USEM 01a: Jewish Literatures in Eastern Europe: Syllabus

Antony Polonsky
Spring 2007
Lown 308

Description of the Course

The emergence of a modern literary consciousness among the Jews was one of the results of the breakup of traditional Jewish society and the attempt to transform the Jews from a religious and cultural community transcending national boundaries into citizens of the different countries in which they lived. In Eastern Europe, where the majority of European Jews lived, this new literary consciousness was expressed in various languages including Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish and Russian. This course will study of the development of modern literary forms, both prose and poetry, among the Jews of Eastern Europe. The works will be studied in English translation.

Prescribed Reading

Sholem Aleichem


Isaac Leib Peretz


Selected poems by Yehuda Leib Gordon, Khaym Nakhman Bialik and Shaul Tchernichowsky (will be supplied by the instructor)

Devora Baron


Shai Ansky


Selected Russian and Yiddish poetry from the Soviet Union (will be supplied by the instructor)

Isaac Babel

*Tales of Odessa* and Stories from *The Collected Stories*, edited and translated by Walter Morison, with an introduction by Lionel Trilling, Meridian

Bruno Schulz  

Selected poems by Julian Tuwim (will be supplied by the instructor)

Henryk Grynberg  


Selected poems dealing with the Holocaust (will be supplied by the instructor)

### Course Outline

**Week One**
17 January

Introduction: The transformation of the Jews under the influence of modernity

**Week Two**
22, 24 January

The emergence of modern Yiddish literature

Reading:

Sholem Aleichem  
*Tevye the Dairyman* in *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories*, translated with an introduction by Hillel Halkin.

**Week Three**
29, 31 January

The emergence of modern Hebrew literature

Reading:
Selected poems by Yehuda Leib Gordon, Khaym Nakhman Bialik and Shaul Tchernichowsky (will be supplied by the instructor)

First USEM paper, 3-5 pages, due:
‘How did the new literature in Hebrew and Yiddish differ from that of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment)?

**Week Four**
5, 7 February

Women in Jewish Eastern Europe

Devora Baron ‘The First Day’ and Other Stories, translated and edited by Naomi Seidman and Chana Kronfeld,

**Week Five**
12, 14 February

Jewish writing in Russian and Polish down to 1914

Reading:

Isaac Leib Peretz Selected stories from The I.L. Peretz Reader, edited with and introduction by Ruth R. Wisse.

**Week Six**
26, 28 February

The ‘new’ Yiddish literature down to 1914

Reading:

Shai Ansky The Dybbuk in The Dybbuk and Other Stories, edited by David Roskies.

**Weeks Seven/Eight**
5, 7, 12, 14 March

Jewish writing in the Soviet Union 1921-1941

Reading:

Isaac Babel The Collected Stories, edited and translated by Walter Morison, with an introduction by Lionel Trilling.

Selected Russian and Yiddish poetry from the Soviet Union
**Weeks Nine/Ten**

19, 21, 26, 28 March

Jewish writing in interwar Poland

Reading:

Bruno Schulz  

Selected poems by Julian Tuwim

Second USEM paper, 3-5 pages, due

**Weeks Eleven/Twelve/Thirteen**

11, 16, 18, 23, 25, 30 April

The Holocaust and its aftermath in the Soviet Union and Poland

Reading:

Adolf Rudnicki  

Bohdan Wojdowski

Extract from *Bread for the Departed* form *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Poland: An Anthology*.

Henryk Grynberg  
*The Victory*, translated by Richard Lourie.

Henryk Grynberg

Poems in *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Poland: An Anthology*.

Hanna Krall


Selected poems dealing with the Holocaust

Deadline for completed research paper draft

Final Take-Home Examination:

one essay question on research paper, plus
revision of, or commentary on, first USEM paper

**USEM Guidelines and Requirements**

**In-class Notes**

This USEM course is designed to help prepare you for your future reading and writing. It is therefore vital that you regard the work you do for it as done not only for its own sake, but also as a basis for the type of work you will be undertaking in the remainder of your undergraduate career. Be practical in your in your note-taking; while you may want to jot down information that helps focus your attention in class or that you may want to use in a future paper, you may benefit most by only recording in your notebook material that you will need to use later. Your notebook should be a record of what you have learned, especially of what you have learned about how to read and write. It may be that your most helpful notes will not be ready-made answers but questions you have still to answer.

**In-class Performance**

This class is conducted as a seminar and its goal is to achieve a shared learning experience. *Your primary obligation is thus social* - your first priority should be those types of work which contribute both to your learning and that of the others in the class (class reading, the preparation of written material to be considered in the class and so on). The principal basis for evaluation in this course is your written work, but class participation can significantly affect a borderline grade. This may take various forms - in-class discussion, peer review of papers and perhaps smaller discussion groups.

Class attendance is vital and you should not miss class except as a consequence of a personal or medical emergency or a scheduling conflict which you have discussed with me in advance. Unexcused absence from the class will affect your final grade.

**Evaluation**

In order to obtain a passing grade, your work on each assignment must be awarded a passing grade and you must show that you have completed the overwhelming majority of the assigned readings. You may revise a paper right up to the granting of the final grade, but only a significant improvement in the work will lead to a grade being altered. Your final grade will reflect your fullest achievement in the course: you can efface the effect of early poor grades if your later work shows real improvement. Grading is the most difficult aspect of my work - I am happy to discuss with you your grades, but you should understand that in the final analysis the awarding of a grade has to be the result of judgement, which is always partially subjective.

**Communication**

Please do not hesitate to let me know about any difficulties you are having with the course or any suggestions you may have for improving it. You can communicate with me in class, by telephone or by e-mail.
If you are a student with a documented disability at Brandeis University and with to have a reasonable accomodation made for you in this class, please see the course instructor immediately.