordelia. Lear dies from a broken heart.

Solomon Mikhoels

Solomon Mikhailovich Mikhoels (1890-1948) was a prominent Jewish leader and Yiddish actor.

From the first performance of the Moscow Yiddish Theater, Mikhoels played the lead roles, earning fame and critical acclaim. He remained the theater's lead actor, and took over the role of artistic director in 1929 after Granovsky's defection to Germany. As director, he chose productions that would promote Yiddish and Jewish culture while balancing the ideals of Soviet socialist realism. He continued to act in the theater and also appeared in some film. In 1939, he was awarded the Order of Lenin and was named a People's Artist of the USSR.

In 1941, he was appointed as the chair of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, a committee of Jewish public figures that was convened by Stalin as a propaganda tool to garner worldwide support for the Soviet effort against the Nazis. As chair, he traveled, along with fellow committee member Itzik Feffer, to the United States, as well as Britain, Mexico and Canada, to give public lectures and meet with officials about the Soviet war effort. He was regarded as the Jewish representative of the Soviet government, and even after the war, was often appealed to by Soviet citizens and invited to speak internationally. After the war, Mikhoels continued to act and received the Stalin Prize in 1946.

On January 13, 1948, Mikhoels was killed in what was portrayed as a traffic accident, but was actually an assassination carried out by Stalin's security apparatus. He was publicly eulogized by the government, and GOSET was renamed in his honor, but by 1952, he had been falsely accused of having engaged in anti-Soviet activity. His death has been considered a turning point in Soviet Jewish history, as it marked the beginning of an official policy of anti-Semitism.

Purimspiel

A Purim spiel is a play that is performed for the holiday of Purim. It is often a comic reenactment of the story of Esther. It is the only piece of folk theater that has survived a thousand years of European culture and survives today.

Traditionally, a Purim spiel includes standard pan-European roles like the *marshalik* (master of ceremonies), *payats* (clown), *lets* (jester), and *nar* (fool). By the 18th century, Purim plays had developed into broad-ranging satires that included music and dance. These became the precursors of Yiddish theater.

The Purim spiel continues to flourish, often as a skit, but also as humorous or satirical articles, blog posts, or TV segments.

Aleksandr Pushkin

Aleksandr Sergeyevich Pushkin (1799-1837) has often been considered Russia's greatest poet and the founder of modern Russian literature. His work has inspired countless plays, operas, and literary heroes.

He was born into Russian nobility in Moscow, the great-grandson of a kidnapped African prince who was gifted to Peter the Great and rose to become a member of his imperial court. Pushkin published his first poem at the age of 15, and quickly became known as part of the Russian literary scene.

Two of his most well known works were the drama, *Boris Godunov*, and a novel in verse, *Eugene Onegin*.

Paul Robeson

Paul Robeson (1898-1976) was an African-American singer and actor who gained international fame on the stage (playing Othello and in Showboat singing “Ol’ Man River” among other productions) and on screen. He became active in fighting against racism, and lent his voice to support movements like Pan-Africanism and workers’ rights while fighting against Fascism and Nazism.

He traveled widely, and made several trips to the USSR, whose ideals of equality he supported. During WWII, at one of his benefit concerts on behalf of the war effort,

Robeson met Solomon Mikhoels and Itzik Feffer, who were there as emissaries of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. Robeson’s ties to communism and his role as an activist made him a target for McCarthyism and the House Un-American Activities Committee. He was blacklisted from many venues, and was not permitted to renew his passport for eight years.

In 1958, Robeson published an autobiography and embarked on a world tour, after the return of his passport. He continued performing, but did not regain the same level of fame.

Venyamin Zuskin

Venyamin Zuskin (1899-1952) was an actor in GOSET. He was second to Mikhoels in the troupe, and often played the supporting role to his lead. He received the Stalin Prize in 1946, and taught in the theater’s actors’ studio. Zuskin took over as GOSET’s artistic director when Mikhoels was killed in 1948.

Zuskin was also an active member of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, and so became a target of one of Stalin’s purges. He was arrested while in the hospital and executed at Lubyanka prison on Stalin’s orders on what became known as the Night of the Murdered Poets.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think of the title of this novel? Who is the Yid?
2. The epigraph for the novel is a line from Shmuel Halkin's Bar Kokhba script that was performed by the Moscow State Yiddish Theater in 1938. Bar Kokhba, raising his sword, declares, "A slave who wields a sword is not a slave!" What does this mean? Why did the author choose this line for the epigraph?
3. The degree to which this novel is shaped around real people and events is more extreme than in many works of historical fiction. How does the strong presence of historical figures and facts shape your reading experience?
4. At various moments in the novel, the narrative shifts from prose form to a theatrical script dialogue. At which moments does this temporary transition occur, and how do they affect your reading of the scene?
5. Consider the relationship between the characters of *The Yid* and the narrator telling their story and asking questions of the audience. Do you sense that they are aware of each other, and to what degree? Who is the narrator addressing?
6. The novel frequently introduces characters in full, rich depictions, only to abruptly depart from them, leave them behind, or kill them off. What does this device accomplish? Do these full portraits of apparati of the state humanize these figures? What does it serve to individualize figures who are meant or strive to be faceless, nameless, uniform in mid-century Moscow?
7. How would you characterize this book? What genre would you ascribe it?
8. Levinson's methods in executing his plan are very deliberate—he purposely aims for the throats of his victims (p 31) and plays on the blood libel that is circulating (p 225, 239). Why do you think he makes these choices?
9. The ethics and moral concerns of killing are frequently at play in this novel. Kogan feels that one's attitude toward death is "determined by where you are", and that his machine-gunner self and doctor self held different perspectives (p 130), wondering if the doctor self has the resolve to kill again; Ol'ga Fyodorovna accuses Levinson, "You are not a poet, Solomon, not a soldier. You are a murderer, Solomon, and a common thug" (p 247); on their way to Stalin's dacha, the costumed passengers of the Black Maria debate whether regicide is worse than other killings (p 259), and, having reached their destination, the ethics of murdering a man who does not understand why he is being killed (p 287). Do any of the considerations raised change the nature of individual killings? Are all of the deaths in *The Yid* justified and/or necessary, or did you find some of the murders questionable? Do each of the killings make the perpetrator a murderer? Would you feel differently about the troupe's mission (and crimes along the way) if their target had been Hitler instead of Stalin? How so, and why?

10. Levinson's plot is crazy and extremely dangerous. What distinct motivations drive each of the six conspirators—Levinson, Kogan, Lewis, Kima, Olga Fyodorovna, and Moisey Semyonovich—to take part in it?
11. The line between theater and reality is loosely drawn throughout this novel. Mikhoels once “found it useful to consider whether Levinson's experience informed the characters he portrayed on stage or whether the characters he portrayed informed Levinson's experience” (p 143). And Lewis asks Levinson, “how do we know that an actor leaves his character onstage after the curtain falls?... Are you playing the part of the leader of a plot, or are you indeed being the leader of a plot?” (p 102). What do you make of Levinson's strongly established identity as an actor of a burned-down theater? Which do you think is the case for Levinson? Do you agree with Levinson's response to Lewis that the question is theoretical and irrelevant? Does the play that Levinson writes for Stalin's assassination support his case?
12. What is the significance of *King Lear* in this novel? Who plays the role of the king and who of the Fool? (For more on this, see Paul Goldberg's *King Lear* essay on page 26 of this guide.)
13. Of the many written works that are referenced over this novel, from Russian novels to plays and Jewish ritual stories, which do you think is most crucial to the novel?
14. What role do tefillin play in *The Yid*? What do they signify? Consider Kogan and Lewis' conversation about tefillin (p 216-217).
15. The play that Levinson writes for Stalin's assassination enacts “the first Blood Seder” and includes lines from the Passover Haggadah (p 288-292). Lewis, meeting with Kima years later, says, “I think *der komandir* was wrong to model his blood ritual on the Passover Seder. Should he have chosen Purim?” (p 300). What do you think, was this the Passover story or a Purim tale? Was this a serious drama or a comedic Purimspiel? Do you think its players believed their act to be a serious endeavor or an absurdist gag?
16. In the final scene, Lewis asks Kima to reveal the truth of the day that Stalin died and who killed him. Why does this matter?

Recipe: Naturally Fermented Sour Dill Pickles

Levinson, while writing his script, enjoys a large pickle, “the kind you pull out of a barrel at a market and eat on the way home. The aroma of garlic and dill overpowers the smell of wood burning in the stove, and pickle juice is bleeding godlessly onto the table” (p 206).

This recipe comes from Jeffrey Yoskowitz, a writer, pickler and entrepreneur. In 2012, Yoskowitz co-founded The Gefilteria, a venture re-imagining Old World Jewish Foods through unique dining experiences, talks and demos and production of an artisanal gefilte fish sold around the country. He got his start in the food world at Adamah Organic farm in Litchfield County, Connecticut, where he worked as a farm fellow and returned a year later as a pickle apprentice.

Yoskowitz has written about food and culture in publications such as The New York Times, The Atlantic, Slate, Tablet, Gastronomica, Meatpaper, The Forward, among others. Through his writing and research he has become an authority on food and culture. In Fall, 2016, his forthcoming cookbook The Gefilte Manifesto will be published by Flatiron Books, an imprint of Macmillan.

Ingredients

1 quart jar

1 lb of small, fresh pickling cucumbers (Kirby or Persian cucumbers)

1 T non-iodized kosher salt

1-2 Bay Leaves

3 peeled but whole cloves of garlic

2-3 sprigs of dill

1 dried chili pepper

1/4 tsp coriander

1/4 tsp mustard seed

1/4 tsp black peppercorns

a few cloves

Any other spices and herbs (optional)

Fill the jar halfway from top with cold water. Add salt, tighten lid and shake to dissolve salt. Add garlic, dill and spices. Pack quart jar with cucumbers. Make sure vegetables are below water level—you can wedge them under the neck of the jar.

Leave the jar out on the counter at room temperature with the lid on, but not too tight. After the first two days, “burp” the jar (open lid to relieve pressure). After 3-4 days (for half-sour pickles), 5 to 7 days (for full-sours) or whenever you like the flavor, transfer the jar to the fridge. Enjoy!

Shkvarkes

Shkvarkes is a dish of rendered fat and cracklings, which, in Jewish tradition, is commonly referred to as gribenes. In Russian or Ukrainian cuisine, shkvarkes is often made with lard, as Levinson does (p 206), but the traditional Jewish dish is made with chicken skins and fat.

Ingredients

1 lb. chicken skin and fat, cut into 1/2 inch pieces
1 onion, chopped

1 tsp. salt

pepper

1. Pat chicken skins dry, and put in a heavy, nonstick pan over low heat. Add salt and pepper.
2. Cook slowly until fat begins to render, approximately 15 minutes. Add in onions, and continue cooking for 45-60 minutes, stirring frequently. When the chicken skin and onion are golden and crunchy to your desired doneness, remove from heat.
3. Allow to cool slightly, then pour the contents of the pan through a strainer, reserving the liquid in a jar (this is schmaltz, and is used as a fat or flavoring in many recipes). Cover the schmaltz and refrigerate. Enjoy the cracklings or cover and refrigerate for later use.

Recipe: Black Bread

adapted from *Vegetarian Times*

Ingredients

2 1/4 tsp. active dry yeast

3/4 tsp. sugar

1/4 cup warm water (105 to 115 degrees)

1 1/4 cups water

2 cups medium or dark rye flour

2 cups all-purpose flour (optional, substitute up to half a cup of whole wheat) 1 Tbs. caraway seeds, crushed

1 1/2 tsp. espresso powder

1/2 tsp. onion powder

1 tsp. minced shallots

1 1/2 tsp. salt

1/4 tsp. fennel seeds, crushed

2 Tbs. cider vinegar

2 Tbs. dark molasses

1/2 oz. unsweetened chocolate

2 Tbs. margarine

Vegetable oil, for greasing bowl and pan

1. Stir yeast, sugar and warm water together in a bowl, and let it stand for 10 minutes until foamy. In a separate bowl, whisk together rye flour, 1/2 c flour, caraway seeds, espresso powder, onion powder, salt and fennel seeds.

2. In a small saucepan, combine 1 cup of water, vinegar, molasses, chocolate and margarine, and stir over low heat until the chocolate and margarine have melted.

3. Stir wet ingredients into the flour mixture, then add the yeast mixture and stir with a wooden spoon for 2 minutes. Add remaining flour 1/2 cup at a time until a soft dough forms. Transfer to a floured work surface, and let the dough rest for 15 minutes. Knead the dough for 15 minutes until the dough is springy and smooth. Place the dough in a greased bowl, cover loosely, and let it rise for about an hour until doubled in size.

4. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Deflate dough gently and form into a ball. Place dough on a greased or parchment-lined baking sheet. Cover loosely and allow to rise until doubled, about 45 minutes. Slash an 'x' into the top of the round. Bake for 45-50 minutes, until the bread is nicely browned and sounds hollow.

Visiting Scribe Essays by Paul Goldberg

As part of Jewish Book Council's Visiting Scribe series on The ProsenPeople blog, Paul Goldberg writes three essays on King Lear, his family's history in Moscow, and writing a portrait of Stalin. His posts are available on the Jewish Book Council website and reprinted in full here.

Lear's Warning

Imagine Moscow in late February of 1953.

The most powerful tyrant in human history is mad. His paranoia, his dementia afflicts the entire land. A group of prominent doctors—most of them Jews—is behind bars, awaiting execution. Ominous vehicles called Black Marias fan out across the city to arrest enemies of the people.

This drumbeat of hatred is heard in the streets. Ancient tales of blood libel are circulating on buses, trolleys and streetcars. Thugs and military units are preparing a pogrom—the biggest since Kristallnacht. Freight trains amass in Moscow and its environs, and lists of Jews and half-Jews are being prepared for deportation.

(My family's names are on the list. They are to be shipped east to the TransSiberian Railroad railhead, then, by barge, up toward the polar circle.)

The Yid begins with a knock on the door. Three goons come to arrest Solomon Levinson, an actor once employed at the Moscow State Jewish Theater. Friends call Levinson *der komandir*, the commander. As a young man in 1918 he led a band of Red partisans who fought against the White Guard and the Czech legionnaires and the United States Marines alongside the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Levinson became a formidable swordsman in the civil war. His mastery of small-swords and stagecraft make him deadlier still.

He and his companions confront the fundamental

question of Russian literature: *Chto cheloveku delat?* What's a man to do? They decide to take the ultimate challenge of patriotism and rise up: "The king is mad! Down with the king!" They determine—strategically—that on some occasions simple terrorism is what his- tory calls for. I will not throw in any spoilers here.

To write *The Yid*, I had to inject reality into events that occurred six years before I was born. I needed someone to guide me, and I turned to a writer who had an astonishing command of that terrain—madness, evil, blood libel, racism, regicide, the boundary between the stage and the world. This writer was neither Russian nor Jewish. Though he died in 1616, he remains contemporary, even urgent.

There is a lot of Shakespeare in *The Yid*—all of it in Yiddish.

Shakespeare was big in the USSR of the 1930s. Censors thought it was safe—as did playwrights and translators. The Russians have a special appreciation for Shakespeare's ability to explain the horror of their lives. The Bard knew nothing of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism, but he understood wisdom, power—the loss of power, especially—and of course folly.

One of the most interesting performances of Lear opened in 1935 in Moscow, in Yiddish. Solomon Mikhoels, the artistic director of the Moscow State Jewish Theater, decided to stage *Kinig Lir*, starring himself as the title role. The production of *Kinig Lir*, the story of a king gone mad, is the historical backdrop of *The Yid*: the story of a king making a deadly error was playing out against the backdrop of

the Moscow Trials, with their theatrical accusations, scripted confessions and, of course, executions.

(Argument can also be made that Lear is a Jewish story. Who is Lear but a royal Tevye, an old fool with strong-willed daughters?)

There is an interesting line in Mikhoels' article on Lear: "The tragedy of Lear, to me, begins not at the moment where he is banished by Goneril. The tragedy begins at the point where he banishes Cordelia—that is in Act I."

Is Stalin Lear? Is he making a fatal mistake? Is Trotsky—who is banished—Kent? Is Bukharin Cordelia?

Indeed, Mikhoels planned to test the notion that Shakespeare was safe material by staging Richard III, casting himself in the role of the tyrant. I would not be the first person to argue that the twentieth century transformed Richard III into a play about Stalin.

The war was followed by more urgent material for Moscow State Jewish Theater. Shmuel Halkin, the translator of Lear, wrote a play called *The Avengers of the Ghetto*. And then came catastrophe: the anti-Semitic campaigns, the bizarre assassination of Mikhoels in 1948, the execution of Yiddish poets at the end of the Moscow State Jewish Theater.

Lear is a warning to Stalin: You are making catastrophic errors of judgment, which set you and your country on a path to disaster. But in February 1953, the time for warnings has passed. My characters are deep in disaster, and they accept that the ultimate challenge is to act as Russian patriots, to slay the tyrant.

Now, we circle back to Shakespeare, as seen through the broken mirror of the celebrated Russian poet Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin, born 183 years after Shakespeare's death. In *Boris Godunov*, his epic play about political assassination and tyranny, Pushkin riffs on Shakespeare. As I read it, it's *Macbeth* made Russian.

Here is an excerpt from Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, the

usurper's soliloquy:

... Raging pestilence

Will burn the soul, and poison fill the heart,
Reproach assault the ears with hammer-blows, And
spinning head, and rising nausea,
And blood-bathed boys appear before the eyes . . .
How glad I'd be to flee—but where? . . . Horrible!
Oh, pity him whose conscience is unclean!

Is regicide followed by regret? Does it cause madness?

The characters in *The Yid* are contrarians. Their answer is an emphatic No. Lear was your warning, Comrade Stalin; you should not have executed Bukharin or banished Trotsky.

The year is not 1935. It's March 1, 1953, 4:42 AM in Moscow. The great biomechanical Machine of Truth is blasting off the dust and cobwebs. The wheels of just revenge begin to grind.

Moscow, 1953

As a journalist, I separate fact from fable. As a novelist, I go through the same process, but keep the fable. You need facts to ground a story; you need fables make it soar.

The Yid is a continuation of my dialogue with my grandfather. His name was Moisey Semyonovich Rabinovich. He served in the Red Army during the civil war and was a pharmacist at field hospitals during World War II.

He was an accomplished professional and a heroic character in his own right, but for my entertainment, he made up stories of fighting Nazis in the woods of Belarus and marching to Berlin, even blasting through the walls of Hitler's bunker. These tales were all fictional, but all these years later I remember them better than his true stories.

My grandfather turned me into a collector of legends, and I thank him in *The Yid* by making him into a fictional character. He is the fierce Rabinovich—the Bundist who is not through with combat—the sort of guy you want on your side.

I was born in 1959, six years after Stalin's death. To make this story real, I needed to create the set for the novel. I started with my parents' apartment, a communal cold-water flat in central Moscow. My principal character—Solomon Shimonovich Levinson—set up residence in what was once our room. (The three of us had just one room.)

Levinson's sidekick, Kogan, resided not far from Levinson, in a building overlooking my school. The dacha that my conspirators use to dump bodies actually belonged to my grandmother. I used real addresses. In the tightly-braided world that is Moscow, Shmuel Halkin—the poet who translated King Lear into Yiddish—lived across the street from my grandmother. Several of Halkin's plays, and indeed Halkin himself, figure in *The Yid*, and as I write this an autographed copy of his book lies in front of me.

Visually, the streets of Moscow of my childhood haven't changed much since 1953. In *The Yid*, I wanted to speak about that time and my city in an entirely different way. The biggest challenge was to keep the novel from sounding like homage to Bulgakov, who so brilliantly captured the soul of Moscow and, for that matter, Stalinism. In addition to strangling my inner Bulgakov, I refrained from reading writers who explored the same world. I wanted *The Yid* to be different.

My grandfather's stories laid down the foundation of the book. His friends expanded this narrative. These were old Jews, mostly Bolsheviks who had been through the twentieth century's biggest bonfires. They sat on benches at the Bauman Garden in central Moscow, telling stories of heroism in World War II. Most of them carried rolled up copies of *Krasnaya Zvezda*, *The Red Star*, the newspaper of the Soviet military.

I listened. I don't remember their names, but their stories feed the narrative I wrote.

We don't get to choose our material, and this is mine: Since childhood, I knew that in 1953 Stalin was preparing to deport all Jews to settlements and prison camps, and that residential offices were preparing

lists of Jews for deportation. By extension, this meant that the names of everyone I knew—including my parents and grandparents—were on these lists.

I also knew that there was once a Yiddish theater in Moscow. I asked my aunt—Ulyana Dobrushina—to tell me about going to performances there, spending the war years with the Yiddish theater as it waited out the war in Uzbekistan, and her uncle, Eliel Dobrushin, a playwright at the theater and a member of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. She also told me about seeing Solomon Mikhoels.

It took a specific episode to make this material come to life. Around 1969, German Grigoryevich Pervov, the father of my friend Alyoshka Pervov, pointed to an apartment building entryway at Chaplygin Street and said: "This is where in 1944 they arrested a Jewess for killing a Russian girl and putting her blood in the matzos." Then he described watching this woman's arrest. I returned home—a few blocks away—and told my parents, who then told me about this bit of anti-Semitic mythology.

This evil myth shook me to the core. Of course, I believe that some hapless woman was led away in handcuffs. I can accept the notion that she had committed murder (such things happen). That distant event gave me the appreciation of the power of an urban legend.

The Yid has been a part of my life for over 46 years. One of the benefits of working with Ludmilla Alexeyeva, a longtime human rights activist, included understanding her intellectual journey, which begins in Moscow of the 1930s.

In *The Yid*, one of the characters, Dr. Kogan, the surgeon, starts to feel a spiritual connection with the body parts he sees floating in formaldehyde, waiting to be dissected by medical students. He had seen many a corpse and was a few steps removed from becoming a cadaver.

I could never have made up this story. I heard it from my friend Janusz Bardach, a former Soviet political prisoner, who became a world-renowned maxillofa-

cial surgeon, ultimately at the University of Iowa. He and I became friends after I reviewed his memoir in *The New York Times*. As I wrote *The Yid*, I imagined this medical luminary cursing, bickering, and above all, hurting.

Janusz thought my plan to write a novel about Stalin's death was insane, and the early pages he saw scared him.

"You are writing a comedy about tragic events," he objected.

I concurred.

Yet, Janusz, who is now gone, would have been a perfect recruit into the band of conspirators in *The Yid*—and, in a way, he is in it, fighting tyranny shoulder-to-shoulder with my heroic grandfather and his Red-Star-toting Bolshevik friends.

My Stalin

My novel—*The Yid*—is about a plot to assassinate Iosif Stalin before he launches the largest purge of his 29-year rule.

Stalin absolutely had to figure in my novel directly. I needed his physicality, his spiritual being. I had to get inside his skull, to taste his paranoia, his dementia. This task was an anathema of historical research. It's impressionistic, existential. I was grasping for telling details that provided windows into the tyrant's final hours. Does he believe the end is near? Does he believe that there can be no such thing as the world without Stalin? How does it feel to experience his brand of dementia, his brand of paranoia?

I scoured many volumes, looking for details, finally making a surprising finding: telling details are largely determined by the teller. For example, in a book called *The Unquiet Ghost*, Adam Hochschild describes traveling through Gorbachev's Russia as it struggles to reconcile with its Stalin-era past. Hochschild asks the same questions I ask as a novelist—looking for the same insight into the tyrant's mind. At Stalin's dacha in Sochi, he describes the beautifully restrained Art Deco décor. Stalin's other dacha in

Kuntsevo, outside Moscow, is similarly elegant.

Stalin-era architecture projects opulence. There are colossal sculptures, big columns. It's the opposite of the modernist structures of the twenties and thirties and is eerily reminiscent of the Nazi Gothic style of architecture. I was able to pick up on this question—this inconsistency—because Hochschild describes it, and I trust his reportage.

So why does this brigand choose to live in an environment so clearly inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright? Stalin's interiors look like the sort of places where an American captain of industry—I am thinking of Nelson Rockefeller—would have been quite at home. Could it be that he is not as uncouth as we would like to believe? Does this choice of architecture come from within this man or does it just happen?

Another telling detail came from Stalin's daughter, Svetlana. In a memoir, *20 Letters to a Friend*, she describes discovering that the old man hung photos of children on the wall of his study. These were cutouts from Soviet magazines. Svetlana attributes this to Stalin's efforts to substitute fictional children for the grandchildren with whom he had no contact.

I trust Svetlana's story, but not her explanation. What if the children are a part of the old man's dementia? What if they are the nucleus of the world as he experiences it in the winter of 1953? What if they are the inspiration for his plans? Stalin doesn't sleep much. He waits for children to step off the illustrations pinned to the walnut panels of Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired rooms. How will the world exist without Stalin? The old man hates doctors, negates the very existence of disease. Will children come to his defense? Are they his guardians or angels of his death?

Images tell the story, too. Stalin is a little man with a crooked left arm. The arm has petrified, turned into granite, hard as a statue, which would be fitting, except the fingers curl. If you can part them with your right hand, a cigarette can be inserted. Or part them further and fold in a pipe. The elbow moves forward, then back again, but not the arm. It hangs at an obtuse angle. And pain is close, lurking in the left

shoulder.

I had the set and Stalin's physical characteristics.

It would have been a cop-out to describe a demonic presence. I needed to know from someone I trusted what it was like to converse with the man.

Here, I made use of the memoir of the Yugoslav Communist Milovan Djilas. It's titled *Conversations With Stalin* and tells the story of his three brief meetings with Stalin. It works so well because the narrator doesn't pretend to be comprehensive or objective.

Svetlana isn't separate enough from her father to provide the sort of telling details I needed as a novelist. Nikita Khrushchev, another notable memoirist, was a part of the same stratum.

By contrast, Djilas is an outsider, an intellectual, and he stays in the frame at all times, providing one telling detail after another. In one of these meetings, Djilas registers a complaint about Red Army soldiers raping and murdering women in areas they had liberated. Djilas describes a scene of the sort that "might be found only in Shakespeare's plays."

This comment infuriates Stalin. Red Army has fought for thousands of kilometers before marching into Belgrade in 1944, he objects. "And such an army was insulted by no one else by Djilas! Djilas, of whom I could least have expected such a thing, a man whom I received so well!" Stalin rages. "And an army which didn't spare its blood for you! Does Djilas, who is himself a writer, not know what human suffering and the human heart are? Can't he understand it if a soldier who has crossed thousands of kilometers through blood and death has fun with a woman or takes some trifle?"

The final meeting shows advancing dementia. "There was something both tragic and ugly in his senility," Djilas observes. "The tragic was invisible—these were the reflections in my head regarding the inevitability of decline in even so great a personality. The ugly kept cropping up all the time. Though he had always enjoyed eating well, Stalin now exhibited gluttony, as though he feared that there would not be

enough of the desired food left for him. On the other hand, he drank less...

"He laughed at inanities and shallow jokes... In one thing, though, he was the Stalin of old: stubborn, sharp, suspicious whenever anyone disagreed with him."

At one point, Stalin opines about the atom bomb: "That is a powerful thing, pow-er-ful!" I don't know the precise Russian words, but I think they would be: "*Moschnaya shtuka, moshch-na-ya!*"

This is the "mountain man of the Kremlin" described by Mandelshtam:

His fat fingers are blacker than worms,
His words weighing a pood—16-kilo.
Roach mustache emits a thick laugh,
And a glow emanates from his boots.

This is the Stalin I wanted my conspirators to encounter on March 1, 1953: crass, taunting, inane, demented, yet still as "pow-er-ful" as the weapons of hellish destruction he has in his arsenal.

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