

# **Sharing Writers for a Small Nation: Belarusian-Jewish-Russian Writer Grigory Reles**

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## **History of National Literature and Joint Ownership of Authors**

The history of national literature is an invented tradition. It was created in parallel with the history of an individual nation. National literature was considered an evolutionary entity, similar to that of a nation, which would be born at a certain point in time, develop in various phases into a “Golden Age,” and then gradually decline and die out. Latecomers such as Russian, Polish, Czech and other major national literatures in Eastern Europe were constructed following the example of Western literature: the French model for Classicism, the German and British model for Romanticism writings.

The most extreme cases are the Belarusian, Ukrainian, Slovakian and other minor nations that have difficulty constructing their national literature as a seamless entity. Belarusian literature written in modern language appears to have been established only in the late 19th and early 20th century. Although literature written in Old-Belarusian (or Ruthenian) flourished in the territory of the Great Duchy of Lithuania, it disappeared in the 18th century, and was increasingly replaced by Polish writings. Therefore, it is impossible to create a continual history between two written Belarusian literatures. Moreover, while the Soviet regime guaranteed the establishment of Belarusian literature to some extent, the overwhelming dominance of Russian language in Belarusian society today has driven Belarusian-writing authors to the literary periphery, especially, in terms of the number of readers.

It is notable that these very latecomers grew under the influence of “middle” latecomers, as is the case with Belarusian literature, which has developed following the model of Russian and Polish literatures. Therefore, it is possibly an imitation of an imitation. Of course, all national literatures appear as an artificial product, whether they look completely “natural” or not on the surface. I assume, however, that such an incomplete evolutionary entity can provide suitable material to clarify how the history of a national literature has been compiled both synchronically and diachronically. The device of artificial “junctures” that connect multiple authors and literary works to a single story of a national literature appears more exposed and more visible in latecomers such as Belarusian literature, compared to relatively major national culture in which history resembles a much more seamless entity.

Many supporters of the idea of national literature assert that one nation must develop one literature written in the identical national language. It is not easy, however, for a marginal nation to compose its literary history exclusively of works published in a single language. As usual with minor nations in Eastern Europe, their communities exist in multilingual circumstances crossed by different cultural and ethnic borders. In his book *A History of Slovak Literature*, Peter Petro proposes the idea of sharing authors among several national literatures. “If a Slovak were to write in Latin, nobody would question the fact that he is a Slovak writer and not a Roman one; the difficulty arises when a Slovak writer uses Czech, German, or Hungarian. The solution advocated by contemporary literary historiographers in Slovakia is to share such authors with the literature of the language they used, particularly if their work played a significant role in the history of both literatures, as is the case for some Slovak authors claimed by the Czech, Hungarian, and Austrian literatures.”<sup>1</sup> Joint ownership of writers among several national literatures seems a good enough idea. However, it is problematic that certain non-Slovakian writing authors enter Slovakian literature on condition that he or she is “a Slovak writer.” According to his argument, German, Hungarian, Jewish, and any non-Slovak writers are automatically excluded although they might have lived in Slovakia, written on

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1 Peter Petro, *A History of Slovak Literature* (1995), p. 5.

Slovakian themes, or even used Slovakian for their writings. Overall, it is often impossible to discern who is “a Slovak writer” particularly before the modern era when people had only a vague notion of their national identity.

Ivan Shteiner, a scholar of Belarusian literature, provides a more comprehensive argument. “The time has come when we should consider 19th century literature multilingual. It is worth including (in Belarusian literature—*by author*) works written not only in Belarusian, but in Polish, Russian and any other languages if they are written in Belarus or written about Belarus.”<sup>2</sup> The important point is not who writes literature, but where it is written and, even of greater significance, what it is written about. In this case one can more effectively categorize a national literature even in pre-modern writers who hadn’t yet formed their national identification.

## **Belarusian Multilingual Literature**

Shteiner specializes in 19th century Belarusian literature, a controversial period when few authors actually wrote in Belarusian. The old-Belarusian language has almost disappeared while contemporary literary language has not yet been sufficiently established. While in the first half of this century nationalist movements became active in many East-European regions, it was still difficult to discern Belarusian national consciousness in the local people and culture. The idea of sharing authors would work conveniently in this era. For example, Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855) is a central figure in Polish Romanticism. Of course, he wrote most of his works in Polish, while he regarded himself as a Lithuanian most likely in the sense of a local component within the framework of the Polish “commonwealth.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Mickiewicz might be a Be-

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2 *Штэйнер І.Ф.* Шматмоўная літаратура Беларусі. Мінск: Беларуская навука, 2002. С. 2.

3 On the attempt of “nationalizing” Mickiewicz that resulted in success for Lithuanians but failure for Belarusians see: Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 2003), pp. 90–91, 281–283.

larusian from the present viewpoint since he was born in Navahrudak, a city located within the territory of contemporary Belarus. His poems often cover Lithuanian-Belarusian history and folklore. Consequently, it is natural that all three national literatures share the great poet.

Another and much minor example is Jan Barszczewski (1790?–1851), a Polish writer born in Belarus. His masterpiece novel *The Nobleman Zawalnia, or Belarus in Fantastic Stories* (1844–46)<sup>4</sup> is rarely referred to in Polish literary history, but occupies an important position in 19th century Belarusian literature. Moreover, he wrote several poems in peasant Belarusian language, which has been deemed as one of the first Belarusian-written poetries in the modern era.<sup>5</sup> Many intellectual elites who lived in 18th and 19th century Belarus preferred to use Polish for their writings, so there is a great amount of Polish literature written within the territory of contemporary Belarus or based on Belarusian materials and topics. We can see several anthologies of Polish-Belarusian literature and even monographs on this theme.<sup>6</sup>

In comparison with Polish, however, Russian-language literature has received less attention so far.<sup>7</sup> Faddey Bulgarin (1789–1859) is worth mentioning in this regard. He wrote mostly in Russian while he had a similar background to Mickiewicz in his Polish-Lithuanian self-identification and birthplace in Belarus. Bulgarin, however, is a much less popular and even notorious writer since he loyally served the Russian

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4 Jan Barszczewski, *Szlachcic Zawalnia, czyli Białoruś w fantastycznych opowiadaniach* (Petersburg, 1844–1846).

5 Mikola Khaustovich is a renowned specialist on Barshchewski in Belarus. See, for example; Мікола Хаўстовіч, На порозе забытае святыні: творчасць Яна Баршчэўскага. Мінск, 2002.

6 See, for example; *Штэйнер І.Ф.* Шматмоўная літатурна Беларусі...; Паса нябёсаў на зямлі тутэйшай. Беларуская польскамоўная паэзія XIX ст. Мінск, 1998.

7 See as previous studies; *Алешка Т.В.* Современная литература Беларуси: двойной контекст. // Научные труды кафедры русской литературы БГУ, вып. 8. Минск, 2013. С. 3–17; *Андреев А.Н.* Русская (рускоязычная) литература Беларуси: проблемы становления // ЛитКулитика.by. (1.12.2012) [www.litkritika.by/categories/literatura/kritika/856.html](http://www.litkritika.by/categories/literatura/kritika/856.html)

empire working as a reactionary journalist and an agent for the secret police.<sup>8</sup> Today neither Poland, Lithuania, nor Belarus is rushing to share this sufficiently important figure in their histories of national literature.<sup>9</sup>

Today the Russian language continues to have an ever-increasing influence over Belarusian society. According to the result of the last national census (2009 year), 70.2 percent of the population uses Russian in their daily life while only 23.4 percent prefers to speak in Belarusian.<sup>10</sup> The proportion of Belarusian-speaking people is constantly decreasing except for the short period of enthusiastic national revival at the beginning of the 1990s when the republic gained independence. In such circumstances, it is not surprising that Belarusian intellectuals desire their national literature to keep its distance from Russian literature. Moreover, there is a strong trend that cultural elites insist on the unity of nationality and language. A stereotypical dichotomy is still alive whereby Belarusian speakers are democratic, pro-European in opposition to Lukashenko's tyranny while Russian speakers are anti-democratic and supporters of the dictatorial regimes of Belarus and Russia.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most critical moments for Belarusian-language literature is the lack of reality in a novel's situation where all the conversation takes place in Belarusian. An exception consists of genres of historical

8 For the last two decades, many studies on Bulgarin appeared mainly in the context of Russian literature. Among them Reitblat presents the most comprehensive view on his complicated national and political identification. See, for example; *Рейтблат А.И.* ред., Видок Фиглярин : письма и агентурные записки Ф.В. Булгарина в III отделение. М.: НЛЮ, 1998; *Рейтблат А.И.* Булгарин и Польша // Русская литература. 1993. № 3. С. 72–82.

9 As a rare example, Bulgarin's works enter an anthological series of Belarusian literature "Книгазбор"; *Булгарын Ф.В.* Выбранае. Мінск: Беларускі Кнігазбор, 2003. Mickiewicz and Barszczewski also enter the same series.

10 Национальный состав населения Республики Беларусь. Минск, 2011. С. 384–385.

11 On more comprehensive arguments on the strategy and mechanism of language choice in Belarusian society, see; Elena Gapova, "Negotiating Belarusian as a 'National Language'" in Ernest Andrews, ed., *Sociolinguistic Changes in Post-Communist Eastern Europe and Eurasia* (Columbia UP, 2008), pp. 132–160.

novels, peasant novels, and those that depict a narrow circle of cultural elites in large cities, in which it seems more or less natural that fictional figures speak in Belarusian.<sup>12</sup> In the 19th century novel by Jan Barszczeński we naturally assume that his peasant characters speak in Belarusian even though the author wrote the story in Polish. In contrast, we treat with suspicion the idea of whether urban characters actually use Belarusian in today's novels written in Belarusian. For example, contemporary writer Andrei Fedarenka (1964– ) wrote a novel *The Chain* (1994) in Belarusian, which is set in the capital city Minsk.<sup>13</sup> Although all the dialogues appear written in Belarusian these conversations are actually in Russian. This becomes clear to readers when the main character meets a poet who genuinely uses Belarusian. Then he suddenly tries to speak to the poet haltingly in his broken “national” tongue.

Although a considerable number of writers in Belarus chose Russian for their literary works, it is difficult to place them within the context of Belarusian national literature. Among them, Ales Adamovich (1927–1994) and Svetlana Aleksievich (1948–) are well-known authors,<sup>14</sup> not only inside, but outside Belarus. It is slightly ironic that they could present typically Belarusian topics (war tragedy and the Chernobyl catastrophe) to the audience of other Soviet republics and all over the world partly because of their active use of the Russian language. For literary works in minor languages such as Belarusian, it is relatively difficult to find appropriate translators and therefore reach a wider audience.

Recently, Veniamin Blazhenny (1921–1999) has come to the attention of many literary scholars in Belarus. Born in a small Jewish town, he wrote pieces of peculiar poetry in Russian, which was published only in the late 1980s. A contemporary poet Dmitry Strotsev (1963– ), living in Minsk, who also composes in Russian, recognizes the significant influence of Blazhenny on his poetry, proposing the special term “Minsk

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12 Go Koshino, “The Representation of the Belarusian Language in Contemporary Belarusian Literature,” in Kimitaka Matsuzato, ed., *Emerging Me-so-Areas in the Former Socialist Countries: Histories Revived or Improvised* (Sapporo: SRC, 2005), pp. 179–182.

13 *Федарэнка А.* Ланцуг. Мінск, 2012.

14 On Aleksievich's works see Elena Gapova's article in the present volume.

school” be applied to themselves.<sup>15</sup> Both of them have been isolated figures so far, but this newly found “lineage” of Russian-language poets might effectively integrate them into the history of both Russian and Belarusian literatures.

## **Grigory Reles and Belarusian-Jewish-Russian Literature**

Finally, we focus on another Belarusian-Jewish poet Grigory Reles (1913–2004)<sup>16</sup> as a possible target of literary “sharing.” He, differently from Blazhenny, wrote his poems mainly in Yiddish while using Russian for his prose works. It is noteworthy that Jewish people made up the main part of urban inhabitants in early 20th century Belarus. Their native tongue was usually Yiddish, with their second language possibly being Russian. At that time, the Belarusian language was spoken mainly in rural areas. This Yiddish-spoken world quickly declined during the time of Hitler’s invasion and Stalin’s terror. It finally disappeared as a result of mass emigration to Israel in the Brezhnev and later perestroika period.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Reles probably belongs to the last generation of Belarusian Jews who speaks Yiddish natively. Most of his contemporary Jewish intellectuals suffered from the eradication by both the Hitler and Stalinist regimes, or had already left the country.

Grigory Reles was born in the small town of Chashniki near Vitebsk.<sup>18</sup> His father Leib Reles, who was a Hebrew poet and later

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15 *Алешка Т.В.* Современная литература Беларуси... С. 9–10.

16 I refer to his first name as Grigory since this article focus on his Russian writings.

17 Jewish inhabitants in Belarus numbered 150,084 people (1.9 percent of the population) according to the first census after the war conducted in 1959. The number decreased by 840,000 compared to 1941 before the war. *Иоффе Э.Г.* Страницы истории евреев Беларуси. Минск, 1996. С. 186. The Jewish population in 2009 consists of 12,926 people (0.1 percent). During the years 1989 and 1999 the population of 84,000 was diminished mostly due to the emigration. *Национальный состав населения Республики Беларусь.* С. 7–9.

18 On Reles’ biography see: *Иоффе Э.Г.* Рыгор Рэлес: вядомы і невядомы. / *Польмя*, № 4, 2013. С. 145–158.

worked as a private teacher (melamed) of Yiddish and Jewish prayers for children, advised his son to write in his “native language,” not in Belarusian by which the boy tried his first piece of poetry printed in a wall newspaper in school. In his late teens several of poems appeared in the pages of Jewish journals in Minsk. In 1934 the Belarusian Writers’ Union granted him membership to the Jewish section, recommended by such leading Belarusian Jewish writers as Izi Kharik (1898–1937) and Zelik Akselrod (1901–1941). Reles survived the Great Terror, working as a school teacher in the province, and even published the first two books of his poems in Yiddish while many intellectuals perished during this time, including both the abovementioned Khalik and Akselrod. Reles just happened to be in Minsk on business when Nazi invaders suddenly crossed the border and took the town Navahrudak where he then worked. His wife and daughter were killed during the occupation. In 1948, soon after the war, a famous Jewish artist Solomon Mikhoels was assassinated by the Soviet agency in Minsk and an anti-Semitic campaign began in Stalin’s Soviet Union. In this period Reles lost his job in literary journals and was expelled from the Writers’ Union. With help from his friend, Reles found a job at a night school and worked as a teacher there. Based on this experience he wrote several “pedagogical” novels in Russian. At the same time, he continued his Yiddish writings, but these works were published mainly in Jewish journals in Moscow and Warsaw. Although Belarus is known as a country where ethnic discrimination occurred less than other regions in Eastern Europe, anti-Semitic feeling in post-war Belarusian society was more pronounced than in other Soviet republics.<sup>19</sup> According to Reles’ recollections there was even a groundless rumor of Jewish inhabitants’ spreading germs causing cancer.<sup>20</sup>

In the 1960s and 70s he traveled around Belarus visiting small rural towns that were previously inhabited by Jewish people. Based on this experience, Reles wrote a series of short novels that depicted contemporary dwellers of these places. Many of these stories appeared in the book

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19 Гудков Л.Д. Левинсон А.Г. Отношение населения СССР к евреям // Вестник Еврейского университета в Москве. 1992. № 1. С. 34.

20 Релес Г.Л. А краю светлых берез. Минск: Изд. Э.С. Гальперин, 1997. С. 341.

*Under Every Roof* (1979), written in Russian.<sup>21</sup> The memory of loved ones that had perished in the war serves as a leitmotif in many of the stories. Here we look at some examples. *The Watchman* (*Смарож*) is about banal aspects in Soviet life. The main character Solomon Abramovich loses his job because of an inflexible bureaucratic attitude by the kolkhoz director, but eventually recovers by making a direct appeal to the local party leader. Nonetheless, the important point is that he prefers to work as a watchman because he can't sleep at night haunted by the image of his young children killed by Nazi soldiers. *With Loving Eyes* (*Влюбленными глазами*) is a slightly sentimental story between two female ex-partisans, Tatiana and Anna. Genka was their young comrade-in-arms. He loved Anna and asked Tatiana to pass his passionate letter to her friend. But soon after that he died in a battle over Berlin. On Victory day some 20 years later, Tatyana eventually decides to hand over the letter to Anna from Genka who she also secretly loved. In *Somewhere at the Edge of Town* (*Где-то на окраине*) a first person narrator encounters his childhood friend. His wife is also from the same place where the narrator was born, but she has never visited their hometown since the end of the war. The place brings back painful recollections because a traumatic accident occurred there. Almost all her relatives were slaughtered in their hometown during wartime.

Most of Reles' stories are set in former Jewish residences (*mestechko*). It is worth mentioning, however, that the author seldom depicts any social and cultural traces of Jewish inhabitants. The narrator's travel through these places is supposedly in the course of his business as a journalist. Only some details reveal the Jewish signs behind the stories. The name of Solomon Abramovich in *The Watchman* is an apparent example. In most cases characters have common names such as Anna, Tatiana and Genka. Family names are usually hidden without which one cannot discern whether they are Jewish or not. As for Solomon Abramovich, he is also portrayed as if "he reminded one of a Babel type, an old Talmudist." In *Somewhere at the Edge of Town* the narrator recollects the father of his childhood friend, a Bible enthusiast who liked to compete in knowledge

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21 Релес Г.Л. Под каждой крышей. Минск, 1979.

of the Holy Book. It may show an old religious generation of Jewish people who have almost disappeared. A single exception is the story *In His Small Homeland* (*В его родном уголке*) totally dedicated to a Jewish topic. The narrator recounts his recollections of a talented Yiddish poet Semen Lechuk who perished in the war. During a journalistic trip, the narrator visits the poet's hometown by chance and learns that his precious manuscript has been accidentally lost. The motif of lost text symbolizes Belarusian Jewish culture, which has almost disappeared today.

The gap created by 30 years of war and terror had completely changed the demographic features of Belarus. Reles intentionally described the absence of Jewishness rather than simply not employing Jewish materials in his novel. We can see the poetical representation of such "absence" in his famous Yiddish poem *The House* (1946): "But the door doesn't bang amid night silence, /the floor board doesn't creak in the entrance. /Entering this house is not allowed for me, /And settling down there not forever. / Our house, which our grandpa built to last a long time/ for his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, / Our house, which doesn't exist on the earth, in reality, / Which I only dream of now and then."<sup>22</sup> The readers remembering Belarusian towns in the pre-war period would be able to supplement Reles' "blank" description with images of old Jewish inhabitants. Other readers might imagine the configuration of a national map, linking names of Belarusian towns given in Reles' novel. Moreover, the memory of the Great War, a traumatic experience in general, could combine the diverse identities of Belarusian, Jewish, Russian, Polish, and all other inhabitants of the same region. In this case, the representation of absence facilitates the sharing of authors and literary works among multiple national literatures that was discussed above.

We can treat Reles' multilingual literature both inside and outside the national framework. Any reader in the Soviet Union has access to literary works written in Russian by the author Grigory Reles. His Yiddish works penetrate a different audience range. Through the network of the Jewish diaspora, his poetry under the name of Girsh Reles appears in Moscow, Odessa, Birobidzhan, Warsaw, and New York. Finally, his

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22 Russian translation of the text is cited in: *Юфе Э.Г. Рыгор Рэлес...* С. 150.

name is referred to as Rihor Reles in the context of Belarusian national literature. It seems that according to the complicated multi-ethnic nature of Eastern Europe the literary heritage of multilingual writers suffers greater struggles and strife among diverse identifications. It is easy to remember the case of Nikolai Gogol whose “possession” is being contested between Russians and Ukrainians.<sup>23</sup> The case of Belarusian-Jewish Russian writer Reles, on the contrary, presents the possibility of creating a “shared” history of multinational literature. I hope this article serves as good material for further discussion on “sharing” literary authors, especially for a small nation.

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<sup>23</sup> Gogol’s intricate double self-identification is analyzed in: Edyta M. Bojanowska, *Nikolai Gogol: Between Ukrainian and Russian nationalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2007).