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DAVID G. ROSKIES, SERIES EDITOR

*The
Zelmenyaners:
A Family
Saga*

MOYSHE KULBAK

TRANSLATED BY HILLEL HALKIN

INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY

SASHA SENDEROVICH

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◆◆◆ Introduction

For Raya Kulbak

The December 1929 issue of the *Star* (*Shtern*), one of the Yiddish-language monthlies in the Soviet Union, opened with a full-page photographic portrait of Joseph Stalin, placed opposite the journal's table of contents. Congratulatory remarks on the occasion of the fiftieth birthday of Stalin, the general secretary of the Communist Party and the leader of the Soviet Union, were printed above the portrait, with the collective signatures of the journal's editorial board underneath. Listed in the table of contents were a few poems and short stories, an article about the work of proletarian writers in capitalist countries, and something entitled "From the Book *The Zelmenyaners Family* (Chapters from a Novel)" by the writer Moyshe Kulbak.¹ Set in an expanding Soviet metropolis slightly more than a decade after the Bolshevik Revolution, these chapters would later form the basis of a comic Jewish family saga called *The Zelmenyaners*.²

The Zelmenyaners first appeared in serial form: Part One in 1929–1930, Part Two in 1933–1935.³ What today's reader can get through in just a few sittings took the readers of the *Star* six years, with a long break between installments.⁴ In this respect, Kulbak's novel was not so unusual. Charles Dickens took a year and a half to bring out *Bleak House* in serial form, and subscribers to the journal the *Russian Messenger*—the original audience of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*—had to wait

two and a half long years to read the novel from beginning to end. A war that hadn't yet started when Tolstoy began to serialize his novel in 1875 was in full swing by the time he was finishing it in 1877.⁵

Similarly, the Soviet Union where Kulbak first set out to work on *The Zelmenyaners* in 1929 was hardly the same country once the serialization of the novel was finished in 1935. Many momentous things happened in those years, and these changes were palpable in the pages of the *Star*. The issue containing the first installment of *The Zelmenyaners* appeared just one month after Stalin's famous speech calling 1929 "the year of the great breakthrough." The first Five-Year Plan, announced in 1928, was beginning to yield noticeable results as the Soviet Union started its transition to a planned economy propelled by the modernization of its industrial complex and infrastructure and the collectivization of the agricultural sector.⁶ After potential opposition to Stalin's leadership was squelched, the year 1929 also marked the appearance of what would eventually come to be known as Stalin's cult of personality.

The novel, announced in the table of contents opposite Stalin's portrait, was thus conceived, published, and circulated in an era of unprecedented social transformation. A product of its author's creative meditation on the paradoxes of political, cultural, and technological developments and their impact on a Jewish family in the late 1920s and the early to mid-1930s, Kulbak's *The Zelmenyaners* is a novel enmeshed with the heady epoch that began a decade and a half earlier in the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 with its project of remaking human society and human nature itself. *The Zelmenyaners* focuses on the incongruities and disjunctions between Soviet rhetoric and the prerevolutionary cultural and religious mentalities that were transformed under its weight. It exploits those incongruities for comic potential unmatched in Yiddish literature since Sholem Aleichem but contemporaneous with similar literary efforts, some comic and others not, by such Russian-language writers as Mikhail Zoshchenko, Isaac Babel, and Andrey Platonov. Kulbak's novel is a masterpiece of both Yiddish and early Soviet literature simultaneously.

The Zelmenyaners is set in a specific geographic location. Though that location remains unnamed throughout Part One of the novel, the ar-

rival of one of the protagonists in Minsk at the beginning of Part Two is accompanied by a sentence identifying that city as his home. Minsk was a fitting setting for a novel dealing with the social changes enabled by Stalin's industrialization policy. A city in which Jews made up a significant portion of the total population at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, Minsk became the capital of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (one of the eventual constitutive republics of the USSR) in 1919. Rapid urbanization and a significant expansion of the population followed. Nearby villages and outlying neighborhoods found themselves incorporated into the growing metropolis while inhabitants of these peripheral locales suddenly found themselves to be newly minted city dwellers.⁷

More precisely, the setting of *The Zelmenyaners* is the courtyard of one Jewish family somewhere on the outskirts of Minsk. Though also a place where one would hang laundry out to dry—as in an ordinary yard or backyard—an Eastern European courtyard is primarily a space enclosed by houses along most or all of its perimeter. “Courtyard” refers both to the space between houses, where the inhabitants of the surrounding dwellings interact with each other, and, collectively, to the surrounding structures themselves together with the space between them. *Hoyf*, the word for courtyard in Yiddish, has a number of connotations. Isaac Bashevis Singer’s *Der hoyf* has been translated to English as *The Estate*; in that novel about several generations of a single family, the word points to an aristocratic abode.⁸ Derived from the same Yiddish word is the *shulhoyf*, a synagogue courtyard, the most famous of which was in Vilna, where several synagogues large and small were located around a single courtyard. The word *hoyf* also denotes both the physical space and the cultural institution of the court of a rebbe, a leader of a Hasidic sect. In David Bergelson’s novella *Joseph Schur*, written in 1922, we read of “the court of the Rebbe of Great Setternitz,” which “had been in decline for some time now.”⁹

Prominent in Soviet culture, the courtyard figures particularly large in Soviet Jewish culture. Kulbak’s *hoyf* emerged at the same time as Isaac Babel was setting his *Odessa Stories* in some of that city’s famed courtyards.¹⁰ The courtyard remained a focal point of Soviet Jewish experience in the work of such Russian Jewish writers as Fridrikh Gorenshteyn and Arkady Lvov and was a central setting in the interna-

tionally acclaimed film *The Commissar*, which depicts, among other themes, the story of a Jewish family during the Civil War.¹¹ Kulbak's novel centers on Reb Zelmele's courtyard—both the physical structures and the family institution established by the patriarch Reb Zelmele when he arrived in the vicinity of Minsk and put down roots there. (In Yiddish, *reb* is an honorific meaning “Mister”; Zelmele is a diminutive of the first name Zalman.)

As the novel opens, Reb Zelmele's widow, Bashe, still resides in her deceased husband's courtyard—where she has remained much longer than anyone could have expected. The four sons of Reb Zelmele—Uncle Itshe the tailor, Uncle Folye the tanner, Uncle Yuda the carpenter (and amateur violinist), and Uncle Zishe the watchmaker—are now the four pillars of the family, but these pillars are crumbling under the weight of the new zeitgeist despite the uncles' effort to adjust to it. The three daughters of Reb Zelmele, mentioned at the beginning, never turn up as characters: Kulbak, guided by Sholem Aleichem's use of only five of the seven daughters of Tevye the dairyman, must have concocted these three extra children in case more plot lines became necessary as the serialization went on.¹²

Much of the comic plot in *The Zelmenyaners* derives from challenges to the authority of the uncles' generation from the generation of their children (Reb Zelmele's grandchildren), who have grown up after the Bolshevik Revolution and the entrenchment of Soviet power in Belorussia. The inhabitants of the courtyard are all known collectively as Zelmenyaners even though the family's surname is actually Khvost (which in Russian means “tail” and in Soviet-speak of those days referred to those individuals and groups of people accused of being in the rearguard of social and political changes—those literally at the tail end of the revolution). The Zelmenyaners, as it were, are at once Jews who are becoming Soviet citizens and a unique species of humans whose comically exaggerated reactions shed light on the incongruities inherent in the Soviet project of modernization.

Kulbak was born in 1896 in Smorgon (present-day Smarhon, Belarus), a small town in the Russian Empire situated between Vilna and Minsk, about a hundred kilometers from either city.¹³ Between the seven-

teenth and nineteenth centuries the town was the site of a so-called academy where bears were trained for performances in marketplaces around much of Europe. Though the “academy” was effectively defunct by 1870, when bear shows were banned in the Russian Empire, the fame of the town’s peculiar trade was felt around Belorussia as late as the 1930s, when the occasional wandering Roma with a bear in tow would still be called, jokingly, “Smorgon teacher and his student.”

In a 1922 poem, Kulbak drew on the strange history of his hometown:

My grandfather’s kinsman, a Jew who tamed bears,
Performed in the market towns;
By day his beast was confined in chains;
At night, they danced under the stars.¹⁴

By recalling his grandfather, the speaker of the poem situates himself as a descendant of someone from Smorgon at the time when the bear “academy” was still active. But the poem is less about the speaker’s biography than about the genealogy of his own poetic imagination. Chained by day, the bear is an object of terror and titillation; unchained by night, dancing with its trainer under the canopy of the nighttime sky, it offers up a beautiful image of the organic unity of man, beast, and nature.

This celebration of primal instincts freed by human encounter with the natural world is a unique feature of Kulbak’s poetry and shows the influence of the poet’s birthplace and upbringing. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, when Kulbak was born, Smorgon had become a center for tanning, logging, and other industries and agriculture-related occupations that employed, among others, Kulbak’s father and numerous uncles. Growing up around peasants and in a family of Jews who worked the land, Kulbak had his childhood to thank for furnishing him with precise words for plants, trees, and natural phenomena. Many such words were lacking in the vocabulary available to Yiddish writers and needed to be imported from the region’s panoply of Slavic languages.

In fact, more than any of the other Yiddish writers and poets before and of his time, Kulbak has been consistently credited with enriching

the language with new organic and earthy metaphors.¹⁵ The most impressive display of his linguistic knowhow is the 1922 poem “Belorussia,” in which Kulbak invented a family of near-mythic proportions that predated the Zelmenyaners. This was a family of Jewish peasants probably not unlike Kulbak’s own—a family with the patriarch working the land (“A farmer with a horse and with an ax and with a sheepskin”)¹⁶ and the matriarch giving birth to one son after another to produce the poem’s narrator and his sixteen uncles, each of them a strong muscular type at one with nature:

As common as the clay are all
My sixteen uncles and my father,
Hauling logs out of the forest; driving rafts upon the river.
They toil the livelong day like ordinary peasants,
Then eat their supper of an evening gathered around a single platter;
And fall into their sixteen beds like sheaves of grain—together.¹⁷

In “Belorussia,” Kulbak’s Jews are different from their brethren elsewhere in the Russian Empire. They are not the Jews of the market towns who populate many pages of Yiddish literature, nor are they Jews weighed down with worry over how to make a living, or sickly yeshiva students consumed by pedantic arguments over the finer points of Jewish law.¹⁸ Instead, they are Jews who “are known to the birds in the air [and] to the snakes in their marshes.”¹⁹ When, at the end of the 1920s and in the first half of the 1930s, Kulbak’s gaze would shift in *The Zelmenyaners* to Jews who were becoming Soviet city dwellers, the touch of a poet’s pen trained in organic metaphors would remain palpable through the numerous natural images that made their way onto the pages of his urban prose.

Through these same verbal images, Kulbak conveys his observations on the heady era of industrialization and collectivization that provides the novel’s context. Far less triumphant than the official rhetoric of the first Five-Year Plan, which celebrated the Soviet Union’s astonishing leap forward from a largely peasant society to a modern industrial one, Kulbak’s observations are also far more ambivalent. In a failed rendezvous outside the city, the fiercely dogmatic Tonke, daughter of Uncle Zishe, and the uncertain Tsalke, son of Uncle Yuda, stand at the edge of

a road that “stretched to the piney horizon.” The narrator notes: “Far off on the horizon rose a spiral of smoke. A tractor chugged beneath it, creeping slowly along the edge of the earth without vanishing.”

On a bright day, when the sun’s “hot, green breath blasted the meadows,” this tractor—a symbol of technological progress and mechanized agriculture—enters the pastoral landscape in order to stay there for good, to remain a part of the new reality. The image causes Tsalke to pronounce, in one breath, the blessing that thanks God for bringing forth “bread from the earth.” Tsalke is not entirely wrong to do so: the tractor on the horizon is going through a field of wheat, working at bringing forth bread from the earth. Has Tsalke—an aloof amateur intellectual who serves as one of Kulbak’s protagonists—attempted to join the revolution’s modernizing call with his understanding of the natural world as inscribed in Jewish liturgical practices?

That is one possible interpretation of the scene, which is also reminiscent of the conclusion to Isaac Babel’s contemporaneous masterpiece *Red Cavalry*. There, Babel offers the portrait of a Jewish youth who has attempted to comprehend both Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Revolution, and Maimonides, the medieval Jewish philosopher and religious commentator, as elements of one and the same worldview.²⁰ Kulbak, however, by painting an image of something organic transformed into something mechanical, also appears to hint at the devastating effects of the policy of collectivization, which led to the deaths of millions of people in the early 1930s because of forced expropriations of private farms and the confiscation of harvests. The tractor, planted into the natural landscape, disrupts a reaping process long practiced manually by peasants.

Later in the novel, when one of the Zelmenyaners’ distant relatives arrives from Ukraine, whose population suffered the most in the years of forced collectivization, Kulbak’s hints at the political context become more overt. The Zelmenyaners themselves are Litvaks, Jews of Lithuanian stock. The arrival of a distant relative from Ukraine is therefore very noticeable. The relative in question, we are told, smells of a village threshing floor and incessantly eats bread as the younger Zelmenyaners sarcastically inquire whether the collective farms, whose successes they have heard lauded on the family’s newly installed radio, have stopped

producing wheat. Accused of being a kulak—one of the class of peasant landowners that the policies of collectivization sought to exterminate—this relative may very well be, as the language here suggests, a survivor of the great man-made famine in Ukraine in the 1930s.

The question of harvests comes up throughout the novel, serialized at a time when discussion of the negative aspects of collectivization was not easy to conduct openly. But tracing the evolution of Kulbak's nature metaphors in *The Zelmenyaners* also reveals his ability to fuse nature and industry, to the point where it becomes impossible to imagine the one without the other. On the morning that Uncle Yuda leaves Reb Zelmele's courtyard on a journey that would lead him to a collective farm, "far in the east, the first fires of day bubbled up through a cleft in the snow as though from a hearth in a foundry." The image is still organic, but drawn from one of the regnant metaphors of the Five-Year Plan, which likened the project of creating the new Soviet man to the process of forging metal. Such language was already abundant at the time Kulbak was writing these lines, but he would become acquainted with it directly when later, in 1936, he was contracted to edit the Yiddish translation of Nikolai Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered*—a paradigmatic Soviet production novel—for the Belorussian State Publishing House.²¹

Toward the end of *The Zelmenyaners*, Kulbak gives us a description of another morning in which nature has apparently been replaced by industry in Reb Zelmele's courtyard:

In the early hours of the morning, when factory whistles sounded all over the city, the still-sleeping tanners heard their steady foghorn, discernible by its low, ample drone like a bassoon in an orchestra. . . . In early morning, as a gray dawn broke, the stars ceased their singing. In Reb Zelmele's yard, a polyphony of sirens took their place.

Here the space of the courtyard, reconfigured through the use of industrial language, itself gets reshaped by the dominant Soviet literary metaphors of production.

As a young man, Kulbak studied for a while at the Volozhin yeshiva, where one of his predecessors was the great Hebrew poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik. During World War I, Kulbak's family had moved from

Smorgon, which ended up right on the front line between the German and Russian armies, to Minsk. In 1919, Kulbak moved again, this time to Vilna, where success awaited him upon the publication of “The City”—an energetic poem full of revolutionary rhythm and force that would later be quoted in *The Zelmenyaners* by Tonke, the novel’s most doctrinaire protagonist, as the work of a “Zelmenyaner poet, Kulbak.”

In 1920 Kulbak left Vilna (then known by its Polish name, Wilno—a city in the newly independent Republic of Poland) for Berlin. There he spent three years living from hand to mouth while frequenting the cafés that were the meeting places of Yiddish, Russian, and Hebrew writers unsettled by the Civil War in Russia and Ukraine.²² Between 1923, the year of his return from Berlin, and 1928, Kulbak served as a teacher in Vilna, a major Jewish cultural center and nascent laboratory of modernist Yiddish poetry, where he became an inspirational figure to the younger generation of poets. His poem “Vilna”—a hymn to the city known in the Jewish imagination as the “Jerusalem of Lithuania”—was published in 1926 and remains one of his best-known works.²³

In 1928, Kulbak moved back to Minsk—in part because of his belief in Soviet support of Yiddish culture, in part out of the strong Communist convictions that were already apparent in his earlier work, and in part out of a desire to be reunited with his family. Like Vilna, Minsk was the home of several Yiddish cultural institutions, but in Minsk all such institutions were supported by the state in its attempt to create a new and progressive Soviet Jewish culture. In fact, in the interwar years, Yiddish was—along with Belorussian, Russian, and Polish—one of the four official languages in Soviet Belorussia: the first state-level recognition of Yiddish as an official language anywhere in the world. (The second, and last, such recognition would follow a few years later as Yiddish became the official language of the Jewish Autonomous Region in the Soviet Far East.)²⁴ The move to a political setting very different from Vilna gave Kulbak plenty of food for thought—and *The Zelmenyaners* could be viewed as a comic assessment of what the writer saw in Minsk after he settled there.

The dating of events inside the novel itself is implicitly clear, not simply from the fact of its serialization but from certain textual details. The author gives indirectly—albeit precisely—a date for the beginning of the narrative in the fourth chapter of Part One, which is devoted to

Uncle Folye. There we learn that the events described “happened thirty-five years ago, when [Folye] was no more than a boy of ten.” In other words, Uncle Folye is forty-five years old at the time the narrative begins. A few pages later we are given a further indicator: “In 1914, Uncle Folye was thirty.” When we put the two sentences together—1914 minus thirty plus forty-five, the date of the narrative’s inception emerges as 1929. The very first installment of the novel, published in the *Star* in December of that year, contains both the first chapter and the chapter on Uncle Folye, numbered there as Chapter 8. Since that chapter would eventually become Chapter 4 when the novel was published in book form, we can estimate that Kulbak drafted a significant portion of Part One before the year 1929 was over.

Nineteen twenty-nine was an important year in Minsk. Local newspapers lauded the achievement of a number of the modernizing goals spearheaded by the Soviet state. Much of the city was hooked up to the electrical grid, part of an all-Union project judged by Lenin to be no less important to the success of Communism than Soviet power itself. The “liquidation of illiteracy” campaign was also advancing by leaps and bounds in Minsk, increasing the number of city dwellers who could read and write. In addition, outlying districts formerly not regarded as parts of the city became connected to the center by an urban rail network.²⁵

All of these events made their way into Kulbak’s novel. The introduction of electric lighting finds the older Zelmenyaners initially disgruntled by the loss of familiar shadows and hidden passageways between houses of the courtyard, where previously the call of nature could be answered out of the sight of others; an aunt comically attempts to learn how to write; family members feel the courtyard suddenly transformed into part of a larger universe as faraway radio broadcasts fill its airspace; Uncle Itshe is enthusiastic about the arrival of the trolley, enabling the whole family to ride freely from their place of residence to other parts of Minsk. When chapters of Part One of *The Zelmenyaners* are read side by side with Minsk’s newspapers from the time, it becomes clear that Kulbak treated his fictional courtyard as a kind of laboratory where real events could be put to the test of comedy.

The Zelmenyaners’ comic reactions to Soviet innovations have to do with their unique biological makeup, folksy attitudes, and private lan-

guage. The Zelmenyaners, as a human specimen, are in turn the literary representation of Kulbak's own interest in the folkloric and the everyday. The protagonist of *Monday*, a novella by Kulbak about the effects of the revolution upon a shtetl intellectual, is said to prize not the holiness of the Jewish Sabbath but rather Monday, "the simple day, when the poor go begging from house to house."²⁶ In an unpublished Russian-language memoir by Kulbak's widow, Zelda, written in the 1960s, there is the following note:

He loved to speak with workers and simple people. He used to say to his students: "One must listen to the language of the people, to idioms and sayings, to folklore." Together with older students he would go on excursions to the market. They would eavesdrop on and record the words of merchants and customers.²⁷

Kulbak's novel displays a similar attentiveness to idiomatic language and ethnographic detail. As for the novel's obsession with the Zelmenyaners as a kind of separate species, its epitome is to be found in a chapter in Part Two entitled "The Zelmeniad" (as in "The Iliad"). Initially serialized in the *Star* in February 1935, it was one of the last chapters to be published. Drawing on the device of a "found text," the chapter is said to have been "compiled and revised from the notes [about the courtyard] by the young researcher Tsalel Khvost, a native of the same courtyard." (Elsewhere, Tsalel is called by his nickname, Tsalke.)

At the time he was writing his novel, Kulbak held a day job as a research associate and editor in the Jewish sector of the Belorussian Academy of Sciences.²⁸ In this position, he processed and revised Yiddish-language texts for publication. Within the comic frame of *The Zelmenyaners*, Tsalke's "study" is an exercise in mock ethnography, a parody of the actual ethnographic debates that Kulbak would have witnessed up-close from his position at the academy.

Tsalke's study is divided into an introduction and six parts. The introduction specifies that Reb Zelmele Khvost had founded the courtyard in 1864. This is a brief excursion recapitulating the local history already related earlier in the novel but presented here as better researched and with a date that places the local history within the context of a larger historical timeline. According to Tsalke's study, the traits

that have distinguished the Zelmenyaners have been at work from the very beginning: "Set apart from their neighbors, the Zelmenyaners forged a distinctive lifestyle of their own in the course of the next generations." Each of the subsequent parts describes these specific customs and practices as they become manifest in various spheres of life, indicated in the titles of the parts: in addition to a sub-chapter on technological and medical peculiarities of Reb Zelmele's courtyard, there are chapters on "Zelmenyaner Geography," "Zelmenyaner Zoology," "Zelmenyaner Botany," and "Zelmenyaner Philology."

Tsalke's research categories are parodies of actual ethnographic studies being undertaken at the time. Reb Zelmele's courtyard, the smallest possible unit available for Tsalke's amateur ethnography, strikingly resembles another social unit subjected to contemporary ethnographic research and debates: the shtetl. Such research was encouraged at the time to help the Soviet government determine appropriate economic policies that would enable the Jews residing in the former Pale of Settlement—to which they had been restricted between the end of the eighteenth century and 1917—and formerly engaged in middlemen's occupations, to enter "productive" professions.²⁹ Accordingly, the use of social science was part and parcel of a larger preoccupation with ethnography that informed the state-building enterprise in the early Soviet period.³⁰

Specifically, "The Zelmeniad" is reminiscent of a pamphlet called *Research Your Shtetl!* calling on amateur ethnographers to study their hometowns under ten predetermined categories. Among these categories are: "geographic position and appearance of the shtetl," "the history of the shtetl," "population," "the economic system of the shtetl," "education in the shtetl," "facilities and sanitary conditions," "practices and culture."³¹ The pamphlet was published in Minsk in 1928 (the year Kulbak returned from Vilna) by the same institution that would employ Kulbak two years later. Tsalke's "study" in *The Zelmenyaners* takes up this pamphlet's call, as it were, and subjects it to parody.

From the beginning of the novel the Zelmenyaners have been described in language that is both organic and ethnographic:

Zelmenyaners are dark and bony, with broad, low brows. Their noses are fleshy and they have dimples in their cheeks. On the whole they are quiet,

sluggish types who look at you sideways, though some of the younger generation can be loud-mouthed. At heart, however, while putting on worldly airs, they remain timid descendants of Reb Zelmele. Zelmenyaners are patient and even-tempered. They are as taciturn when happy as when glum. Yet they sometimes glow like hot iron in a special Zelmenyaner way.

Over time, Zelmenyaners have developed their own smell—a faint odor of musty hay mixed with something else.

Like Kulbak's Jewish peasants, loggers, and tanners in the poem "Belorussia," the entire Zelmenyaner clan is a breed unto itself. The Zelmenyaners' traits—their unique organic smell but also their turns of phrase and peculiar laughter—persist throughout the novel no matter how much their circumstances change. Even the younger generation—the generation bent on Sovietizing and modernizing the courtyard—remains organically a generation of the descendants of Reb Zelmele, a generation in which the Zelmenyaners' nature persists.

The fact that the Zelmenyaners are described in "The Zelmeniad" as though they are under observation by an amateur ethnographer did not escape the attention of Minsk-based critics of Kulbak's novel. Some disapprovingly focused on Tsalke's statement that "in the course of the generations the Zelmenyaners have worked up their own unique approach to life." This "unique approach" came under attack in the charged political atmosphere of the Soviet mid-1930s.

One critic, Yasha Bronshteyn, addressed the issue of Kulbak's ethnographic language in his 1934 article "Against Biologism and Folkishness."³² Bronshteyn noted—not incorrectly—that in much of his poetry and prose, preceding but also including *The Zelmenyaners*, Kulbak was drawn to a particular type of character: a "stormy-raw," "biologically stripped," "naked nature man." The critic refers to this type as a *shilue*—a rascal, a "whippersnap"—a term Kulbak himself uses as an epithet for some of the younger Zelmenyaners. (Most likely, the Yiddish term is Kulbak's own coinage, and interestingly it appears on Tsalke's list of the Zelmenyaners' own linguistic peculiarities as reproduced in "The Zelmeniad.") Bronshteyn, however, makes the concept of *shilue* more inclusive, applying it not only to the younger generation but also to the generation of the four uncles and their wives.

All the Zelmenyaners, according to Bronshteyn, were “rascals” of sorts, a quality that was part of their problematic nature as individuals driven more by their gut feelings than by their consciousness. This category includes both those who supported the revolution and those who opposed it. What unites the two groups, according to Bronshteyn, is their reliance on instinct and emotion rather than on higher-order thinking. Here, operating within the permissible parameters of Soviet criticism, Bronshteyn takes his cue from Lenin’s famous 1902 treatise “What Is to Be Done?” Departing from the traditional Marxist emphasis on class struggle as the essence of the revolution, Lenin, who doubted that the largely illiterate and uneducated Russian working class and peasantry would ever be able to organize themselves into a revolutionary force, proposed to rely instead on a “vanguard of the proletariat” driven more by consciousness than by spontaneity. As one preeminent scholar of Soviet literature has put it,

“Consciousness” is taken to mean actions or political activities that are controlled, disciplined, and guided by politically aware bodies. “Spontaneity,” on the other hand, means actions that are not guided by complete political awareness and are either sporadic, uncoordinated, even anarchic . . . , or can be attributed to the workings of vast impersonal historical forces rather than to deliberate actions.³³

Bronshteyn’s indictment of the Zelmenyaners can be understood in terms of this opposition between spontaneity and consciousness. Bronshteyn asserts that the “call of blood” and the Zelmenyaners’ own “version of world history” are stronger than the effects of Soviet ideology.³⁴ The specific traits distinguishing the Zelmenyaners, moreover, exert a greater influence than whatever positive energy might be produced by the young generation of the family. As Bronshteyn points out, the younger Zelmenyaners, even those who would appear to be ideologically reliable, are described according to their typical external Zelmenyaner traits and spontaneous decisions, rather than from the inside and as doing what heroes of Soviet literature should be doing: undergoing a process of evolution from spontaneity to consciousness. The self-described rascals themselves—even the most ideologically progressive—are, first and foremost, typical Zelmenyaners.

A poignant example of the apparent triumph of spontaneity over consciousness among the Zelmenyaners comes in the chapter about electrification. The idea to extend electricity to the courtyard occurs to Bereh the policeman, Uncle Itshe's son, randomly. The critic Bronshiteyn is dismayed by this: by, that is, the fact that the silent Bereh would be entrusted with implementing Lenin's electrification plan. Electrification in the Soviet Union cannot be portrayed, according to the critic, without showing the leading role played in this enterprise by Communist ideology and "consciousness." Instead, here too, the reflexes of the Zelmenyaners prove stronger than the supposedly transformative power of ideology.

According to another Minsk-based critic, A. Damesek, these same reflexes are what turns their bearers into passive characters: for example, the older Zelmenyaners resist electrification because it is in their nature to resist such innovations. Damesek does single out one character for displaying consciousness, but it is the kind of consciousness antithetical to the proper aims of a Soviet novel. Damesek's conscious character is Tsalke, and the case study of his "incorrect" consciousness is "The Zelmeniad." This chapter was at the center of Damesek's 1936 attack on *The Zelmenyaners* in the pages of the *Star*.³⁵

Damesek describes Tsalke's practice of collecting his family's curiosities as "an actively hostile force that manifests itself all the more because it senses its own proximate and absolute demise."³⁶ That is, Tsalke is impelled to do what he does precisely because he senses the inevitable disappearance of Reb Zelmele's courtyard and its unique ways of life. As an amateur ethnographer, he consciously and deliberately occupies himself with interpreting the material in his collection. Such motivations and consciousness are absent in the other Zelmenyaners, whose reactions to Soviet modernization are driven purely by gut reactions. And yet, instead of aiming his consciousness at some socially useful task, Taskle devotes himself to recording the unique and undesirably reflexive traits of his kin.

Tsalke's mock ethnographic text, "The Zelmeniad," writes Damesek, "occupies itself with the specificity of Jewishness with the purpose not just of preventing it from becoming part of a museum display, but of transforming it into a folk tradition, an exalted national form."³⁷ Dame-

sek fears that Kulbak is using the figure of Tsalke not to ridicule and satirize the Zelmenyaners' anachronistic ways, as he should have been expected to do, but rather to perpetuate and enshrine them. Damesek here joins the ranks of other critics who chastised Kulbak for his insufficient use of satire. Tsalke's activity, in these critics' eyes, is doubly dangerous: not just a reflexive but a positively deliberate counterreaction to Soviet modernity. At a time when technological innovation driven by Soviet ideology is destabilizing the courtyard for the better (according to this view), Tsalke, acting as the lone motivated figure in the courtyard, has attempted to salvage what he can.

To a great extent, the critical attacks on *The Zelmenyaners* by Bronshteyn (in 1934) and Damesek (in 1936), among others, need to be understood within the context of the changing conventions of Soviet literature. On the surface, Kulbak's novel may have seemed to be telling the story of a Jewish courtyard's gradual dissolution and the integration of the Jews into the Soviet metropolis through the force of different ideological and technological innovations. This, at any rate, was exactly what the text *should* have been about in the eyes of the critics; but, as one critic wrote, to take this narrative at face value would have been a mistake. The untamed independence of the novel's protagonists made it unclear whether they were, in fact, absorbing the lessons of the revolution.

It may be useful to recall in this connection that Kulbak began serializing his novel in 1929 and finished it only in 1935. Roughly halfway through Part Two, a watershed event occurred that quite likely changed the author's attitude toward his own text.

At the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, held in Moscow in August and September 1934, all literary production in the Soviet Union was centralized through the introduction of the concept of Socialist Realism, henceforth proclaimed to be the only acceptable mode of creative expression. Though the buildup to this moment had been ongoing throughout the early part of the 1930s, the promulgation of Socialist Realism—that is, the depicting of “reality in its revolutionary development”³⁸—as the only acceptable style of Soviet literary production marked an official turning point in the subordination of art to Soviet political and ideological ends.

Kulbak heard the news directly as a member of the Belorussian delegation at the congress.³⁹ Whether by coincidence or by design, the chapter entitled “Bereh and Uncle Folye Fight for the New Man” was initially serialized in the issue of the *Star* devoted to reports about the proceedings in Moscow. In this chapter, Bereh, expelled from his work at the police station for some unspecified ideological shortcoming, is sent to work at a leather goods factory so that he can prove his credentials as a reliable Soviet citizen by undertaking socially important work (in this case, ratting out the state’s ideological enemies, one of whom turns out to be his own relative).

Having already begun the serialization of Part Two with a prologue about Bereh, Kulbak appears to have seized on the new literary directive as requiring a clear central protagonist in the process of evolution from spontaneity to consciousness. Such an evolution, according to the tenets of Socialist Realism, could not be accomplished on one’s own but required the help of a mentor. Since, aside from the courtyard itself, *The Zelmenyaners* does not really have a central protagonist, Kulbak appears to have tried to invent one after most of the novel was already written.

In the prologue about Bereh, serialized in the *Star* in March 1933, Kulbak had already planted the seed of this idea by dispatching Bereh to participate as a soldier in World War I and the Russian Civil War, where he could presumably have earned some military distinction. There, a non-Jewish officer named Porshnyev befriends Bereh and, by asking promptly whether he belongs to any party, establishes himself as a figure who will later be presented as Bereh’s ideological mentor.

But Kulbak must have judged this initial chapter insufficient to establish Bereh’s credentials as the novel’s main protagonist. In October 1934—one month after the codification of the doctrine of Socialist Realism—he published an additional chapter about Bereh’s experience during the war. As if modifying the utterly nonheroic Bereh of the prologue, Kulbak now presents him (albeit with a satirical edge) as something of a hero. Returning to those earlier events, the new chapter informs us that Bereh had been taken in by a Jewish baker who wants to arrange a match for his daughter. But, declining the settled life of a family man, Bereh runs away and undergoes his wartime experiences as he continues on his journey home—experiences that come as close

to the heroic as a comic novel will allow (and that mimic the scene in Homer's *Odyssey* where Odysseus rejects Calypso in favor of making his way back to Ithaca).

When the second half of *The Zelmenyaners* was published in book form in 1935, this later chapter was included, out of its original sequence, as Chapters 3 and 4 of Part Two. In this we can see Kulbak's attempts to grandfather the entirety of his novel into the guidelines of Socialist Realism by introducing Bereh, very belatedly, as a potentially passable protagonist who journeys from spontaneity to consciousness. Evidently aware of the artificial nature of this enterprise, Kulbak also introduces another detail: the discovery of an autobiography written by Bereh as part of his application for a job at the police station—where his boss will be none other than Porshnyev, his ideological mentor and wartime companion. Such autobiographies were indeed required of Soviet citizens seeking employment in the 1920s and the 1930s, when anyone not from a desirable class (with aristocratic roots, for example) would have had trouble getting hired.

By narrating his own adventures during the war, Bereh passes off his youthful exploits, such as they were, as a proper Soviet biography. It is clear, however, that Kulbak was still undercutting his own apparent efforts to conform to the requirements of a proper Soviet text. Bereh's autobiography is found and scrutinized by the pedant Tsalke, who, comparing the place names mentioned in the document with the route Bereh would have realistically followed in returning home from the war, judges the autobiography to have been concocted out of thin air.

Midway through the novel, at the beginning of Part Two, the family and their courtyard are in decline. In the early chapters of Part Two, then, Bereh emerges as a kind of messenger from the "Promised Land" of Communism—someone who could turn the family's fortunes around. This image of a messenger from the Promised Land had arisen before in Yiddish literature. Sh. Y. Abramovitch's classic satirical novel *The Brief Adventures of Benjamin the Third*—a harsh critique both of life in the shtetl and of the messianic dreams that make life only more difficult for their Jewish dreamers—includes the following episode:

Once, it so happened, someone arrived in Tuneyadevka ["Lazy Town"] with a date. You should have seen the town running to look at it. A Bible

was brought to prove that the very same little fruit grew in the Holy Land. The harder the Tuneyadevkans stared at it, the more clearly they saw before their eyes the River Jordan, the Cave of the Patriarchs, the tomb of Mother Rachel, the Wailing Wall.⁴⁰

Here, the Promised Land, which exists as an imaginary construct in the minds of Tuneyadevka's Jews, suddenly acquires a more realistic status in the form of date fruit. Kulbak unquestionably has this scene in mind when, during Bereh's adventures on the road, someone delivers to the Zelmenyaners an apple rumored to have come from Bereh himself:

The apple lay for a few days in a place on the table. It was a red, winter-storage apple with a thick peel, a short, thick stem, and a winey smell that filled the room. Everyone touched its cool peel and lifted it by the stem while thinking of Bereh and his exploits on the battlefield.

For those few days, the whole yard dreamed of him. Suddenly he was seen as the rising star of the family, which had seemed headed downhill.

In many ways, Part Two is built on applying these hopes for the family's revitalization to the realities of the political and cultural context in which the Zelmenyaners find themselves. If Bereh is the bright hope of the family, someone who can help the family become integrated, this hope comes with an underside of betrayal: Bereh will need to turn on his family in order to establish his credentials as a trustworthy Soviet citizen, thereby earning the admiration of the political mentor who has helped him complete his journey from spontaneity to consciousness.

The entirety of *The Zelmenyaners* was serialized through the most transformative years in Soviet history. Perhaps, in deciding to publish it, the censors read the novel as a proper Socialist Realist story of the disintegration of a traditional Jewish family and its integration into Soviet society. As we have seen, however, critics of the time did indeed perceive the degree to which Kulbak's insistence on the family's unique and persistent traits made the Zelmenyaners odd candidates for the perfect Soviet narrative. In 1971, interestingly enough, when the book was reissued in the Soviet Union long after its initial publication, a number of passages that had not been excised earlier fell victim to the censor's knife.

In September 1937 Kulbak was arrested on charges of spying for Poland. Such charges were pervasive in Minsk during the heyday of the Stalinist purges because of the city's proximity to "bourgeois" Poland, where many of Minsk's Jewish cultural figures had connections that were now suddenly suspect. Kulbak, given his travels throughout the 1920s, enjoyed extensive professional and personal associations in Vilna, then known as Wilno, Poland. After a brief trial behind closed doors, he was executed on October 29, 1937, at the age of forty-one. Kulbak's wife, Zelda, whom he had met and married in Vilna, was also arrested in 1937 and spent eight years in a labor camp in Kazakhstan designated specifically for wives of "enemies of the people." In 1942, Kulbak's elder child—his son, Elya—was killed shortly after the German invasion of the USSR. His younger child—his daughter, Raya, born in 1935—survived the war and was reunited with her mother after the latter's release from the camp in 1946.

Both Zelda, who was born in 1897 and died in 1973 in Minsk, and Raya, who emigrated to Israel in 1990 and now lives in Tel Aviv, spent many years trying to acquire correct information about Kulbak's arrest and execution. Zelda had been told in the 1950s that Kulbak died in 1940 from natural causes in a labor camp. As with many other purged artists, such as the writer Isaac Babel, the state for a long time tried to create the impression that its victims had died naturally some time after their arrest rather than being shot almost immediately. Raya eventually succeeded in establishing the truth. As with other victims of the Stalin era, Kulbak was posthumously rehabilitated in the 1950s after the dictator's death.

Kulbak could hardly have known his fate when he moved to Minsk in 1928 to rejoin his family and partake in the great opportunities presented by state-level sponsorship of Yiddish culture. The world into which Kulbak moved upon his relocation to Minsk was hardly a place whose evolution could have been predicted from the outset, and it would be unseemly to criticize his and others' decision to relocate and remain in the Soviet Union.

The Zelmenyaners, the novel that Kulbak was writing during almost the entire time of his stay in Minsk, is as good a testament as any to the unpredictability of the political situation in the Soviet Union during

that period: a brilliant laboratory of reactions to an ongoing drama of social and cultural experimentation.

Despite the fact that nearly six years had passed between the novel's first installment and the last, the end of *The Zelmenyaners* comes thematically full circle. The first chapter contains the text of Reb Zelmele's will, in which a request is made that the family continue living in the courtyard. In the novel's last chapter, it becomes clear that this core provision will not be heeded: the family is in the process of leaving the courtyard, which is itself being destroyed to make way for a new factory. Yet the text of the will in the first chapter and the list of possessions that the Zelmenyaners salvage from their houses in the last are somehow similar. The novel is bracketed by these two sets of details outlining the family's inherited and remaining material possessions.

The lists get an additional gloss at the end of Part Two. During what is ostensibly a show trial—another institution of the Stalin era—Tonke, the most dogmatic of all the Zelmenyaners, testifies in court against the family and its purported uniqueness. In her testimony, as if channeling the negative commentary of the novel's real-life critics, she makes her case by citing the same list of material possessions and character traits. In this respect, Tonke is the opposite of her cousin Tsalke, for whom the collection of lists, linguistic items, and family curiosities had formed an amateur ethnographic project to salvage the traces of a disappearing culture. But though Tonke appears to have the final word, thus seemingly casting the entire novel as a narrative fitting the imperative of Soviet literature, Kulbak's mastery of details challenges any such impression.

From the very beginning of the novel's serialization, Kulbak has prepared his reader to understand *The Zelmenyaners* as a narrative not about disappearance but about transition and transformation. Reb Zelmele's will, which opens the novel, contains a curious detail. It is dated not by the secular day and year but by an indication that it was written in the week when the scriptural Torah portion of *B'shalakh* is read during Sabbath morning services. (The Jewish year is also given, counted from the moment of the world's creation, but, we are informed, with its last two digits "erased.") *B'shalakh*, spanning Exodus

13:17–17:16 and covering the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites escaping Egypt, the giving of manna in the desert, Moses’s drawing water from a stone, and the battle with Israel’s enemy Amalek—is the first of the scriptural narratives dealing with the multiyear wanderings of the children of Israel on their way toward the Promised Land.

Leaving his property and possessions to the Zelmenyaners as a bequest, Reb Zelmele taps into the metaphors implicit in the Torah narrative. A Soviet Yiddish critic was thus correct in chastising Kulbak for not creating ideologically reliable characters but instead populating his novel with protagonists who were all part of “the generation of the desert” (*dor hamidber*).⁴¹ The courtyard itself becomes a site of wandering, with a Soviet “promised land”—of electricity, radio, bigger buildings, and revolutionary pathos—slowly taking over this space as its inhabitants, each in his or her way, try to engage with the new reality.

The significance of Kulbak’s novel lies not in its description of what once was and what no longer is but rather in its preservation, in great detail, of the rapidly shifting meanings of what appear to be stable objects, concepts, and words. On the last page of the novel, as the Zelmenyaners’ courtyard is knocked down to make way for a candy factory, the family members forage through the remains of their home, picking out household items that could be used in the new quarters where they are being resettled. As pots, pans, shoes, and inkwells are uncovered, someone unscrews a mezuzah from the entryway in the hope that it can later be installed at the entrance to a new apartment. The critic Yasha Bronshteyn took this concluding scene as one final example of the family’s “biologism”: another sign, manifested in the desire to cling to outdated possessions, of their inability to become fully Soviet.

But there is a different way to read these same details. The objects that remain of the courtyard are turning into displaced markers of a family that is becoming both Soviet and Jewish. They acquire a transitional status: no longer meaningful parts of a functioning household, they must now be viewed separately from the larger system of which they had formerly been a part. Unmoored from their natural contexts, the remnants of the Zelmenyaners’ courtyard await their reinterpretation and recontextualization in the family members’ new apartments,

persisting beyond the old home's physical disappearance but with their final meaning deferred.⁴²

Set in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and early 1930s, *The Zelmenyaners* collects and preserves the structure of a Jewish family's courtyard together with the process of its transformation and all the changing rituals, practices, idioms, words, and objects that this process entails. Because of Moyshe Kulbak's imaginative genius, the resulting novel, synthesizing a changing world in compelling comic prose, becomes a space through which we, in turn, gain access to that world in the very moments of its metamorphosis.

NOTES

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1. M. Kulbak, "Funem bukh 'Di mishpokhe zelmenyaner,'" *Shtern*, no. 12 (1929): 6–15. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.
2. For the study of Soviet Jewish culture in the interwar period see Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).
3. In book form they appeared as Moyshe Kulbak, *Zelmenyaner: Ershter bukh* (Minsk: Tsentraler felker farlag fun F.S.S.R, 1931); Moyshe Kulbak, *Zelmenyaner: Tsveyter bukh* (Minsk: Melukhe-farlag fun vaysrusland, 1935).
4. Soviet Yiddish periodicals like the *Star* and books like this novel circulated outside the Soviet Union as well, and so Kulbak's novel was reviewed by non-Soviet Yiddish critics in addition to those inside the Soviet Union. For example, Nakhmen Mayzel reviewed both parts of the novel, as they were published in book form, in the Warsaw-based peri-

- odical *Literary Pages*: Nakhmen Mayzel, “Dos bukh vos ikh hob akorsht ibergeleyent: Moyshe Kulbaks ‘zelmenyaner,’” *Literarishe bleter*, no. 14 (413) (April 1, 1932): 224–225; Nakhmen Mayzel, “Moyshe kulbaks ‘zelmenyaner,’” *Literarishe bleter*, no. 11 (670) (March 12, 1937): 174.
5. William Mills Todd III, “Anna on the Installment Plan: Teaching *Anna Karenina* through the History of Its Serial Publication,” in Liza Knapp and Amy Mandelker, eds., *Approaches to Teaching Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2003), 53–59.
 6. Stalin’s speech was published in all major newspapers, including Minsk’s main daily Russian-language newspaper the *Worker (Rabochii)*, which is where Kulbak would have most likely read it: I. Stalin, “God velikogo pereloma,” *Rabochii* (Minsk, November 6, 1929).
 7. I am thankful to Elissa Bemporad for allowing me to read prior to publication chapters of her book *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in the Jewish City of Minsk, 1917–1939* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, forthcoming). See also: Elissa Bemporad, “Behavior Unbecoming a Communist: Jewish Religious Practice in Soviet Minsk,” *Jewish Social Studies* 14, no. 2 (Winter 2008): 1–31; Andrew Jay Sloan, “Pale Fire: Jews in Revolutionary Belorussia, 1917–1929” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2009).
 8. Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Estate* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969).
 9. David Bergelson, “Joseph Schur,” in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, trans. Leonard Wolf (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 527.
 10. Isaac Babel’s “The King”—one of the stories of his *Odessa Stories* cycle—opens with the following sentence: “The wedding ceremony ended, the rabbi sank into a chair, then he left the room and saw tables lined up the whole length of the courtyard.” Isaac Babel, *Isaac Babel’s Selected Writings*, ed. Gregory Freidin, trans. Peter Constantine, Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 261.
 11. Fridrikh Gorenshteyn, *Berdichev: Izbrannoe* (Moscow: Tekst, 2007); Arkady Lvov, *The Courtyard*, trans. Richard Lourie (New York: Doubleday, 1989).

12. Sholem Aleichem published his first Tevye story in 1894; the last one was published in 1914. Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories*, trans. Hillel Halkin (New York: Schocken Books, 1987).
13. For a detailed biography, see Robert Adler Peckerar and Aaron Rubinstein, "Moyshe Kulbak," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, ed. Joseph Sherman, vol. 333 (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2007), 121–129.
14. Moyshe Kulbak, "Ten Commandments," trans. by Leonard Wolf, in Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, and Khone Shmeruk, eds., *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* (New York: Viking, 1987), 386.
15. One of Kulbak's students in Vilna, writing about his teacher's penchant for organic metaphors, gives this among a number of his favorite examples: "mokhike neshomes" ("moldy souls"). Shlomo Beylis, "Gezangen tsum erdishn (notitsn vegn Moyshe Kulbak)," *Di goldene keyt*, no. 105 (1981): 106.
16. Moyshe Kulbak, "From Byelorussia," trans. by Leonard Wolf, in Howe, Wisse, and Shmeruk, *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, 388.
17. Ibid.
18. R. Beriozkin, in an introduction to the Belorussian edition of Kulbak's selected works, paraphrases an unattributed critic on this point: "In Yiddish poetry before Kulbak, a Jewish peasant was a myth; for Kulbak, he is real." Maisei Kul'bak, *Vybranae* (Minsk, 1970), 8.
19. Ibid., 398.
20. "The Rabbi's Son," *Isaac Babel's Selected Writings*, 175–176.
21. Nikolai Ostrovskii, *Vi shtol hot zikh farkhatevet: Roman in tsvey teyln*, ed. M. Kulbak (Minsk: Melukhe farlag, 1937). This Yiddish translation of Nikolai Ostrovskii's paradigmatic Soviet novel, *How the Steel Was Tempered*, lists Moyshe Kulbak's name on the title page, referring to the text having been "edited" (*baarbet*) by him; the name of the translator is not listed. In fact, the text was translated into Yiddish by Khatskl Dunets, who had been purged by the time the translation must have been nearly finished, in 1936. In the minutes of a meeting of the Party committee of the Belorussian State Publishing House (Belgoslitizdat) from March 17, 1936, there is a discussion of the danger of assigning translation of texts to ideologically unreliable translators: "It is inconceivable for [the editorial board] to have assigned the translation of Ostrovskii's *How the*