

Translation / Traduction

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The Life and Diary of Osip Dymov

Osip Dymov (also Ossip Dymow; Yosef Perelman; 1878–1959) was a Russian and Yiddish writer, playwright, and journalist.¹ Dymov was born in Bialystok, where his father was a merchant. He studied in St. Petersburg and began his literary career there. In 1913, prior to World War I, Dymov immigrated to the United States where he spent the rest of his life. In the more than fifty years since his first publication appeared (1892), Osip Dymov published over twenty-five plays, a collection of short stories in Russian (“Solntsevorot” [Sun Cycle], St. Petersburg, 1905), a collection of selected works (“Dramen un ertseilungen” [Dramas and Stories], New York, 1943), two volumes of memoirs in Yiddish (“Vos ikh gedenk” [What I Remember], New York, 1943 and 1945), and dozens of essays and articles, mostly published in the Yiddish newspapers *Der tog* and *Forverts* in New York.

In 1943, Yiddish journalist Boris Belostotsky wrote of Dymov’s cultural significance: “When I look at Osip Dymov ... I see more than simply a good writer. I start to reflect and reminiscences come to mind ... Dymov and beyond Dymov. In Osip Dymov, in his personality come together threads, paths, images and details of the whole epoch.”² Indeed, Dymov lived and worked at the intersection of cultures and languages – Russian, English, and Yiddish. He was multi-talented and worked successfully in many genres – journalism, short stories, and drama. He was intimately connected to important cultural figures and Jewish communities in the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, the United States, Germany and Canada. As a journalist, Dymov published his work in the New York Yiddish press, but his literary and other work was covered by the Canadian Yiddish press, such as the Montreal daily *Der Keneder Odler*, by Dymov’s friends, Canadian Yiddish journalists, reporter Sh. Shveler and literary critic N. Gottlieb. Thus, in 1953, the *Keneder Odler* was first to report on Dymov’s amazing turn to sculpture as a new medium for his art, in an interview by Shveler.³ In 1943, the newspaper published Gottlieb’s review of Dymov’s monumental two-volume Yiddish memoir called *Vos ikh gedenk*, or “What I Remember.”⁴ Ironically, in 1944, having just finished his memoirs, Dymov suddenly lost his memory. He was struck with amnesia caused by a general anesthesia during surgery.⁵

Dymov was physically fully sound but his mind was blank. He, who had been so earnestly attached to his family and friends, could no longer recognize anyone. He, who had spoken several languages fluently, could neither speak nor understand others. The famous writer did not even know who he was. Later, Dymov wrote about the experience: “I was a corpse, because I had no memory. A body without a soul. What is a soul? ... [it] is a disciplined memory ... and memory is the past ... It is real, because it cannot be destroyed or changed. Our soul is history, religion, morality, culture, art – with God within! I had lost my God – how could I regain Him?”⁶ Eventually, Dymov started to improve. It was a painful process lasting many months. As he regained his memory, he was prompted with dates, events, and names. He tried painstakingly to record everything meaningful that he could recall from his past. This effort resulted in his Russian short story “Dnevnik” (The Diary, 1948). The manuscript is found at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archives in New York. Its fragments are published here in English for the first time.⁷

Osip Dymov
Diary

February 23, 1948

1.

28 II. 48

Дневник
Осип Дымов
Караго Гавриил

1. Когда мне было 6 или 7 лет я перед
своим рассказывал моему старшему брату
Герману и сестре Анне выдумывая отом
как ~~разношерстные~~ пощаривать разно-
кох и белов бегут по обачи.
- Мне ~~хотелось~~ хотелось написать, -
сказал Герман.

~~На утро Анна подхватила мое
это и мама давит мне об
и мама приподняла, это если это
повторится я
и Анна посадила меня в урод~~

На утро Анна подхватила мое
и мама отправила меня в урод.

Это было мое ~~первое~~ ^{первое} при-
казано мое ~~написание~~ ^{написание} ~~написание~~ : сначала
привычки а затем - критика

Excerpt from the diary of Ossip Dymov. Courtesy of YIVO Archives, RG 469 Ossip Dymov Papers, Box 6, Folder 92.

[1884]

When I was 6 years old, I would tell fairy tales to my elder brother German and sister Anna before we went to bed ...

—You will grow up to become a writer, —said German.

Next morning Anna complained of my behavior to my mother and I was punished by having to stand in the corner. It was the beginning of my true career: first comes recognition, then — criticism.

[1892]

I am 14 years old. I am a fourth year pupil at a Bialystok school. The Moscow journal *Around the Globe* just published my “Captain’s Story” ...

My weekdays... During my eight years at school I did not see anyone except teachers and students. Yes, I had seen other people before I entered the school. Now I saw them again. Weavers, many young workers—I knew them as kids. Now they behave differently, they speak restlessly, they conspire about something, on *mayuvke* [the celebration of the First of May] they sing new songs... My weekdays—I am cherishing them now!

[1898]

The time has come to go to St. Petersburg and enter university. Which university? It really does not matter—if only I can get into one of them. Admission [of Jews] is too limited!

I am 20. Looking for money to support myself as a student, I left an article on Dostoevsky at the office of [the weekly] *Theater and Art*. A few days later, I was met by a shaggy-haired man with a wild beard, the son of a rabbi from Mozyr. He asked me:

—Do you want to be my assistant? I will pay you 40 rubles a month ... Do you agree?

This man was Aleksandr Kugel, Homo Novus, a renowned critic.

When my [debut] play “The Voice of Blood” won the contest, [Alekssei] Suvorin [the publisher] of [the influential Russian daily] *Novoe Vremia* handed me the prize, 300 rubles, and said:

—What nonsense have you written ...

The opening night of my play in the theater turned to be a stunning failure.

[1903]

I am 25. My play “Shma Israel,” dedicated to the victims of the Bialystok pogrom, was produced in St. Petersburg ...

—This is an awkward, pointless and harmful play [wrote] S[hloyme]. An-sky

[1912]

I am a Jew. Osip Dymov = Yosef Perelman.

In the summer of 1912 I wrote “The Eternal Wanderer.” I read the manuscript to my friends ...

—Do you really think you are a Russian writer? Do not forget that you are really Jew from Bialystok,—[said] Vladimir [Ze’ev] Jabotinsky.

Vladimir Jabotinsky accomplished a lot in his effort to “nationalize” the Jewish intelligentsia in Russia ... In 1905 he told me:

—Listen to me, son of Bialystok! Indeed, Russian art and Russian language are wonderful things. But what are you going to give to your own people? ... Who will write for the Bialystoker? Who—except you—could embody our national protest, our pains and hopes? You must turn to Jewish subjects, you must be one of us! Jabotinsky did not mention the language, just the subject. Jabotinsky taught [me] to think as a Jew who thoroughly perceived and sensed the Jewish tragedy.

[1913]

—I will give you 1,000 dollars and three *shifskartn* [trans-Atlantic ship tickets] in first class for you, your wife and daughter. Do you want to come to America?—[asked] Boris Tomashefsky.

Yes, I did want to. But I ended up in second class.

[1914]

During rehearsals of “The Eternal Wanderer” in New York:

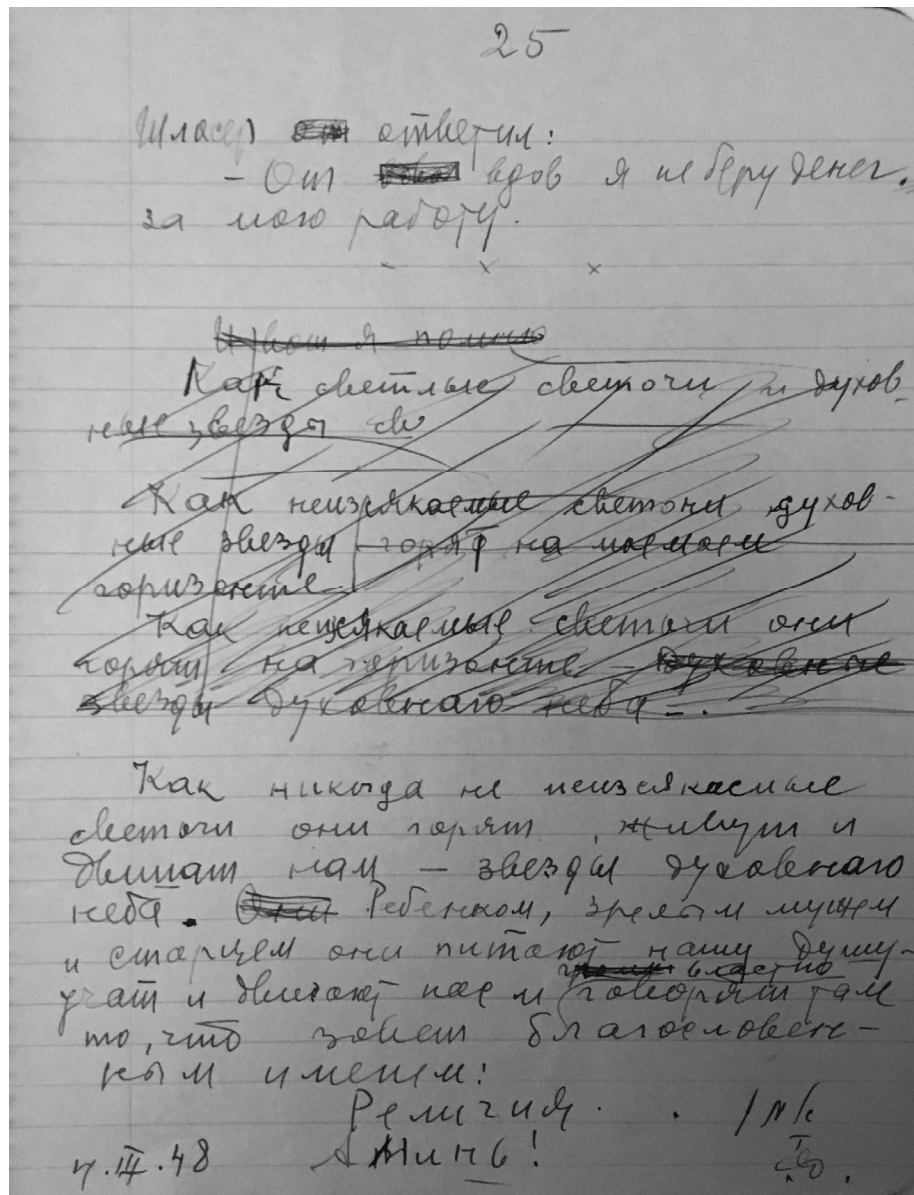
—Tomashefsky, why did you bring this shit here?!—said David Kesler.

[1919]

In the summer of 1919 I wrote a comedy called “From Bleecker Street to Prospect Avenue.” Leon Crystal told me:

—The name is awkward. Call it “Bronx Express.”

I could not imagine any better advice.



Excerpt from the diary of Ossip Dymov. Courtesy of YIVO Archives. RG 469 Ossip Dymow Papers, Box 6, Folder 92.

3

истерии Давидова - как и
капитанов.

Косвенно это помогло мне
потом поехать в Петербург
лесной интеллигенции. Из 800 канди-
датов евреев было принято 6. Кат-
фор из них два не хуже меня
подобравши, но ни один из них
~~не попал в карцере 24 часа~~
~~не начал ни писать ни в карцере~~

*
←

Мне 29 лет.

на

будущего ~~своего~~ второго курса
я получил много на конкурсе
рассказов объявленной газетой
"Биржевые ведомости", Пропера.
Презд на трамвай - наверх -
~~на~~ на "интервал" - стоил ~~три~~
3 копейки, а у меня было ~~только~~
~~два~~ только две. ~~Ну~~ Пришлось
престижем ~~не~~ рас с ~~семь~~ ~~сот~~
~~и~~ и ~~д.~~ ^{очень} ~~спешно~~, боясь что я
опоздаю и ~~пре~~ ~~много~~ ~~по~~ ~~мужи~~ ~~кто~~
никуда ~~дура~~. ~~И~~ ~~от~~ ~~Пропера~~

1

Schedrin, Vassili. 2011. Dymov, Osip. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Dymov_Osip (accessed on August 26, 2019.)

2

Osip Dymov, *Dramen un ertseilungen* (New York, 1943), 167.

3

Keneder odler. September 30, 1953.

4

Keneder odler. August 22, 1943.

5

YIVO Archives, New York, RG 469, folder 51.

6

Ibid.

7

Excerpts from the manuscript were used in the original Russian in the following published studies on Osip Dymov: Vassili Schedrin "Zhizn' i dnevnik Osipa Dymova," *Yehupets* 13 (2003): 113-136; Osip Dymov "Vspomnilos', zakhotos' rasskazat'..." (*Iz memuarov i epstoliarnogo naslediiia*) (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Center of Slavic Languages and Literatures, 2011).