



Young Jewish men engaged in a lively talmudic discussion in the Ramayles yeshiva in Vilna in the 1930s. Taken by A. Sapir, courtesy YIVO.

## My Quarrel with “My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner”

How I came to translate one of the greatest stories in all of Yiddish literature, a work that I believe uniquely illuminates the debate at the very center of Jewish modernity.

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In early January 1960, just after having arrived in New York to begin my graduate studies in Yiddish literature, I had the privilege of attending a lecture by the acclaimed Yiddish poet and novelist Chaim Grade (pronounced *Grahdeh*). Born in Vilna in 1910, educated in a yeshiva of the Musar movement in Bialystok, Grade had returned to Vilna in the early 1930s and launched a career as a secular poet. After World War II and the Holocaust, in which he lost his family, he moved to New York. There, in addition to poetry, he began also to write prose: over the years, a great deal of it. He died in New York in 1982.

At the time of his lecture, Grade had not yet made a name for himself in English. But in Yiddish circles he was highly distinguished not only as a writer but as a lecturer on subjects ranging from Maimonides to Rembrandt. For me, it was thus a thrill to be present at his lecture, whose subject was “The Culture of Eastern Europe,” and afterward to be invited (perhaps on the basis of my own family connections with Vilna) to join him and his Yiddish publisher for dinner at the Russian Tea Room.

In that opulent venue, after an excellent talk, with two dinner companions eager to please him, Grade was not pleased—with himself. The lecture, he grumbled, was not a success—*nisht-gelungen*—because, having misjudged the time allotment, he’d had to omit an entire section of his prepared

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remarks. For myself, having just read his long poem “Musarists” (1939) about the uniquely demanding yeshiva he had attended until 1930, I couldn’t help being struck by how much, in person, he resembled the main character in that poem.

Musar was a program of moral instruction intended to cultivate an ethical personality. Conceived in the mid-19th century as a corrective to the overemphasis on technical analysis that was said to be typical of Lithuanian yeshivas, Musar employed techniques of consciousness-raising to make students not just better scholars but morally better people. But in some yeshivas, like the one Grade attended, instruction had turned harshly ascetic.

The main character of his poem, Chaim Vilner, modeled on the author—boys were often called by where they came from—is publicly shamed and accused of vanity when the head of the yeshiva discovers a comb (!) in his breast pocket. In the yeshiva’s attempt to suppress their egos, it had instead ensured that, in words first appearing in the poem and repeated by Grade long afterward, “whoever has learned Musar can have no enjoyment in life.”

Given this assessment of his education, it is not surprising that Grade should have left the yeshiva in Bialystok to return to his native Vilna as a determinedly secular poet. This hardly implied a break with Jewish life at large. In the city’s Yiddish-speaking neighborhoods, secular and religiously observant Jews shared common courtyards and sat reading side by side in the famously overcrowded Strashun Library. Within a few years, at the same time that he was living with his pious mother in the back of a smithy and courting a rabbi’s daughter, Grade would emerge as a leading figure of the literary and artistic group *Yung Vilne*.

Then came the Soviet occupation of 1939, followed two years later by the Nazi invasion. With the Germans about to occupy Vilna, Grade fled to the Soviet Union, thinking it was safe to leave his wife and mother behind. He was, of course, mistaken, and all of his writing thereafter, much of it riddled with guilt over their fate, was about the world whose eradication he had survived.

In 1945, with the end of World War II, he was able to leave Russia. After a brief sojourn in Poland he went on to Paris and then in 1948 moved permanently to New York. There, in poetry, fiction, and memoirs, he drew continually and to lasting effect from his personal knowledge of Jewish Poland-Lithuania between the world wars.

On the evening I spent in his company, Grade spoke a little about himself, saying that he was never at peace: when he studied Talmud, he felt he should be reading Dostoevsky, and when reading Dostoevsky, he thought he should be studying Talmud. The following year, I began to see what a writer of genius could do with such a struggle. It happened when I discovered his 1952 Yiddish story, “My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseynr.”

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That story has become the best known of Grade's works—a classic of modern Jewish literature and modern Jewish thought. Although a somewhat abbreviated version of it appeared in English in the 1950s, and was subsequently adapted for stage and screen, this is the first time it is being made widely available in a complete English translation.

## I. Transposition

"*Mayn krig mit hersh rasseyner*" is situated in Paris where Grade briefly lived after the war. His first published work of prose, it appeared in the 1952 Rosh Hashanah issue of the New York Jewish monthly *Yidisher kemfer* ("The Jewish Militant").

But what kind of prose was this? A story? A memoir? The journal's editors called it an essay. Actually, however, Grade had created his own literary form to contain the wars raging inside him: a slice of fictionalized autobiography that harked back to his poem "Musarists," transposing its yeshiva arguments into a postwar debate between two survivors.

The story (I will argue for story) covers three time zones: 1937, 1939, and 1948. Of these, the third, 1948, takes up six of the work's eight chapters, over 85 percent of the whole.

We begin after the war in a crowded Paris subway car as the narrator, the "I" whom Grade intends us to identify with himself, suddenly catches sight of his former yeshiva classmate and intellectual sparring partner Hersh Rasseyner. He is incredulous. In the way that people in those days heard about one another, he had assumed that Hersh must have succumbed in a Nazi concentration camp—yet here they both are, surprisingly reunited.

As the two catch up on the circumstances that brought them back together, each expects that the other must have been, if not transformed, then deeply scarred and changed by what Yiddish calls the *khurbn*, the same term it uses for the destruction of the two ancient Temples in Jerusalem. Instead, their unfolding discussion through the rest of that long day reveals that each has actually become more persuaded of the rightness of his earlier path in life. Though Hersh may have become less abrasive in promoting Musar, and Chaim more patient in defending his freedom from it, the divide that had formed in school between the traditional and the secular Jew remains independent of the Nazi attempt to destroy all Jews alike. Hence, the quarrel picks up where it left off, and stays unresolved when they part again at the end.

The story made an immediate impression in Yiddish, and on English readers from the moment the literary critic Irving Howe and the poet Eliezer Greenberg decided to include it in their 1953 anthology, *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, and invited Milton Himmelfarb, their fellow intellectual, to translate the story in somewhat edited form. (At the end of this essay I trace the story's translation history up to its present version.)

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In a 1972 essay in the quarterly *Judaism*, the late literary scholar Edward Alexander would sum up the intellectual and emotional impact of the story on its English readers:

If we had to select a single work to stand as a paradigm of all Holocaust literature, a work of sufficient generalizing power to contain within itself not only most of the religious, philosophical, and artistic questions that the Holocaust raises but also the whole range of conflicting answers to them, we could not do better than to rely on Grade's story.

No wonder that, in keeping with this judgment, the work would also gain prominence in the emerging academic field of Holocaust studies—or that Rabbi Joseph Telushkin and the filmmaker David Brandes would similarly highlight the centrality of the Holocaust in *The Quarrel*, an adaptation of the story for their stage play and 1991 film. Relocating the meeting of these two survivors in Montreal (also a French city), they fleshed out more of the characters' background and their experiences during the war.

The significance of this particular reading of the story will become evident later on.

## II. Quarrel or Krig

Most of the commentary on this work has focused on the 1948 encounter in Paris. Without changing that focus, I will pay greater attention here to the first two chapters, which establish the context for all that follows.

To begin at the beginning: Himmelfarb rendered the conflict between the two former Musar classmates as a *quarrel* rather than a *battle*, *fight*, or *war*. But of the several Yiddish terms available to him, Grade used the stronger word *krig*—as in German *Blitzkrieg* or *Bürgerkrieg* (civil war). The antagonists who meet up in Paris in 1948 have been arguing ever since one of them, our narrator Chaim, left the yeshiva. While Chaim himself escaped into the Soviet Russian interior, Hersh had been through a Nazi concentration camp, and both lost their entire families. Yet nothing has changed their convictions. What makes this a story rather than an essay is that the continuity is taken for granted, without comment: their Jewish *krig* displaces the German war that came to put an end to both it and them.

Had Grade wished to dramatize a talmudic-style debate, he could have done that alone. His real subject begins earlier, and the opening chapters, set serially in 1937 and 1939, create the narrative arc that actually defies the category of “Holocaust literature” to which the story has often been consigned.

Here is the opening of the story:

In 1937, I returned to Bialystok, seven years after I had been a student in the Novaredok Yeshiva of the Musarists, a movement that gives special importance to ethical and ascetic elements in Judaism. When I came back, I found many of my old school friends still there. A few even came

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to the literary evening when I spoke. Others visited me secretly; they did not want the head of the yeshiva to know. I could see on their unshaven faces that their poverty had brought them suffering and that the fire of their youthful zeal had slowly burned itself out. They continued to observe all the laws and customs meticulously, but the weariness of their spiritual struggles lay upon them. For years they had tried to tear the desire for pleasure out of their hearts, and now realized they had lost the war with themselves. They had not overcome the evil urge.

Vilna was 138 miles northeast of Bialystok; both cities lay within the Lithuanian part of Poland, or *Liteh*. Though Grade turns only part of himself into the figure of Chaim Vilner, everything Chaim says about himself corresponds to the author's biography. "Rasseyner" and "Vilner," as the boys would have been known in the yeshiva, is how they figure throughout. We are given none of their family background that the play and the film would feel obliged to provide, since Grade's concentration on their argument is as single-minded as the yeshiva atmosphere from which Chaim has escaped.

In the 1930s, the Novaredok yeshiva was the largest in Poland, with a reputation for extremism, not only in a religious sense. The Musar movement had been founded in Russia. When the Bolsheviks took over in 1917, the head of its main branch, Rabbi Yosef Yoizl Hurwitz, instructed the students to flee to Poland to join the already existing yeshiva in Bialystok or establish new branches in other cities. Some of the boys were arrested, some killed, but the movement grew. The historian David Fishman points out that it modeled itself, consciously or not, on radical political movements of the time. Its militancy attracted young men burning with the same idealism that drove others to political revolutionism—and still others to Zionism, which plays no part in the story at all.

According to Immanuel Etkes, who wrote a book on the movement, Musar's innovation was to "transfer the focus of the problem of ethics from the theological to the psychological realm." Since knowledge alone could not guarantee obedience, students would have to be guided behaviorally to resist the temptations of modernity and ego-gratification. In the attempt to tear out evil by its roots, the Novaredok branch of Musar was hardly less radical than Communism, the latter intent on altering society, the former on transforming the individual.

Grade's first book of poetry, *Yo*—"Yes"—was published in 1936. By the following year, seven years after he had quit the yeshiva, his growing fame had gotten him invited back to Bialystok for a public reading. Describing in *Mayn krig* how some of his former classmates attended his lecture and others visited him surreptitiously, Vilner says:

I was mistaken in expecting that in Musarist style they would try to "tell me off" (*araynzogn*). They didn't berate me. Some were friendly, but avoided getting into an argument, and others sighed over me regretfully, as someone who had gone astray.



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Chaim obviously *expected* some reckoning. In the story, the anticipated rebuke finally arrives with a vengeance when he runs into Hersh Rasseynner, his former friend and one of the most zealous of the students.

Rasseynner's temperament and arguments derive from Musar, not from other branches of East European Orthodoxy, and there are no niceties in Musar behavior. "How are you?" is no idle inquiry, but an ethical probe. Rasseynner knows just where to strike, having undoubtedly learned about Vilner's poetry reading from those who went to hear him, and possessing a low opinion of the beliefs of the "worldly ones" who now dictate his former friend's attitudes:

Chaim Vilner, you will remain a cripple. You will be deformed for the rest of your life. You write godless verses and they pinch you on the cheek for it like a *heder* child. To add to the blasphemy, you come to spread your godlessness in the very city where you once studied. Now they're stuffing you with praise as they stuff a goose with grain, and spoil you like an only child! But later you'll see, when you've begun to go to the school of those pork-eaters, oh, won't they beat you! Oh, how they'll whip you! Which of you isn't hurt by criticism? Is there really one of you so self-confident that he doesn't go around begging for some authority's approval? Is any one of you prepared to publish his book anonymously? The main thing for you people is that your name should stand on the cover, at the very top! You have traded in our *menuhas hanefesh*, our tranquility of spirit, for what? For lusts that you will never satisfy, for doubts that you will never resolve no matter how much you suffer. Your writings will make no one better and will make you worse. I have heard that your booklet, your excuse for a book, is called *Yes*. But I tell you, "No!" Do you hear me, Chaim Vilner?— "No!"

We have to remind ourselves that Grade is the sole author of this work of fiction, and that both voices are his. He unleashes Chaim's antagonist to mock his "*bikhl*," his "*sefer pralnik*," belittling terms of ridicule for the book that had launched Grade as a Yiddish poet. If Musar was out to suppress the ego, this former Musarist knew that according to its standards, Vilner—his stand-in—was guilty indeed.

Yet, through Vilner, Grade also gives himself the better of this first exchange. Rasseynner turns to walk away, but "I had once been a Musarist, too, so I ran after him." In a passage twice as long as his accuser's, Vilner charges Rasseynner with fleeing from temptation less out of righteousness than out of fear, and out of disappointment that the world hasn't come running after *him*. He also denies having left the yeshiva to seek pleasure:

I was looking for a truth that you don't have. For that matter, I didn't run away, I simply returned to my street—to Vilna's Butchers' Street. [. . .] I love the porters with their backs broken from carrying their loads; the artisans sweating at their workbenches; the market-women who work their fingers to the bone to give a poor man a piece of bread. But you scold the hungry for being sinners and all you can tell them is to repent. You laugh at people who work and do business—because

you say they don't trust in God. But you live on what those exhausted women labor to bring you and in return you promise them . . . the world to come. Hersh Rasseynner, you have long since sold your share of the world to come to those poor women.

Having thus vanquished his yeshiva nemesis, Chaim is more certain than ever that in leaving the school and returning to Vilna he had made the right choice. "If, at the time, I said to myself, I didn't know why and where I was going, someone else thought it out for me, someone stronger—within myself. That stronger someone was my generation and my *sviveh*"—translated here as "environment" because there is no exact equivalent for the encompassing Jewish community that this term, absorbed from Hebrew, had come to represent.

Grade appears here to offer an approving picture of *Yung Vilne*, whose very name confirmed the literary group's attachment and devotion to its fellow Jews. He commends the socialist ideals that had replaced religious observance as the standard of right action. One of the poems he probably read that evening in Bialystok was "Mayn mameh," a portrait of his mother the fruit peddler so vivid that shoppers had come to check her out for themselves:

*Di bakn—ayngefaln un di oygn—halb nor ofn,  
Hert mayn mameh, vi es ziftsn ire kni:  
Cheeks sunken and eyes half-open  
My mother hears the sighing of her knees:  
This long winter morning  
We have scurried through the markets—  
Now let us rest here at the gate  
Till nightfall.*

The woman who cannot afford to let her body rest spends the entire day peddling to the passersby the produce that she has obtained from wholesalers. The poem describes her through the appurtenances of her trade: she sways like the pointer on the scale, her body humps like the rotting apples in her basket, and as every part of her body is desperate to shut down, the head sinks until,

Rocked by snow and sleet,  
my mother falls asleep on her feet:  
*In vint un shney farveyt  
Shloft mayn mameh shteyendikerheyt.*

Grade's mother was raising him to be a rabbi, but he here undertakes a presumably higher calling by showing her dignity in suffering. Material life as it is lived takes precedence over life as it should be lived. *Yung Vilne* was thoroughly leftist, and although Grade himself was never an affiliated Communist, this autobiographical part of the story intimates that he shared the movement's social mission.

### III. 1939

The second chapter, situated in Vilna in 1939, a scant two years later, recalls the tension verging on panic that came with the outbreak of war in Eastern Europe. Ignoring the Hitler-Stalin pact that partitioned the region between Germany and the Soviet Union, Grade simply calls it the war between Germany and Poland, and sets the scene as follows:

Western Ukraine and western Belarus were taken over by the Red Army. After they had been in Vilna a few weeks, the Russians announced that they were giving the city back to the Lithuanians. Refugees who did not want to remain under Soviet rule began to arrive among us. The Novaredok yeshiva came also from Bialystok to Vilna. Meanwhile, the Soviets remained. Hunger raged and every face was clouded with fear of the arrests carried out at night by NKVD agents, dispatched from Minsk. I was broken and despondent. Once, standing in a line for a ration of bread, I suddenly saw Hersh Rasseynner.

Only by noting how carefully Grade has constructed this paragraph—the passive form of territories “taken over by the Red Army,” the laconic “Meanwhile the Soviets remained,” and the curt reference to the NKVD agents “dispatched from Minsk,” do we realize how warily he was continuing to navigate the political landscape even as he was composing this passage in postwar New York.

In Vilna 1939, his caution would have been a matter of life or death, for you never knew which envious competitor might denounce you to the Soviet secret police, even from within your own leftist ranks, let alone among writers from an opposing camp. Because he was so close to the Communists, he had no fear about fleeing into the Soviet interior two years later when the Germans were about to enter the city. But Vilna under the Soviets would have been tricky for Grade, a former yeshiva student whose wife’s brother was a Zionist and whose father-in-law was a rabbi. Even in New York in the early 1950s it was still unwise to offend the leftists who wielded cultural influence and remained entrenched in Yiddish publishing. In writing this story, Grade walked a political tightrope without appearing to do so.

The changed political climate of 1939 has subtly shifted the story’s moral equilibrium. Rasseynner, now married, is more *balebatish*—more settled, as befits the head of a household. He is also more watchful, and Vilner knows why. “He doesn’t know whether he can trust me.” If Vilner were really an ideologue, he could turn Hersh over to the NKVD. Meanwhile, seeing how dejected Vilner appears, Rasseynner senses that he himself has the advantage. Motioning toward the bridge where some Red Army soldiers are guarding their tanks, he says, quietly:

“Well, Chaim, are you satisfied now? Is this what you had in mind?”

I tried to smile and answered just as quietly, “*Hersh, because you consider me treyf doesn’t mean that they consider me kosher.*”



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*But from the hard, serious expression on his face I could see that my quip had missed its mark. I moved in a little closer and said: “Hersh, I bear no more responsibility for all that than you do for me.”*

He shook himself and pronounced a few sharp, cutting words, seeming to forget his fear: “You’re wrong, Chaim. I do bear responsibility for you.”

He took a few steps back and motioned with his eyes to the Red Army soldiers, as though to say, “And you for them.”

Grade may have been a novice at fiction when he wrote this story, but this tightly compressed segment shows how masterfully he already controlled a dense and complicated narrative. As compared with how freely, in the previous chapter, the Jews under Polish rule argue in the middle of the street, the menacing Soviet presence now turns one Jew against another, fearful of betrayal and selective reprisal. Rasseynner speaks his mind only once he is sure that Vilner is still reliably Jewish, and their surreptitious exchange conveys the precariousness they both feel. For Chaim’s part, the *sviveh* to which he so proudly pledged his allegiance is now under commandeered Soviet control, and he wonders to what extent he may be implicated in this evil.

## IV. Percentages of Words

Let me pause here, drawing on personal experience to clarify how my present translation differs from the excellent earlier one by Milton Himmelfarb. In the above conversation, the italicized passages were omitted by Himmelfarb. Elsewhere, he (or his editors) felt free to *add* words, usually so as to explicate terms or concepts likely to be unfamiliar to English readers; an educative example occurs in the story’s very first sentence, where the phrase identifying Musar as “a movement that gives special importance to ethical and ascetic elements in Judaism” is Himmelfarb’s, not Grade’s.

Such editorial decisions take me back to my own first job in Yiddish literature, which happened to be an assignment to translate Chaim Grade’s novella *The Well*. When I accepted the commission, I thought the Vilna Yiddish of my parents (Mother a native of the city, Father a long-time resident) would be adequate to the task, but quickly realized that the percentage of sanctified Hebrew-Aramaic (*loshn koydesh*) words in Grade’s prose was higher than in any Yiddish writer I had previously read. I sought help where I could, including from local former yeshiva students, but reference books were scarce. In fact, when I later looked up Musar in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, the quoted description was from—Chaim Grade.

In search of guidance, I met with the writer Maurice Samuel: a master at interpreting Jewish and Anglo-American societies to each other, a forceful spokesman for Zionism, and a brilliant public intellectual. Samuel was also the premier translator of Yiddish. Rather than going over any single

passage of my work, he took up the term *poresh* that I had with difficulty translated as “synagogue recluse.” (Uriel Weinreich’s Yiddish-English dictionary renders *poresh* as “one who devotes himself exclusively to the study of the sacred books.”) Samuel objected that the English reader should never feel he was reading a translation; since the entire concept of the *poresh* was alien, I ought to introduce his function in my own words, adding a whole paragraph if necessary. Omissions were likewise preferable to abstruse information, and there should be no footnotes or glossary.

Indeed, following that approach, Samuel had interwoven his own commentaries into his translation of stories by Y.L. Peretz (*Prince of the Ghetto*) and Sholem Aleichem (*The World of Sholem Aleichem*), as though he were their co-author. What Himmelfarb does in explaining Musar as “a movement that gives special importance to ethical and ascetic elements in Judaism,” and in omitting passages like the italicized one above, Samuel wanted me to do throughout.

Despite my enormous respect for my host, I was not about to take this advice, which represented an earlier and more presumptuous (some might say, creative) concept of translation. Given that search engines are now handier and more ample than any glossary I could provide, I have omitted one and made this translation as faithful as possible to Grade’s text.

Here is one reason: the sheer intimacy of Vilner’s retort that Himmelfarb and his editors considered too internal for the English reader—“*Hersh, vos far aykh iz treyf, iz nokh far zey nit kosher*”—is the very point. It conveys the special quality of Vilna speech, steeped in talmudic turns of phrase—a feature of the East European Jewish culture that Grade had expounded in his lecture. Vilna idiom was studded with examples of chiasmus, antimetabole, and an entire rhetorical lexicon of reversals, including this one that says your enemies do not necessarily consider me their friend: *you* may think I have gone over to their side, but they distrust us both equally.

Vilner wants his insider’s wit to charm and mollify Rasseynner, but Rasseynner declines the bait, instead holding Vilner to account for the consequence of his ideas. In replying that he *does* feel responsible for Chaim, Hersh means—and Chaim perfectly understands him to mean—that the Jewish way of life is there to *prevent* one from becoming an accessory to evil. Once Chaim quit that way of life, he became culpable for wherever quitting it led. The particular intricacy of their speech transmits what makes the two of them indispensable to each other: a crucial feature that only a translation capturing this intricacy can hope to convey.

Returning now to the plot, if the first chapter may have led us to think that Chaim speaks *for* the author, representing Grade’s point of view, the second chapter shows him writing also in expiation: he allows Rasseynner to condemn Chaim’s youthful flirtation with Communism, however idealistic it may have seemed at the time. So, too, in the rest of the story we do well to keep in mind that Grade was at least as intent on arguing Rasseynner’s position as he was on presenting what we may take to be his

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own. The pair's intimate verbal shorthand is just one of the ways the story restores the presence of a self-sustaining Jewish culture in Europe—a culture, and a sensibility, that stood independently of their surroundings then and have continued to do so for many Jews today.

## V. The Debate Begins Anew

The final shift of scene in the third chapter, the technique by which an author moves his readers from one sphere to another, I consider one of the most stunning in Jewish literature:

Nine more years passed, years of war and destruction, during which I wandered across Russia, Poland, and Western Europe. In 1948, on a summer afternoon, I was riding in the Paris Métro. . . .

Grade had earlier pivoted from 1937 to 1939 with the simple declaration “Two years passed.” By just as casually bridging the nine years that followed, the years of the *khurbn*, the great destruction of the European Jews, he refuses to accord them a decisive role in Jewish history or Jewish thought.

The Holocaust was a German initiative. The Nazi party planned and executed the Final Solution that reduced the Jews by a third of their number and all but terminated the two millennia of Jewish life in Europe. It cost this story's two former yeshiva classmates their families, their wives and parents, their friends and native communities: they could never recover any of what they had lost. But what did it really have to do with them and their *krig*? Grade's audacious response is—almost nothing. “Nine more years passed” confirms that the same issues facing Jews before the war remained in place after it, essentially unchanged by all that was destroyed.

As for Chaim Vilner's interlocutor/antagonist, Grade did not choose him at random. One longstanding assumption by translators, critics, and scholars was that the figure of Hersh Rasseynner had been based on a real person; thanks to the research of Yehudah DovBer Zirkind, the identity of that person has now been confirmed.

He was Gershon Liebman, whom Grade in an early draft of the story called by his yeshiva name Kovler. Everything the fictional Rasseynner says about himself corresponds to what is known about the real Kovler-Liebman: that he and Grade were in the Novaredok yeshiva in Bialystok; that, in the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen, he had gathered around him a circle of students whom he taught and sustained; and that, having survived, he opened probably the first postwar yeshiva in Germany and founded others in France and Morocco. In further confirmation of Liebman as the model for Rasseynner, he was known to have told his students about his encounter with Grade in Paris, when he tried to win him back to religious observance.

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But the dialogue and its arrangement are of course wholly Grade's, and the antagonist is only as strong as Grade makes him.

Once the stage is set for Paris 1948, the debate begins anew, free of the yeshiva and, *mutatis mutandis*, of the Soviet threat. At one point, Chaim-as-narrator records being embarrassed by his friend's volubility (notably, Hersh has no such qualms), but they can otherwise converse for as long as and however they like, this being their reward for having survived in Europe.

Hersh told me briefly that he had been in a camp in Latvia. Now he was in Germany, at the head of a yeshiva in Salzheim.

"The head of a yeshiva in Germany? And who are your students, Reb Hersh?"

"Do you think," he smiled, "that the Holy One has become an orphan? There are still boys, praised be the Almighty, who are studying Torah."

Chaim is so happy to have met his old friend that he does not immediately protest Hersh's crediting the blessings of faith for his ability to gather a circle of students around him even in the camp (as the real-life model for him did). But Rasseynner cannot leave it at that. As he had once taunted Vilner with responsibility for the Soviet occupiers, so he now mocks his ex-friend's cultural affinity with the couples publicly kissing in their Paris subway car.

"Where are you going? Together with them perhaps?" His eyes laughed at the young couples. "Will you get off where they do? And maybe you still believe in this cruel world?"

To which Vilner replies:

"And you, Reb Hersh, do you still believe in God's particular providence for the Jews? You say that the Holy One has not been orphaned. But we have become orphans. A miracle happened to you, Reb Hersh, and you were saved. But how about the rest? Can you still believe?"

It was Vilner's final question—how can one go on believing?—that dominated much theological discussion after the war. The enormity of Nazi evil seemed incompatible with any notion of an Almighty, Ruler of the Universe, who had contracted with the Jews at Sinai to carry His law in return for His special providential care. Two powerful memoirists, Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi, both dramatized how God had failed them at Auschwitz, the former when witnessing the public hanging of a mere boy, the latter at the sight of a Jew by the name of Kuhn praying after a *Selektion* procedure that had spared him but condemned others to execution. "If I were God," writes Levi, I would have spat on Kuhn's prayer."

Chaim makes the same point. "A miracle happened to you, and you were saved? But how about the rest?" In thanking God for His personal providence, was Hersh not inexcusably condoning the murder of all

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the others? Is it moral to continue believing in a God who oversees this measure of evil? This indictment seems harsher than Job's by many millions. To it, Chaim will later add the charge of "cloistered virtue" that Satan mounts against Adam in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, denying the do-gooder any moral superiority for simply avoiding a temptation he fears he would be unable to resist.

As the two men trade arguments in successive chapters of the work's final section, secular Chaim appears at first to have the upper hand. The statues of great benefactors of civilization surrounding them in the Hôtel de Ville, where they do most of their talking, help him make the case for the enlightenment that culture and science have brought to the world. "The great writer broadens our understanding and stirs our pity for our fellow man." Expansion of knowledge is an end in itself, and science has improved people's lives.

Yet, gradually, Hersh proves so much the stronger that we suspect Grade of having dramatized this encounter precisely in order to arrange the open expression of a level of venom that he in his own voice, as a "liberal" author, could not otherwise release. "If you make excuses for the man who exults in his wickedness," Rasseynner charges, "then as far as I'm concerned all your scribbling is unclean and unfit: *muktseh makhmes miyus*—forbidden because disgusting." Far from admiring the humanistic pretensions of fine literature, Hersh thinks its expansion of our sympathies for evil is itself evil. "Condemn the glutton and drunkard!" Thus does Grade remind his literary stand-in that Judaism's very purpose is to prevent this form of idolatry.

Rasseynner's attack on European civilization is the most sustained such condemnation I know of in all of Jewish literature. Hersh makes it clear that in denouncing his former schoolmate for having crossed over into the secular camp, he is actually indicting not him alone but all that Western enlightenment had wrought. If the continuity and endurance of their argument form the spine of this story, its power lies in Chaim's observation that his friend is "unburdening himself of anger" that he had for too long choked off.

This is the key to Grade's state of mind when writing the story. Grade had been a poet before the war, an acclaimed poet, but when he needed a vehicle for his rage, he gave his inner Rasseynner free rein, imbuing him with all the intelligence, talmudic debating skills, and artistic talent at his command.

In fact, the force of Rasseynner's steadfast belief in Musar lies in what has just happened in Europe. Disdaining the high ideals propagated by those whose statues literally stand above them in the heart of Paris, the Musarist hammers home the difference between great ideas and good deeds. Take, he suggests, the Athenian philosophers in their School of Reason:

Did they really live as they taught, or did their system remain only a system? You must understand once and for all that when his reason is calm and pure, a man does not know how he will act when his dark



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desire overtakes him. A man is dazzled by his own wisdom and proud of his knowledge, but as soon as a little desire stirs in him, he forgets all his learning. His senses are stronger than his reason. Reason is like a trained dog who follows sedately in his master's footsteps—until he sees a bitch.

By contrast, a man should choose between good and evil only as the Law chooses for him. Since Judaism wishes him to be happy, the habits cultivated by following the Law will guard against temptation when it strikes.

The sophistication and flow of Rasseynner's speeches are almost too much. How did this yeshiva boy get to sound like . . . Chaim Grade? Rasseynner explains that during his confinement he was able to read up on Western sources. Moreover, he had silently continued challenging Vilner during all of his years in the ghetto and later in the camps:

That's why you mustn't be surprised if I talk to you as fluently as though I were reciting the daily prayers. Believe me, I have had so many imaginary debates with you that I know my arguments as well as the first prayer of the morning.

And this allows the author, through Hersh, to hold nothing back:

For ages [the wise men] debated, they talked and they wrote: does duty to nation and family come first, or does the freedom of the individual come before his obligations to parents, wife, and children—or even to himself? They deliberated and concluded: there are no bonds that a nation cannot break; that truth and reason are like the sun, which must rise every day. Just try to cover up the sun with shovelfuls of dirt. So there came in the West a booted ruler with a little mustache, and in the East a booted ruler with a big mustache, and both of them together kicked the wise man to the ground and he sank into the mud.

If, to the rational materialist, the Holocaust proved the worthless incapacities of Jewish civilization, Hersh proves the worthlessness of all that tried to bring Judaism down: you dare to ask how I can go on believing in God; how can you go on trusting in *man*?

## **VI. Rasseynner's Indictment of Secular Modernity**

The most invasive change made to Grade's story in Himmelfarb's translation is the omission of most of chapter six, in which Rasseynner's student Yehoshua, whom he had rescued in the camps, comes looking for his teacher. The boy rudely contrasts the self-sacrifice shown by his *rebbe* with the callowness he attributes to Vilner in saving his own skin. This mean-spirited use of the Holocaust to condemn secular Jews drives Vilner into a rage. "Is this what you teach? Hate and scorn for the whole world?"

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Rasseyner, who had once been no less abrasive than his disciple, apologizes for Yehoshua's intemperance but then poses a question: if a meteor were about to destroy the world, and we had no longer to live, would we make peace with "the German"? Vilner agrees that they would *not*. By the same token, Hersh asserts, there can be no peace with the Enlightenment that was epitomized in the German. On this, too, both agree: no forgiveness.

Why did Himmelfarb cancel this entire section? Why did Grade bring the boy Yehoshua into the story? Let's again pause to consider how the original resists editorial excisions.

From the beginnings of modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature, writers raged against the failings of their fellow Jews. At the same time, the actual, self-imposed censorship of a politically dependent minority constrained them from assailing the Jews' Gentile oppressors.

In Rasseyner, Grade created a character who could discharge all of his own pent-up rage with no liberal inhibitions. Simultaneously, on the positive side, he created in the same character a person who could speak out with the assurance of a man of faith, who at once carries the yoke of the Torah's commandments and looks down on those who want to lighten the load.

"Anyone who thinks he can hold on to basic principles and give up what he considers secondary," says Hersh, "is like a man who chops down the trunk of a tree and expects the roots not to rot." Jewish chosenness entails the duty to conform to a holy Torah, a duty that is not incumbent on other nations. As for Jews "who have discarded Jewish holiness," they "are no more special than the others . . . and less special than those Gentiles who obey the Noahide laws." Unafraid to stare "the German" in the face, Hersh is equally unafraid to go out into the world, there to build his observant communities.

This postwar Hersh speaks with such assurance that Grade may have felt he needed the boy Yehoshua's extreme insensitivity to remind him of why he had left the yeshiva in the first place. Even as he accorded his old nemesis every rhetorical advantage, Grade may have been afraid to let him off *too* easily.

For their part, Himmelfarb and the English editors might well have found the boy's presence unnecessarily intramural—an unwelcome intrusion into the story's otherwise balanced polemic. They may also have thought (in 1952) that "ultra-Orthodox" Jews were too marginal to be taken seriously.

How wrong they were about both—which makes the present, fully restored original text all the more relevant to today's readers than the edited version. Contemporary *haredi* society, in both America and Israel, includes any number of young men like Yehoshua whom secular Jews continue to find frighteningly offensive. This intervention of the ideal world by the real world is the way Jewish life actually works.

Whatever the editors' intentions in removing him, Yehoshua interrupts the story's indictment of secular modernity, which then continues in Hersh's final blistering attack on the *Jewish* Enlightenment. He begins with the poet Yehudah Leib Gordon who in 1863 issued this call for internal reform:

Wake my people! Sleep no more!  
Night is over. The sun shines.  
Open wide your eyes, explore  
New surroundings and new times!

Rasseynner may or may not have actually read Gordon's poem (here in Hillel Halkin's **translation**), but he knows its famous conclusion: "Be a Jew at home and a man in public." This distinction—between how Jews may function among themselves and how they are expected to behave as citizens—Hersh likens to the dog who wants to attend two weddings and, scurrying back and forth, misses both. No genuine Jew would accept the notion of a divided identity. He scorns the Jews who dived into the world of Gentiles and landed on their axes, the Jew "who would talk in the most elevated rhetoric about Enlightenment; but what he really had in mind was to become a druggist."

Standing there in Paris, the cradle of the French Revolution and its attendant horrors, Hersh offers in his person and calling the surviving proof that Torah civilizes the human being; Western civilization does not. If, before the war, he had accepted this on faith, now, having experienced the core of evil, he is all the readier to live by an even more stringent set of binding laws.

## VII. The Asymmetry of the Quarrel

"I've been listening to you and I sometimes had the feeling that I was listening to myself." As their lengthy conversation draws to a close, Chaim Vilner lets us know how much of himself the author has invested in both of his speakers.

For his part, Vilner counterattacks Hersh's closing argument with reminders that there were both righteous Gentiles who manifested goodness and non-practicing Jews who performed acts of great heroism; Hersh has no monopoly on human decency. Censuring the narrow, divisive, and alienating features of Hersh's Orthodoxy, he blames him for shutting his fellow Jews out of his closed circle. In other words, Chaim levels against his interlocutor many of the accusations already voiced by secular modern Jewish writers against the binding force of Jewish law. His prosecution is also a justification of himself as a Jew.

When all is said and done, however, the difference is that, in order to raise new generations of Jews, Hersh Rasseynner has no need of Chaim Vilner, whereas Chaim Vilner knows that he on his own cannot keep Judaism alive. His brand of Jewishness owes everything to the centuries that went into its making, while contributing nothing sustainable to the

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Jewish future. Though the story represents the modern Jewish struggle as in danger of slipping into one of the two extremes, Vilner's own future depends on Rasseynner's tenacity. With Vilna gone and no *sviveh* to replace it, the author, Grade, still retains the tools to preserve its memory, but only Hersh will perpetuate any part of their formative culture. Thus, Vilner concludes with a plea:

Our paths are different, both in spirit and in practice. The storm that has torn us up from our root, scatters us, the remnant, to all the corners of the earth. Who knows when our paths will ever cross again? May we both have the merit of meeting again and seeing where we stand. And may I be as Jewish then as I am today. Reb Hersh, let's embrace each other. . . .

The Vilna Jew who cast his lot with literature rather than tradition was dependent on a thinning secular Yiddish audience. That audience still existed when I attended Grade's lecture in 1960, but it was already aging without replacement. It is therefore touching that, today, *haredi* youngsters—the offspring of “Yehoshua”—are discovering Grade on the Internet, which offers them online access to his books in Yiddish. One of his current translators is a member of the Satmar community.

Grade would go on from this work to develop a cast of fictional characters in novels and short stories built around the traditional Jewish dichotomy between the *meykil* and the *maḥmir*, the lenient and severe interpreters of religious law, the liberal and conservative personalities that are (partially) represented in talmudic discourse by the schools of Hillel and Shammai. The pitched battles between the characters in this work and in others by Grade stand in sharp contrast to the dialogues of Plato, where the interlocutors are but a foil for the wisdom of Socrates. The wisest Jews know they have no monopoly over wisdom. As much as its content, the *form* of this standing quarrel distinguishes Jewish civilization from that of Europe.

Grade was bound to complicate his characters because he himself was temperamentally a *maḥmir* with the mental habits of a “Lithuanian” Jewish skeptic, writing in a modern genre for a liberal readership. “My Quarrel” often tends conservative, but, unlike Dostoevsky, Grade does not give that side the clear upper hand. How could he? He had demonstratively shut the door on the yeshiva without attaching himself to any other form of Jewish observance, he had moved to America without really embracing the country, and he had married a woman who disliked Judaism and disliked the Jew in him.

All of that rich information, and much more, awaits a biographer. This story merely hints at how Grade made literature out of the quarrel with himself, and why it must end, as it does, with Vilner seeking conciliation.

Interestingly enough, just as Chaim Vilner asks Hersh to embrace him at the end of the story, Grade's work attracted American advocates who possessed his own high level and wide range of Jewish knowledge. Rabbi Louis Finkelstein of the Jewish Theological Seminary was excited to recognize

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some of his own rabbinic teachers among Grade's characters, and singled out this story in particular for "translating the abstract colloquy of East European intellectualism into vivid and living discourse." Professor Isadore Twersky of Harvard University would invite Grade to teach his advanced students in Jewish history, an experience they treasured. Though Grade never attained the critical or commercial success of his Nobel Prize-winning contemporary Isaac Bashevis Singer, his literary reputation is no less assured, especially among discriminating readers.

The argument of this story will also live on. Had Grade settled in Jerusalem rather than New York, he could have written its sequel with the counterparts of Chaim and Hersh continuing their debate and trading insults in Hebrew. The former would claim that his service to society or in the army contributed more to their country than Hersh's soldiering for the Lord; the latter would invoke the centuries of exegetical transmission that honed the Jewish mind and body politic and ask what the Jewish people would become without it. The Jerusalem of Israel is a fair substitute for Vilna, the "Jerusalem of Lithuania," and the tensions released by modernity are not likely to subside.

But that imagined update also recalls the story's actual context, which is the third party to this intramural stand-off. Two Jews talking is a preferred form of Yiddish literature, making this internal debate equally a judgment on Europe, a judgment made all the more severe because one of the two still tries to defend European civilization. In form and substance, Grade's fearless "Quarrel" has survived the attempts to silence that internal dialogue. Vilner, initially confident in saying Yes to the world, is pushed on the defensive by evils he could never have imagined. In this way the two men's quarrel becomes itself a silent act of war, a subdued victory lap on the bloodstained battlefield of Europe.

## Afterword

"*Mayn krig mit hersh rasseyner*" was originally published in the Yiddish monthly *Yidisher kemfer*, vol. 32, no. 923, September 28, 1951.

Milton Himmelfarb's translation of the story appeared in the November 1953 *Commentary*. Himmelfarb may have arranged for the publication in the magazine slightly before its appearance in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, edited by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (Viking, 1953).

In February 1982, Herbert H. Paper, a professor of linguistics at the Hebrew Union-College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, self-published a mimeographed version of the story of his own. In that version, working off the Himmelfarb translation, Paper reintroduced the passages and sections that had been removed. His version is also more literal. In a preface, he explained his reasons for wanting to undertake the labor of producing the story in full, "with nothing left out," and added: "My friend, Milton Himmelfarb, has given me permission to use any parts of his translation freely in my own version. And I have done so."



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At first, I had planned simply to tweak this second translation, and just as Paper earlier had received permission from Himmelfarb to use the latter's version as a baseline, so I received permission from Paper's family to proceed. Like him, I, too, have incorporated some of the Himmelfarb text—a text I've several times taught in the classroom. But as I went along, I soon realized that I could rely wholly on neither the first nor the second version. And so I've done my own, while selectively importing the good formulations of my predecessors. I can hardly guarantee that Grade himself, a fierce critic, would have been pleased with the result, but my hope is that the English reader may be less exacting. **M**