

# Diary Entries from My Childhood

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## ABSTRACT

Set in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia, this creative paper is a series of diary entries, each addressing a distinct aspect of why the changing Soviet consciousness, and its associated culture, challenges the norms of a traditional Jewish lifestyle. We peer at different points in the life of a teenage boy who encounters the public school system after events during the Revolution forced rural centers to evacuate into urban hubs. The story spans across a few decades, with each entry relating a particular social challenge with a particular sentiment in Soviet culture. The series of diary entries highlights the protagonist's shifting psychology through the depiction of various lifecycle events, from loneliness in middle school to self-reliance, self-repression, and shame in high school. Each diary entry relates to a different genre in Soviet literature; the self-reliance stage will put in dialogue the protagonist's self-reliance with traditional Marxist/Leninist philosophy. Later sentiments of self-repression will allow for close comparison with D-503 in *We*, while his willingness to affiliate with and engage in a modern culture will derive meaning in light of Pioneer Movement texts. An important dialogue throughout the story pits Leon Trotsky's beliefs about social engineering and religion with the protagonist's traditional mindset about Judaism and the Jewish community.

October 1917

All I can remember was shuffling bodies.

Feb. 2, 1925

My parents first heard it pounding in February 1911, only a few years before the revolution. Mama told me that Jews from across the region hoped for the end of "The Pale", or—as my *tatti* and *zaide*<sup>1</sup> called it—"The *Drek*."<sup>2</sup> White flags popped up at every Jewish house, invisible with the snow falling so hard. But they had conceived of freedom, flirted with it and tasted it. "Things are about to change."

1 Meaning father and grandfather, respectively, in Yiddish.

2 Meaning "trash." The language spoken in "The Pale" was primarily Yiddish (according to a census in 1897, by 99 percent of the Jews living in the region). Literature, newspapers, schooling and conversation were almost exclusively in Yiddish. Linguistically, Yiddish was a morphing of Hebrew characters with German and other languages, infusing it with religious overtones and dialectic diversity. (Modern Jewish History)

Mama also told me that the proposal failed, which surprised me.<sup>3</sup> My parents' dream, my uncle's and cousins' gone. Nearly everything fainted for a moment and then, because of the resilience our forefathers had ingrained in us, woke again to find The Pale just as grey. "Soon enough."

But the snow is falling again today: thicker than hail, lighter than wool. One by one the snowflakes fell. They fell from a place so high I couldn't see it even when I looked up. The flakes slid across my cheeks, slipping deep into my conscience (I tend to think of things this way), it licks the rust from the twisted grates stacked between my temples; it tempts the palate under my tongue, singing with the song ringing in my ears. My parents' song, their parents' dream.

But my parents say they can see that the snow bothers me. Makes me squirm.

My birthday: May 13, 1925

My parents have enrolled me into the public schooling system. Boys breeze past me, seized by the fringes dangling from my shorts and enraptured by the *peyes* dangling from beneath my *yamulkeh*<sup>4</sup>. At

3 In 1910, Jewish members of the Duma drafted a bill which called for the abolition of the Pale of Settlement. Despite support from the Constitutional-Democratic Party, the bill had only symbolic effects and was originally voted upon in February 1911 when it was subsequently presented to the Commission for Personal Freedom, where the motion and the movement disintegrated from lack of attention. (Ibid.)

4 For the Jewish emigrant and refugee the concept of "wearing a mask" was accentuated in early Soviet Russia by the traditional Jew's starkly different physical appearance. Jewish boys would question the fringes which hung from their shorts, traditional *garb warn* to fulfill the Biblical commandment delineated in Numbers 15:38. They would question the meaning of the *peyes*, a symbolic stringency on the more basic prohibition laid out in Leviticus 19:27 not to cut the facial hair on the corners of one's face. The question of masks accentuated the other philosophical challenges Jewish children experienced at the onset of a new Soviet culture. That is, considering how a mask affects one's perceived standing, it can fundamentally challenge that individual's identity altogether.

S.A. Ansky writes in *Pioneers: A Tale of Russian-Jewish Life in the 1880s* about the difficult relationship many Jewish teenagers experienced with their own peers. With the onset of the Jewish Enlightenment in academic textual analysis, Ansky describes how pressures to conform to a burgeoning Jewish trend of heretical textual analysis encouraged traditional boys to question and stray. Evident in Ch.4 and Ch.9 of this novel, the theme runs deeply through many of his works. The 1880s subculture was multidimensional; there were genuine *maskilim* and boorish ones; academic *maskilim* and social ones.

"I wore a disguise for two whole years. ... Besides, if you wear such a mask, you can deceive your parents, make them think you're studying the Torah, and they'll keep sending you money," one boy says, to which another spry *maskil* (Enlightened one) responds, "I no longer want to wear any masks! I can't do it! I suffered long enough in Miloslavka. Now on purpose, just for

the most inconvenient times the pretty girls will catch me praising God in His Goodness: the afternoon prayers, the blessing after bread, the blessings never stop. My frustrations each night spill onto my father's books, ruining the text and his scribbled notes.

"Be strong, Yakov," he tells me. "Be strong."

### Seventh Grade: 1926

Her shoulder would brush mine every time she would pass me in the hallway. Those golden locks when they sway when she looks at me when she blinks and winks and brushes my shoulder.<sup>5</sup>

### Thursday, September 10, 1926: After Rosh Hashanah

Every morning before school the Scouts line up. Scarves trimmed, hands neatly pressed behind their backs. I hate how clean they are. Hate their parroting and their quotes.

But there she was again. Her eyes looked down but the sunshine lifted her face, her curls, the sunshine lifted her up towards the sky. Such light curls. Floating towards me... eyes peeled, gazing at my chest, heart pumping, beating faster than it's ever beat, her warm breath—I can feel it against my cheeks—she is so close to me her aquifers of eyes dripped water onto my lips and there was a distance between us but it would collapse soon it wouldn't contain me it couldn't contain us... "Join us," she whispered, "Join me," so entranced I edged forward and she floated back, the distance between our chests thinned, so thin, thinning more. "Reach" and I reached. "Touch" but I could not. She outstretched<sup>6</sup> a forearm and began to pull back the sleeve which covered her wrist and I reached out to touch her but felt—

—nothing.

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spite, I want to walk along the street smoking a cigarette on the Sabbath, even though I don't smoke. You'll see!" (29). Spite is many stages beyond the rebellion our protagonist will face, at least now in his adolescence, but the deep-seated frustrations all stem from the same sense of discomfort in a new Russian culture. Of particular importance from Ansky's works was his ability "to set the one against many" by pitting a strongly manifest group mentality against a single protagonist. In 1920s Soviet culture, group mentality was only just beginning; the onset of socialist literature and children's groups like the Pioneer Movement exacerbated the social challenges of the emigrant more than other eras.

Our context here highlights a dichotomy between Russian culture and physical appearance of the traditional Jew; the starting point is neither philosophical nor ideological but rather societal. Using Ansky as an influence to speak about masks and the challenges to Jewish identity, our protagonist does not yet recognize the extent to which his identity is the source of his anxiety and loneliness. For instance, the words "Be strong" in Jewish tradition convey extra weight in that when one of the Books of Moses is completed in synagogue, the entire community rises and repeats in unison: "Be strong, be strong, and may we be strengthened." To the extent that Yakov entertains a relationship with his father through text, their relationship begins to attenuate, but Yakov can only formulate this as a social frustration, not as a challenge to his identity.

**5** Non-distinct from its expression in Jewish literature of the late 1800s, Yakov's first experiences with sexuality and sexual tension overwhelm him. David Roskies notes about Ansky's portrayal of the *maskilim*: "More complicated still were their relations to women their own age. In marked contrast to the fictional *maskilim* of old, these Young Turks viewed romantic love as mere frivolity, as a dangerous distraction from the rigors of emotional self-reliance" (228). Ansky's protagonists, while seemingly in contrast to Yakov in this respect, are, in fact, quite aligned. Yakov's unwillingness to align himself with the traditional nay-sayers pushes him into a middle category of *de facto* self-reliance, rather than the *a priori*, conscious type of self-reliance upon which the *maskilim* stood.

**6** The symbol of the outstretched arm in Judaism carries heavy connotation, especially as it relates to Rosh Hashanah. The metaphor originates in the Bible in the Exodus story, where God repeatedly informs the Children of Israel that he will take them out from the Egyptian oppression "with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." The introduction of this phraseology here tends to subvert the man-God relationship by introducing inappropriate sexuality into the metaphor, creates a major rift in the protagonist's conscious perception of Biblical interpretation and analysis.

No, no. It was just a dream.

I had never fallen asleep in davening<sup>7</sup> before today.

She shouldn't bother me like this. It needs to change.<sup>8</sup>

She shouldn't control me. She shouldn't be in synagogue with me. She shouldn't look at me she shouldn't be with me she shouldn't walk next to me or smile at me. I need to change. I don't need her.

No, I don't want her in my life. Emotions are always too powerful for me. I need to control them, to access the true thoughts going through my mind. You can't trust anyone to keep you stable.

### every day this week: August 15, 1927

The threads peeled from the scarlet seat cushion into my fingertips. I mulled them through; over under, around my *tzitzis*, loops and fringes, knots tied onto knots tied onto knots tied once more onto fingers and released and relaxed, and knots tied onto knots tied onto fringes and released and relaxed, and fingers tied onto fringes tied onto knots tied onto knots and released and relaxed.

It wasn't long before someone smacked me to stand up. My Uncle. "Stand up," he didn't say.

I stared into its eyes. Stones placed into eye-socket chambers on the forehead of an aged mouse. Face slipping into disintegrated wrinkles, stones shedding their gloss, long, complacent ears tilted back into the wind spreading out from the cantor's lips.

I have never felt quite so disoriented.<sup>9</sup> The idea of looking. The idea of standing.<sup>10</sup>

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**7** *Davening*, meaning prayer services.

**8** "The only means to rid man of crime is to rid him of freedom" (36). Yavgeny Zamyatin's D-503 in *We* undergoes this same transformation to emotional self-reliance from cognitive dissonance. His total incapacity when approached by 1-330 presents him with multiple daunting tasks. Not only does his desire to control his impulses frequently overwhelm him, but it also challenges a core tenet of his identity. A mechanical man and leader of the Integral workforce, D-503 faces the onset of complete failure if he should be unable to overcome his emotional impulses. The give-and-take with his emotional self-reliance, therefore, underscores a stark misunderstanding of his own personality. We learn that he begs for connection, or sexual pleasure, in a way that his mechanistic, predetermined side could never have anticipated.

Throughout the novel, D-503 undermines his cognitive stability with repression of these emotional instincts. "I became glass. I saw into myself, inside," he says, recording conscious awareness of his own emotions; "I remember I was on the floor hugging her legs, kissing her knees. And I was begging, 'Now, right now, this minute.'" Yet only two paragraphs later he records that "one thing was clear: I hated her, I hated her, I hated her!" (56-57). His ability to see many of the walls throughout the storyline ("Walls are the basis of everything human" (40), he says), allows D-503 to continue building them for what he believes will be his own emotional benefit. Distance, that is, is preventative and ensuring of emotional stability.

From quick analysis, readers would correctly determine that D-503's self-repression is a natural consequence of his self-reliance. The easiest means for solving psychological and emotional problems is to presume that they do not exist at all. After all, "it is your duty to be happy," he explains (80). These are precisely the challenges that our protagonist faces. Lonely in school, Yakov requires stability more than ever before and deals with his own self-reliance as it manifests through sexuality and relationships. Pinned between a traditional home lifestyle and an emasculating and lonely series of experiences at school, Yakov responds in the only logical way he can intuit (because emotional self-reliance is, at first glance, an intuitive haven): independence. And, of course, these feelings will persevere throughout the story, and his isolating loneliness will continue to fester and be the source of great despair and conflict of identity.

**9** Sporadic daydreaming and the disorientation of the reader; see *We*, and D-503's inability to distinguish between what is real and what is imaginary. This is a crucial component of Yakov's diary entries, in that this fluidity represents a strong emotional incapacitation which limits his clarity and exacerbates his struggle.

**10** In nearly all circumstances, Jewish law mandates that when man prays to God he must stand upright to face Him. In contrast to many other religions that encourage prolific bowing and kneeling, the Jewish tradition is rich with references and manifestations of this notion the man and God can speak to one another in much the same way that man speaks to man (with certain

My eyes peered from the caged window of an ark cast away at sea<sup>11</sup> and, being the only part of me which could venture on, soared into the expanse. This was not the community I knew as a child. Mice swarming, vermin squeaking bits of depressed jargon, suppressed by the idea of the Enemy of the State. A frequent topic of conversation. My eyes peered from the window of an ark swarming out to sea and simply left. And when the blinds closed around Uncle's stone chambers, a moment brief enough for the World to have stepped between us and dance quietly out again, within that silent moment though I could not see it I sensed that my Uncle had died, and my eyes could only peer out from the caged window of an ark cast away.<sup>12</sup>

I finally look up and he smiles and hands me an opened *siddur*. "Here," he points, then faces forward and closes his eyes. Evening prayers.

And I stood before God as the community is apt to stand before God and I bowed and bent and cawed in silent prayer with a community bowing and bending in silence. The idea of standing.

My knees buckled as someone with thick, impossible hands pressed down on my shoulders; hands wide enough to wrap twice around my body.<sup>13</sup> It was a downward pressure, and I slipped into the cushions and entered the mind of the synagogue. It's through this lens that I've started to see what people are, what they're going through. It's new to me.

*The man in black on the leftmost wall began to scream about his daughter, a girl I had played with once as a young child. She suddenly appeared by his side, holding hands with a cute, blond-haired boy. She smiled, knelt onto the scarlet cushion, and disappeared. The man on the right only whispered, mumbling through callused lips. His mouth hardly moves.<sup>14</sup> His eyes hardly open and his soul doesn't speak. He's starving. Beside him lies his sickened sister, also nestled into the scarlet cushion, sitting quietly while her husband speaks with God.<sup>15</sup>*

One by one I notice the community is not as it seems.<sup>16</sup>

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important differences related to context, language, etc.). The relationship between standing in prayer and the standing in line associated with the war times and the pioneer movement demonstrates how estranging this process of acculturation can be for Yakov. It forces him to face the discrepancy between how he stands and how they stand, how he looks (at such a young age in the Jewish community, with curiosity and questions) and how they look (with purpose and decisive unity).

11 A reference to Noah and the Ark in Genesis.

12 A reference to Rosh Hashanah prayer services, "*al tashlicheni*," meaning, "Do not toss me away," which is in parallel with "*b'rosh hashana, yikateivun... mi yanuach...*," a segment of the service which speaks to God's necessary but impossible task of determining who will live and who will die in the coming year.

13 The first time we sense religion being restrictive in Yakov's life.

14 Usage here in the present tense gives the impression that the image continued to ring in Yakov's mind even after it had finished.

15 A reference to Moses praying on behalf of his sister, Miriam, after she had sinned against him (Numbers 12:1). The Jewish people, even as they sin against one another, do not dissipate. Excommunication should be a foreign concept.

16 The single most unique component of Jewish culture is its hyperattention to the formation of a community. Much like any ethnic group, Jewish communities for centuries have developed niche norms and expectations. These tight-knit conventions responded to the dangers and threats of informers and pogroms. For most Jewish communities, outside governments have been dangerous and whimsical, so these rules have been kept vigilantly for many years. Yet the Bolshevik Revolution, with Trotsky (by chance, also a Jew) at the helm, ultimately led to the nullification of many restrictions against Jewish settlement and lifestyle. Still, the destruction of many rural areas forced thousands of Jews to relocate into urban centers after the war, which set the stage for a collision of cultures.

Furthermore, Trotsky published a series of papers which demonstrated the uselessness of religion in the modern Soviet era. Pinning religious ritual, the mainstream appreciation for iconography, for example, on habit and custom rather than a more fundamental religiosity encouraged the rethinking of religion in the new diverse urban sphere. "Church ceremonial enslaves even the worker of little or no religious belief," he begins in "The Family and

April 2, 1928

Just 'a cog in the wheel.'  
Just 'a link in the chain.'  
Just 'a scout - in - the .'<sup>17</sup>

August 15, 1928

The first day of grade 10 wasn't quite what I expected.

Our administrators demanded that we discuss the topic of culture in its entirety, and that we demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of culture by deciding on a list of 10 items in our culture which are most crucial to its survival. Friends, family, literature, different students supported different things.

And the administrators would walk around the room, listen to us plead and discuss, smiling proudly as though we had reached a benchmark of cultural identity when the list of ten was finally formulated. And then instantly her face stiffened, now staring sternly. "Erase one," she said, "bring it down to nine."

And it happened again, and repeatedly, until the list was only

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Ceremony" (44). Calling upon the people's claim rather than his own, "the workers' state has rejected church ceremony, and informed its citizens that they have the right to be born, to marry, and to die without the mysterious gestures and exhortations" of religious leaders (ibid.). Even further, Trotsky asserts that "religiousness among the Russian working classes practically does not exist. It actually never existed," rather featured in all cases as a "daily custom and a governmental institution" (33). It is this model that does more than simply reject religion; it devalues it completely and makes a claim about new Soviet consciousness, a claim that supplants all religious ritual with socialist referenda.

Trotsky does not only dissolve traditional notions of religious affiliation; he also suggests alternatives for the appeal to workers' inner call for meaning. "Eight hours work, eight hours sleep, eight hours play," goes the workers' movement old chant. In "Vodka, the Church, and the Cinema," published in Pravda in 1923, Trotsky lauds the innate human "longing for amusement, distraction, sight-seeing, and laughter," but delegitimizes the church as a medium for entertaining it. Rather, the cinema, which "already rivals the beer-hall and the tavern" (33), should function as an "incomparable weapon"—usable against causes like alcoholism and dually functioning as a money-making schema for the government.

What is perhaps most important here, however, is not the rejection of an ideology per se but the estrangement of normative culture. The outspoken belief that custom is mindless and habit is defunct challenges the core values of all religious individuals. For the Jew tied more strongly to his or her community and culture than to anything else, Trotsky's claims alienate identity. They defamiliarize the normal and infuse an old consciousness with the claims of a new one. Since the religious child performs religious ritual first only to find meaning later, the combination of the public schooling system and doubt-infusing socialist ideology makes Jewish tradition almost untenable for adolescents and young adults who have yet to solidify any source of meaning for their religious lives.

The ostranenie experienced by Yakov here follows directly from Trotsky's influence on the culture but in some ways exposes how the culture itself, rather than Trotsky's writings themselves, cultivated the questioning, tradition-smashing environment he helped create. As Yakov witnesses the community "from the eyes of the community itself"—i.e., from the vantage point of the all-hearing synagogue roof—he uncovers the deep isolation implicit within it. Because of the hyperattention on community, it is difficult to distinguish between "community as a value itself" and "community as a place within which values can be developed, and within which members can retrieve essential goods." He sees a community of individuals praying on their own behalf; he sees pain and suffering, starvation, sickness, and most importantly assimilation. Yakov in this moment unintentionally estranges himself from the community by separating himself from it enough to notice its disparate parts. "The idea of looking. The idea of standing," is a sudden realization for Yakov that his habit and custom, particularly as they relate to the religious rituals with which he is most comfortable, are questionable and complex. As he uncovers the complexity in the community members, his traditional notion of community begins to dissolve. And as Yakov witnesses the absorption of certain community members into the scarlet cushion, assimilated into an unforgiving anti-religious culture, he develops perspective on the question of religiosity in the modern socialist era.

17 One major influence of this style—leaving blanks in a series of short, choppy sentences—comes from Zamyatin's *We*. Frequently does protagonist D-503 exasperatedly remark about I-330 or some otherwise aesthetic phenomenon only to be rendered half speechless. The style further mimics the quick transitions of our thoughts, where one's personal instincts mentally complete the gaps that the mouth does not have time to speak.



one.

The class voted first to rid itself of Eastern Orthodoxy. Then school, literature, radios, and sports. Friends and family disappeared after politics and business were abandoned. Until the last item on the list stared everyone in the eyes: IDEOLOGY. And then we started class.

“Meaningful ritual cannot be destroyed by criticism alone...”<sup>18</sup> the teacher read to us.

It’s a shame movies make me cry.<sup>19</sup> They’re too...real.

I wonder if it’s better to force citizens to struggle and endure pain so that they become great, or to let simplicity and habit carry us on. Struggle isn’t a virtue, so why should I struggle? Pain isn’t a value, so why should I be pained? Difference isn’t a value, so why should...

Who knows.

Is there even a way to pick out the real believers from the people who just claim they do? My father tells me all the time, “The Jews have lived for two thousand years, and they want us to just throw out our things and STOP? Nisht.”

When I got home today, he started on another one of his rants. First about the Spanish Inquisition, and then about the pogroms and the raids and the lost lives, “Oh and the lost lives” back in October.

### every day at recess this month: March 1929

I, Yakov Zelber, *not* joining the ranks of the Vladimir Ilyich Lenin All-Union Pioneer Organization, in front of my comrades solemnly *do not* promise: to cherish my Motherland, to live as the great Lenin bade us to live, as the Communist Party teaches us, as required by the law of the Pioneers of the Soviet Union. *I do not.*<sup>20</sup>

That’s what I didn’t say at recess today when the Master Pioneer ruined our game of ball.

**18** Trotsky (35); in context, meaningful ritual implies habitual, religious ritual.

**19** This reference to movies notes how one of Trotsky’s alternatives to religious ritual was indoctrination and social engineering through cinema. That Yakov is fearful of movies because of their “realness” represents a fundamental disconnect between him and the culture. He is not escapist, but rather, grounded. Disheartened by the ambitious goals of the new socialist republic, Yakov offhandedly demonstrates how difference can capitulate in deep loneliness. Indoctrination in the early Soviet period was commonplace. “The recreation of morals,” according to Trotsky, is doable through systematic, governmental means. “[New morals] must be arrived at with the aid of elements already existing, but capable of development...this applies not only to transformation of morals but to every form of conscious human activity.” That writers of literature and theater would agree to produce work in line with new Soviet ideology sounded dubious to Lenin, only further encouraging him to grapple with and utilize the bounds of what is humanly possible for propaganda. Newspapers correspondents needed a new, broader outlook angle if they were to become revolutionary writers (27). “We must deliberately formulate questions, set proper tasks, stimulate discussion, and help to sustain it,” Trotsky writes. (page number?)

Actively encouraged to participate in the political process, children undertook what were traditionally adult roles as the politicization and adultification of Soviet youth swept across the nation (Kelly, 67, 76-77). According to Catriona Kelly, “educational administrators were firmly convinced that education should be a way of inculcating a child into specific adult roles. ...The regime was committed to a view of society as rational, politically literate, hygienically aware, ‘culture’ collective, and education was expected to teach rational collectivism from the beginning” (67). Given this systemic shift, it is not only the existing cultural differences which challenge Yakov’s identity but also the organized governmental programs which actively sought to distance him from it. We see backlash to this type of conflict in *We*, when I-330 et al. rise in opposition during a collective assembly, and arguably in *Heart of a Dog* whenever Sharikov expresses discomfort with the rules and regulations of the Professor’s apartment.

**20** The Pledge undertaken by many Soviet Pioneers in support for the Organization (FarewellComrades).

### Sunday October 20, 1929<sup>21</sup>

*Tatti* and I started learning this morning. It’s what all us Jewish boys do on Sundays after services at synagogue. He has expectations, so one line at a time we would sit; I would read and he would listen. And then he would test me, and he would close the Talmud.

“Continue,” he told me. But the words had scrambled.

“Continue.” Louder now. But the words had begun to fade, and I now saw the ink begin to leak from the Talmud and spill onto the table. As if every time we would learn, a thick voice deep inside of me asked to heave itself into the cracks between the floorboards, to disappear into land, to unify itself with the ground beneath my feet.

“Continue,” but *tatti*. *But tatti!* The ink spread quickly across the surface of the table and reached him, spilling silently from the table onto his lap. He seems more distant from me than he has ever seemed before. When I ask him why he learns he shrugs and tells me it’s just what we do; when I ask him why I learn he closes his eyes and wafts a hum and a whisper towards me: it’s what we do; when I ask him why the Octoberists in school don’t learn, his eyes open themselves—bloodshot beads of vapor condensed into soft blue eyes. He says nothing. He listens nothing. He nullifies himself from my world and I nullify myself from his and we sit in silence until he sighs and he opens the Talmud again but now there are not any more words.

“Continue!” but there was nothing to read.

### a week before testing: May 5, 1930

“Yakov Zelber, stay after class today.” Every student’s least favorite four-word sequence.

The class emptied because lunch had already begun, but I obeyed, and my elephant teacher rose from his chair: 10 feet tall, 5,000 pounds; a grey trunk and wrinkles along every portion of his skin; serrated tusks curling inward and a mirage of platitudes plastered across the wall behind him.<sup>22</sup>

“Let’s get things straight.” There was an indiscernible rumble from somewhere in the room. It strengthened and grew.

“You’re a Jew.” I had never heard clearer words in my life without knowing from whom they

**21** This date also happens to be the holiday of Sukkot; parents take off from work, students are taken out of school, and families generally “dwell” fully in the *sukkah*, a hut-like structure which symbolically mimics the huts in which God sheltered the Jewish people in the wilderness. The act of learning with one’s father after services on a holiday is a longstanding tradition.

**22** Twice in this series of diary entries does Yakov perceive the world through an animal lens. The influencers behind this stylistic choice are Mikhail Bulgakov and Vladimir Mayakovsky, authors of *Heart of a Dog* and *The Bedbug* respectively. One major benefit of this technique is to characterize the protagonist as uncomfortably distant from the individual with whom he or she is conversing. In viewing his teacher as an immovable elephant, Yakov copes with the antagonization and devaluation of his background by cognitively distancing himself from the teacher. Yet in much the same way that Bulgakov’s Sharik develops an increasingly human personality to the point that the Professor can neither control nor collaborate with him, the animal figments of Yakov’s imagination escalate quickly to the point that they are oppressive for him. The slow rumbling voice becomes a pounding in his ears; his representation as a Jew pigeonholes him as uneducated and incapable. This daydream is unbearable for Yakov.

A frequent goal of the personification with animals is to demonstrate a certain person or culture’s animalistic, inhumane nature. The bedbug, for instance, embodies the sort of disgust people feel for the protagonist. The open parallel between man and bedbug is an explicit, satirical formulation of the dichotomy between new and old Soviets. But this type of storytelling also propagates an unexpected typecasting of characters. Proletariats, intelligentsia, Red Army soldiers—it is often easier for an author to delineate a protagonist’s perception of different character types if there is also a cognitive, emotional distance between the two parties. True for Yakov in his daydream about the elephant teacher, and similarly true when he witnesses despair in his uncle’s stone eyes in the synagogue, this model for storytelling is particularly helpful in conveying to readers Yakov’s feeling of loneliness.

came.

“Your parents speak Yiddish, your community is uneducated, and your marks tell us that you haven’t learned the material.” The rumbling was as much like a braid as everything else in my life seems to be, tightened around the ends, impossible to escape the twists and the loops. If I move left, the braid pulls me right. If I move right, the braid pulls me left. Even neutrality eventually moves clear of the center.

“The Principal and I have discussed the possibility that this school might not be the best place for you.” The thunderous voice anchored onto me. It made discernable the voices in my own head.

“The other children in class joke about you. They notice your fringes and comment about your accent. They know why you don’t participate in Pioneers. They know where you spend Sunday mornings and they know why you don’t eat in the servery. They know you, Yakov. They know you’re different. There’s no way to hide it.” Silence pounding in my ears.<sup>23</sup>

“Why were you out of class last week?” he asked politely, “You missed the presentations.”

But I had missed more than that, and *tatti* had told me that I would continue to miss more than that, for as long as Passover fell out during the school-week.

“Given your background”—*given my background*—“I don’t expect you to have the resources to make up the work.”

### June 24, 1931

What mama wanted me to buy from the market today:  
chicken *schmaltz*  
matzo  
eggs  
meat

### June 25, 1931

Mama prepared matzo ball soup, a challah, and lentil stew for grandma. She’s ill, and mama asked me to walk over the food to her house.

The floor creaked louder than she could whisper, but *bubbe* can strike your soul with guilt using the softest of words. And she did.

“\_\_\_?”

*Zaide* opened his eyes and stopped mumbling<sup>24</sup> long enough to catch my view. Deep, jet ink eyes licking the rusty grates stacked between my temples. Dark, rusty metal; uncultured and unaccustomed. I couldn’t return his gaze, I didn’t know how. He turned back to face his sick wife, reached for her hand, and grasped it calmly, soothed by her presence, ostracized by mine. *Why, zaide?*

And then she curled into him, cried a helpless tear, and disappeared into the mattress upon which she lay. And he sat there, eyes towards the ground but face tilted out, ink streaming from those stone chambers, impossibly dark ink streaming from his eyes onto her scarlet blanket. Impossible. Impossible. Gone.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The style itself resembles classic Jewish Talmudic or Biblical study: interspersed quotes with analysis immediately following each line. Line by line analysis is a staple of the Passover Seder, the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services, and many other religious rituals in the Jewish tradition.

<sup>24</sup> Psalms, as is common practice to by the bedside of one who is ill.

<sup>25</sup> Religious and emotional struggle frequently functions as a major theme

## Much sooner than I’d hoped

“This is a date we’ll remember for the rest of our lives.”

“How do *you* know? You’ve got no proof he’s any real threat.”

“Look at the campaign! The inauguration. The flyers, the supporters, the *history*.”

“There’s no way to be sure. Too many checks and balances. He’ll have advisors in the government already appointed from the previous administration. No relation to him at all.”

“I’m sure of it. We’ll never forget this date: January 30, 1933.”

The rabbi called a communal meeting today because Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany. So many voices yelling, it was hard to pick out any one line of thought. Everyone’s voices merged, without structure. Just a cacophonous chord screaming a frightened tune.

“There’s no reason to be fearful. Russia is safe for the Jews.”

“The German Jews are the problem here. Not us.”

“There’s nothing we can do. Leon is silent on our behalf.”

“If we want security, we’ll assimilate.”

“You can’t hide being Jewish.”

“You can’t hide wanting to.”

Mama whispered snowflakes into my ear, but they dropped like ice.

“...many of your friends from the Pale have left our community, Yakov. They chose to be different.”

“but mama? Didn’t they choose to be the same?”<sup>26</sup>

“No, Yakov.”

The ice shattered.

“They chose to be different.”

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for Jewish storytellers and playwrights. Roskies explains about Ansky’s writing: “Precisely because Jewish life lacked kings, warriors and rebels known for their courage and invincibility, [Ansky] claimed that in Jewish folklore all forms of struggle were spiritualized. Who were the *hasidic rebbes* and wonder workers, he asked, if not the Jewish equivalent of knights in shining armor?... Postbiblical Jewish heroism, according to Ansky, came cloaked purely in spiritual garb (224).” It is through this lens that Yakov came to be. Jewish heroes and heroines experience conflict in a way that challenges their identities rather than their physical lives precisely because Jewish identity morphs and shifts constantly with the surrounding culture while persecution and threat have been a constant, unaltering force for two thousand years. Many sects of Judaism are forever entrenched in the belief that acting as “a light unto the nations” (Isaiah 49:6) entails both engaging with those nations and their respective cultures and maintaining religious fervor and transcendent values. That is, Yakov struggles religiously and emotionally because that is how Jewish heroes have always been portrayed.

<sup>26</sup> By “the same,” Yakov implies “the same as the rest of the Soviet culture.”