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Solomon Mikhoels in memoirs: Aaron Steinberg – Khaim Vovsi

Summary: The article considers the phenomenon of Solomon Mikhoels (Solomon Vovsi, 1890–1948), the renowned Jewish actor and director. This study is based on a comparative analysis of two memoir ego-documents: the memoirs of his twin brother, Khaim Vovsi and those of the philosopher – Aaron Steinberg. The analysis employs a biographical and cultural-historical approach tailored to the specific characteristics of ego-documents, as well as the structural-semiotic analysis. The two memoir texts under study uncover unique facts of Solomon Mikhoels' biography and personality, particularly related to his childhood and adolescence. They highlight factors that shaped his creativity, perception of theatre, and contributions to the Jewish theatrical tradition. Although both texts focus on the same biographic period, they discuss entirely different facts; this testifies to the subjectivity of selection and the work of memory mechanism. The comparative approach allows to consider the specific structure of ego-documents, which combine personal memories and elements of the "inclusion" of collective memory.

Keywords: biographical, comparative analysis, Jewish; memory, theatre

SOLOMON MICHOELS WE WSPOMNIENIACH: AARON STEINBERG – CHAIM WOWSI

Streszczenie: Artykuł analizuje fenomen Solomona Michoelsa (Solomona Wowsi, 1890–1948), wybitnego żydowskiego aktora i reżysera. Badanie opiera się na analizie porównawczej dwóch wspomnieniowych ego-dokumentów: wspomnień jego brata bliźniaka, Chaima Wowsi oraz wspomnień filozofa – Aarona Steinberga. W analizie zastosowano podejście biograficzne i kulturowo-historyczne, dostosowane do specyfiki ego-dokumentów, a także analizę strukturalno-semiotyczną. Badane dwa teksty wspomnieniowe ujawniają unikalne fakty z biografii i osobowości Solomona Michoelsa, szczególnie dotyczące jego dzieciństwa i młodości. Podkreślają czynniki, które ukształtowały jego kreatywność, postrzeganie teatru, a także wkład w żydowską tradycję teatralną. Choć oba teksty koncentrują się na tym samym okresie biograficznym, omawiają całkowicie odmienne fakty; świadczą to o subiektywności selekcji i pracy mechanizmu pamięci. Podejście porównawcze pozwala uwzględnić specyficzną strukturę ego-dokumentów, które łączą osobiste wspomnienia i elementy „włączenia” pamięci zbiorowej.

Słowa kluczowe: biografia, analiza porównawcza, żydowski, pamięć, teatr

СОЛОМОН МИХОЭЛС В ВОСПОМИНАНИЯХ: АРОН ШТЕЙНБЕРГ – ХАЙМ ВОВСИ

Резюме: Статья посвящена изучению феномена известного еврейского актера и режиссера Соломона Михоэlsa (Соломона Вовси, 1890–1948). В основе исследования компаративный анализ двух мемуарных эго-документов: воспоминаний брата-близнеца Хайма Вовси и воспоминаний философа Аарона Штейнберга. Исследование опирается на биографический и историко-культурный метод с учетом специфики эго-литературы и на структурно-семиотический анализ. Материалы двух мемуарных текстов раскрывают уникальные факты биографии и личности Соломона Михоэlsa, связанные с его детским и юношеским периодом, раскрывают аспекты, повлиявшие на его творчество,

восприятие театра, и еврейской театральной традиции. Два мемуарных текста обращены к одному биографическому периоду, но освящают совершенно разные факты, что является свидетельством субъективного отбора и действием механизма памяти. Компаративистский подход позволяет говорить о специфической структуре эго-документов, в которых сочетается личные воспоминания и элементы «включения» коллективной памяти.

Ключевые слова: биографический, компаративный анализ, еврейский, память, театр

1. Introduction

Memoirs represent a distinct form of ego-documents. While some scholars categorize them as documentary materials, others highlight the elements of artistic modelling present in such texts. In this context, memoirs appear to be the most interesting form of ego-documents. This is determined by personalization and subjectivization since they are directly related to the biographical facts of the individual being described. The analysis of memoirs, on the one hand, aligns with the classical principles of the biographical method; on the other hand, there is a certain author behind the memories, i.e. each text has its authorship, which makes it not only a record of facts, but also a reflection of personal interpretation and evaluation.

The present article considers two memoir texts devoted to the childhood of the renowned Jewish actor and stage director Solomon Mikhoels¹: the memoir by his twin brother, Khaim Vovsi, written in the 1960s in Russian and the memories of the philosopher, Aaron Steinberg, written in 1962 in Yiddish. The manuscript of Khaim Vovsi's memoirs, donated by Miron Vovsi, is kept in the archives of Daugavpils Local History Museum, and has not been published. Aaron Steinberg's memories are included in the monograph devoted to his work "Philosopher's Prose", compiled and annotated by Nelli Portnova².

From the point of view of comparative studies³, these texts are of interest due to their fundamentally different styles and, in terms of content, their reflection of entirely different facts from the same period of S. Mikhoels' life. They mention different teachers (in A. Steinberg's memoirs, the image of Isaiah Hertz, author of a Jewish grammar textbook, is reminiscent of Biblical figures; in Khaim Vovsi's memoirs, there is a humorous portrayal of an elderly teacher Citron, who taught basic skills and the Russian

¹ Э. Васильева, *Марк Шагал и Соломон Михоэлс: к вопросу о национальной типологии*, «Бюллетень Музея Марка Шагала 2010, vol. 18, pp. 32-35.

² А. Штейнберг, *Проза философа*, Munchen: ImWerden Verlag, 2014, pp. 171-184.

³ D. A. Wagner, S. G. Paris, *Problems and Prospects in Comparative Studies of Memory*, "Human Development", vol. 24, 1981, pp. 412-424.

language), different friends, and even different theatrical performances that later influenced Mikhoels' development as an actor (Khaim Vovsi provides a detailed account of "Sins of Youth", while Steinberg describes "The Hasmoneans"). The facts described in these memoirs have served as material for biographical works on Mikhoels (a book by Matvey Geiser, "Mikhoels"⁴, and "My father, Solomon Mikhoels. Memories of the life and death" by Natalia Mikhoels⁵). This study analyses these memoirs to explore the unique attempts to understand the phenomenon of S. Mikhoels – both as a public figure and as an actor – through the lens of his childhood.

2.

The memoir of Steinberg recounts only a few episodes from the life of Mikhoels, which can be roughly divided into two groups corresponding to two distinct periods of acquaintance between Mikhoels and Steinberg: childhood years spent in Dvinsk and their meeting in London during World War II in November 1943 (the meeting was connected with Mikhoels' activities in the anti-fascist committee). These two groups of events correspond to two time periods, and Steinberg emphasizes their temporal distance: "Exactly sixty years ago, on the banks of the Dvina, I met the twin brothers of the Reb Mikhail Vovsi – Khaim and Shlomo"⁶ (a span of sixty years) and "forty years later, I met with Shloymke in London" (a span of forty years). In each of these stages, A. Steinberg highlights events that he had witnessed himself, selecting those events that he considered most significant. For understandable reasons, these memories lack references to the theatrical career of Mikhoels as an actor. All the mentioned facts are accompanied by acknowledgements of Mikhoels' genius artistic legacy. However, the two main roles highlighted are not connected to the history of the State Jewish Theatre (GOSET= Gosudarstvennyi Evreiskii Teatr): the role of Judah Maccabee, performed in a school play during his childhood, and the role of the Soviet envoy to London. These are these two roles that form the core framework of Mikhoels' artistic mastery. In each period of their meetings, Steinberg singles out two defining events. From their childhood years, this is the participation in the creation of the handwritten magazine "Shushana" and the staging of an amateur performance based on

⁴ М. Гейзер, *Михоэлс*, Москва: Molodaja gvardija, 2004.

⁵ Н. Вовси-Михоэлс, *Мой отец Соломон Михоэлс, Воспоминания о жизни и гибели*, Tel-Aviv, 1984.

⁶ А. Штейнберг, *Проза философа*, Munchen: ImWerden Verlag, 2014, p. 171.

a play written by Aaron Steinberg's elder brother, Isaac, in which Mikhoels played the lead role. From their meeting in London, two public speeches are singled out: one at the British section of the Jewish World Congress and the other at the Association of Jewish Journalists and Writers.

Both memoirs are united by a common thematic thread – the theme of twin brothers. It is the sign of Gemini (both astrological and later in the text imbued with additional meanings), under which Mikhoels was born, that becomes a kind of dominant theme. This allows Steinberg to speak about the essence of the Mikhoels phenomenon. The presence of a brother is what connects the author of the memoirs with the protagonist. Steinberg mentions the name of his own brother, Itzhak Nachman, immediately after introducing the Vovsi brothers. In the first, "Dvinsk" part of the memoirs, Steinberg's elder brother is consistently mentioned with an emphasis on his leading role: "My brother, who had been writing "dramas" since childhood, had also heard some praise from teachers and was deeply interested in the poet called Vovsi". It was Itzhak Steinberg who was the author of the very drama "Hasmoneans", in which Mikhoels made his debut. He also initiated the establishment of the society "Revival of Our Language" (also referred to in other sources as the "Society of Hebrew Language Lovers"), which published the magazine "Shushana". However, despite the parallel – two pairs of brothers – the pair of Vovsi twins is significantly different from the pair of Steinberg brothers: this pair (the twins) is indivisible, Khaim and Shlomke are always together, and they represent a certain phenomenon of Dvinsk:

I imagined that real twins should be inseparable, as if they were two in one person; or, if they are truly a pair rather than one, then the two should always be quarrelling, like Esau and Jacob. Only then did it become clear that we had an extraordinary pair of brothers in Dvinsk. And I immediately realized that, though I didn't know who they were or what they were like, I had often seen them on the street and had often looked at them in surprise. Undoubtedly, those must have been them – those very same twin students of Gordon, Shlomo and Khaim Vovsi! Why had they always seemed like a miracle to me? It's simple! In all of Dvinsk, there were no two other young men, who were always seen together, and never one without the other. In addition, they had a peculiar way of walking together: one always a step ahead of the other. The one walking in front was not just walking, he seemed to be jumping, while the one behind, walking at a slower pace, seemed to show him the way back. They looked very similar, as any brothers would, but the one who was hastier had his lower lip protruded strongly – as if he were about to stick his tongue out at someone. The slower one, on the other hand, had very noticeable eyebrows, as if he were angry with his younger mocker-brother ... It seemed that the "younger" brother, among other things, was a bit shorter and broader in the shoulders ⁷.

⁷ Ibid. 172.

Steinberg constructs his description according to the principle of ambivalence. The similarity stated in the very beginning turns out to be relative (as is typical of brothers), and the contrasts between them are brought to the forefront. The brothers are clearly not alike, and this is the highlight – they differ in appearance, they differ in character, and moreover, their pair-duet breaks any possible logic: they do not quarrel, and the one who is “younger”, Shlomke, turns out to be the leader in the pair. It is Shlomke who truly leads Khaim.

In Khaim Vovsi's memoirs, special attention is given to the category of memory, and the absoluteness of memory is being questioned. A rare structure for this genre emerges in K. Vovsi's text: an emphasis on the fragility of memories as they are just a lead. Actually, the memoirs begin with a statement of the vulnerability of the memories: “The first, earliest years of our childhood have almost completely disappeared from my memory”. Later, he writes: “I have very faint impressions of these performances in my memory”. A lot “pops up” in the memories (“I recall a student named Falke”), thereby confirming the conditional nature of the selection of material. The structure of the text is determined by the specificity of selecting individual episodes through the mechanism of memory. The text is mosaic in nature: on the one hand, it is an attempt to provide an overall description of the atmosphere (city, family, schools); on the other hand, memory isolates individual, independent episodes. Despite the overall impressionistic nature of the memories (which the author himself refers to as “memories of separate episodes from my childhood”), two episodes are presented in considerable detail: the home performance “Sins of Youth”, written, directed and played by Mikhoels, and the clownery performed by Shlomo Vovsi and Khaim Vaisman, inspired by the performance of the clowns, Demash and Mosel, which they had seen in the tent circus named “Devinier”. The home performance, which later became legendary for all biographers, is regarded by Vovsi as a unique phenomenon. This uniqueness is emphasized through the category of memory. While the memoirs generally express the relativity and disconnectedness of memory, it is the description of the home performance that stands out as particularly memorable: “I have remembered this episode for the rest of my life. And the best confirmation of the significance of this episode from Mikhoels' childhood is that it remains vivid in my memory, despite the many years that have passed since then”.

Much attention is paid to the environment in which the Vovsi brothers were brought up – particularly their family and their

childhood hometown. However, in many respects, Khaim Vovsi deviates from the stance expressed in the opening lines of his memoir, where he suggests that it is not the environment, but rather some higher forces that determine a person's fate:

Someone once said that a person's fate is determined long before his birth, i.e., the further development and life of a person after birth do not always justify the developed image of the person, as they are influenced by a number of other circumstances, in addition to seemingly obvious hereditary characteristics, (environment, ethnography, nature, meetings, social order, social circumstances, etc.). This seems to have happened with my brother Solomon Mikhailovich Mikhoels /Vovsi/ and me, his twin brother.

Nevertheless, also the memories of their parents, hometown, and childhood friends are of great significance. The father and mother are portrayed as two opposites, whose unity was embodied in Mikhoels. The mother is described as "a woman of immediate sublime feelings", while the father was rational. The mother enjoyed reading, particularly secular works (she was fond of Zola and Shomer), while the father was a deeply religious man with a passion for cantorial singing. The mother was beautiful, whereas the father "was rather ordinary-looking and lacked regular features".

At the same time, Mikhoels inherited the traits of both parents, though those traits underwent certain transformations in his personality: his father's passion for cantorial music and Hasidic songs shaped Mikhoels' unique musicality (which would later be reflected in his work); his mother's appearance was also evident in his features (he looked like his mother, though he "was not handsome. Yet, his face radiated intelligence, and it was charming and attractive". It is notable that, in Vovsi's memories, the mother is mentioned more frequently: in addition to the actual descriptions of the family, her image appears in two other episodes of the narrative – walking to town and watching home performances. This can be attributed to the subjective priorities of the author. He admits: "I was, on the contrary, more phlegmatic and clung to my mother all the time". In fact, the indication of Mikhoels' duality aligns with the central theme in Steinberg's memoirs about the phenomenon of twins, where duality is also highlighted as a feature that characterizes Mikhoels.

The description of the atmosphere in the town is also worth considering. In the text by Steinberg, the identification of the place of the meeting holds very great significance. It is as important as the necessity to specify the time and place of all events: "Exactly sixty years ago, on the banks of the Dvina, I met the twins

of the Reb Mikhail Vovsi – Khaim and Shlomo.”⁸ For Steinberg, Reb Mikhail Vovsi is first of all the head of the family, so everything is described in relation to him, and this is the adherence to tradition. In contrast, for Vovsi, the question of the atmosphere of the home (a view from the inside) becomes central. In fact, when describing his father’s house, Vovsi engages into a kind of polemic with the biographers who offer their own interpretations of the atmosphere in the Vovsi household. The father’s desire to give his children secular education is particularly emphasised:

Thus, the description of Mikhoels’ family and the atmosphere that prevailed in the parents’ house as a hotbed of musty religious obscurantism, Hasidism and Talmudism, which can be found in some biographical texts, is a deep lie. These fabrications were likely constructed to add an element of exoticism and asceticism to the image of Mikhoels.

It is most likely that the traditionally quoted autobiographical text by Mikhoels is being referenced here: “The parental home is typically Jewish, patriarchal, saturated with the deep fanaticism of my father. I was raised at cheder, where I studied Jewish literacy, the Bible, the Talmud”.⁹ This may explain why Vovsi’s memoir provides a detailed description of the lifestyle of the Jews of Dinaburg – Dvinsk: the atmosphere at home, the daily routine and the behaviour of pupils in the cheder, the bazaar, the signs above stores and shops, and the tent circus that had come on tour. This atmosphere reflects the lively character of the city, the cultural space which is connected with the perception of childhood. In this, there is a parallel with the text by Aaron.

The name of the protagonist of the memoirs is an important semiotic sign. Vovsi’s text has a fairly neutral title – “Memories of S. M. Mikhoels’ Childhood and Youth”. What is crucially important is how the author names his brother. In the text, “Mikhoels” is used 27 times, with only one mention that refers to a remark made by actor Vlasov: “Lear is a cameo suffering” – he said, “but Mikhoels has neither cameo nor suffering”. There is one more mention in the context of the definition of “future”: “Obviously, he has chosen the future Mikhoels as such a stage partner in advance (about Khaimka Weisman’s plan to stage a clownery). All other mentions are simply instances where Khaim Vovsi frequently refers to his brother as “Mikhoels”, sometimes implying his well-

⁸ Ibid. 171.

⁹ К. Рудницкий (ред.), *Михоэлс. Статьи, беседы, речи. Статьи и воспоминания о Михоэлсе*, Москва: Искусство, 1981, p. 12.

known historical status, with the focus being on Mikhoels' theatrical activities:

Mikhoels' musicality and his deep knowledge of Jewish song folklore were overshadowed by the events described above. Yet another context can often be found as well – S. Mikhoels is depicted specifically as a hero of childhood memories: "He was a great inventor, hothead and sworn enemy of little Mikhoels".

This reference demonstrates the specificity of the narrative of the memoirs. In the author's narrative, one can feel the influence of his views at the time of writing, rather than focusing on the past: little Shlomo, not yet Mikhoels. And his acting and adult pseudonym actually have nothing to do with his childhood, but, for the author, the status of Mikhoels as a famous actor – is the leading one. Finally, the frequent use of the brother's full name – Solomon Mikhailovich – (appearing 10 times), deserves special attention. At the same time, the childhood version of the name, Shlemka (in this particular variant), appears four times in the text. Three of these occurrences are in the episode describing the preparation and staging of the clownery – the most vivid and boyishly mischievous childhood memory. The fourth use of the childhood name "Shlemka" occurs at the epic finale of the memoir, which serves as an accent: "There are very few of these people left. And yet, among these few, the image of Shlemka Vovsi, Solomon Mikhailovich Vovsi, a wonderful, inspired, deep and truly people's artist, is still alive and dear". Quite unexpectedly, in the very end (which stylistically differs from the main text, since in the final sentence the author's "I" and personal impressions are replaced by a kind of collective thinking, in which the image of Mikhoels is tinged with sadness), the official "Mikhoels" is replaced by the personal "Shlemka". Moreover, despite the strong association with the theatre, after his name and patronymic, the father's surname appears, just in the context where the surname "Mikhoels" would be more expected. Deriving a model of collective memory that honours the greatness of his brother, Khaim Vovsi reminds the reader that the great Mikhoels belongs to the Vovsi family.

The naming of Mikhoels in Steinberg's memoirs follows a completely different model. The style of the title itself "My Dvinsk Friend: Shlomo Mikhoels" indicates a more explicitly artistic direction of the text: it leans more toward an essay than traditional memoirs. From the very beginning, Steinberg artistically plays with the naming of the protagonist. "Mikhoels" is undoubtedly a more recognizable name in society, therefore its use when

presenting a biographical fact is entirely understandable: “It is no accident that I emphasize that Shlomo Mikhoels was born under the constellation of Gemini.” The use of the phrase “Shlomo Vovsi” is also logical, specifically when referring to his real signature beneath the verses. Further, this name is purposefully used in the description of episodes from childhood. The use of the name “Mikhoels” is associated with a significant event – the staging of the play “The Hasmoneans”, which the author interprets as the true birth of the actor Mikhoels: “But in the same year of 1902 (5062-5063), the artist marked by God, the theatre actor who had been dozing in the soul of Shlomo Mikhoels, revealed himself to all of us. Back then, on Hanukkah, he was the leading actor for the first time (here it should be noted that in relation to the play “Sins of Youth”¹⁰, Khaim Vovsi marks Purim as the most significant Jewish holiday – a celebration that inherently incorporates theatricalization as a ritual element)”. In the Yiddish text by Steinberg, the Russian version of the name – “Shlomo Mikhoels (in Russian, professor Solomon Mikhailovich Vovsi)” is situationally introduced. This explanatory form is introduced in the episode describing Mikhoels’ arrival in England in 1943. Here, the name “Mikhoels” becomes a kind of refrain, emphasizing the unique and unofficial relationship between Steinberg and Mikhoels:

Mikhoels was seated to the right of Lady Reading. Lady Reading’s brother, the second Lord Melchett, was also present. I was invited to take a seat next to Mikhoels, as it was already known that we had been childhood friends. After refreshments, something like a conversation-discussion began – exchange of questions and answers, Mikhoels spoke his magnificent Yiddish¹¹.

However, at the very end of Steinberg’s text, once again, the image introduced in the opening lines re-emerges, as if completing the framework structure of the narrative: “It will not be an exaggeration if we agree that Shlomo, son of Mikhail Vovsi from Dvinsk, has become a true envoy of Russian Jewry”. This confirms the idea of a framework structure of the text, where the place, the nomination of the protagonist in his relations with his kin (this is an element of biblical style) are emphasized; what changes is the depiction of time. While the narrative opens with a reference to a specific, distant time (“Exactly sixty years ago”), its conclusion shifts the focus. In the final part, references to the past (“was”) apply solely to a particular biographical fact (his role as an envoy through the activities of the anti-fascist committee), and the generalizing

¹⁰ А. Штейнберг, *Проза философа*, Мюнхен: ImWerden Verlag, 2014, p. 178.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 181.

conclusions transcend temporal boundaries, appealing to the category of eternity – “my Dvinsk friend lives and will live”.¹²

Conclusion

One of the defining features of ego-documents is the subjective nature of narrative, centred on the author's point of view. However, the two memoirs under consideration stand out for their focus on a prominent historical and cultural figure, Solomon Mikhoels. This shifts the narrator's point of view outward, toward another subject, resulting in a blend of the individual and the collective within the reconstructed model of memory. There are several monographs that are dedicated to the life and work of Solomon Mikhoels: first of all, a book written by his daughter, Natalia Mikhoels, and a biography published in the series “Life of Remarkable People”, compiled by Matvey Glazer, one of the leading scholars of Mikhoels' creative legacy. The memoirs written by Khaim Vovsi and Aaron Steinberg, though rather small in their volume, offer an insight into Solomon Mikhoels' personality from a somewhat different cultural and historical context. Both authors were contemporaries of Mikhoels, sharing the same chronological and cultural context, which means their subjective views on events align closely with his own. The texts of memoirs are factually and stylistically different. However, they intersect in their incorporation of a shared collective memory. In fact, the “inclusion” of the collective memory serves as the unifying principle for both texts: personal memories are a large part of the collective text entitled “Mikhoels”.

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¹² Ibid. P. 183.