"Finally, in a voice that smiled as it sliced, she replied: 'Look, let me just say this [. . .]. Your parents were murdering my parents in the old country.'"¹ On this note—wrathful and forbidding dialogue—a Jewish American woman and a Ukrainian American man embark on a relationship that both restores and annihilates stereotypes. The fictional space (perhaps fictionalized?) that they inhabit is that of Ambassador of the Dead, a 2001 novel by Askold Melnyczuk (b. 1954). Like his bilingual creator Melnyczuk, born in Irvington, N.J., to Ukrainian parents who were displaced persons, the fictional Nick Blud grew up in the 1950s and '60s in New Jersey in a community of Ukrainian immigrants. (The last name “Blud,” correctly pronounced with a long “u,” means “mistake, error” in Ukrainian but also “lechery, sin” in both Ukrainian and Russian, while in its Anglo-American pronunciation it suggests “blood,” an inescapable bond with family and Ukrainian homeland; altogether a trilingual pun of the sort Nabokov’s Pnin might have created.) In this American novel about the bliss and burden of a Ukrainian past, Nick Blud leaves home to become a physician and settles in Boston (like his author Melnyczuk, who moved to Boston in 1976). Outwardly, Nick assimilates, although he never does cease fighting his parents' battles. And he never stops suffering from being accused of “anti-Semitism by default” (AD 248).

Nick’s desire to escape the appalling stereotype of Ukrainian Jew-killers draws him to Shelley, a Jewish doctor from Boston. Nick Blud experiences a morbid fixation on this Jewish woman, a fixation that I would like to call terrifying magnetism.² Some time in the late 1980s, he finally talks to her at a medical conference. "My mother had cousins who died in Auschwitz," Shelley tells Nick as if to draw between them a thick curtain of words and memories. Nick is encouraged by nothing but her urging that they say "always the hardest thing." "So what have you heard about my people?" he asks Shelley over drinks in a hotel bar. "Pogroms. Nazis. The usual. And you?" Shelley
responds. "Usurers. Communists. The media," Nick counters (AD 249). Mutual distrust and asperity, some of it inherited from the parents in its rawest form, shapes the initial stages of the dialogue: "I heard your people were the worst," says Shelley. —"What about the Jews in the Communist Party?" Nick retorts (AD 250). Nick goes on to relate his version of the genesis of the Ukrainian-Jewish animosity, commencing with the coming of Jews to Eastern Europe and laying much blame on the Russians for "pitting people against each other [. . .]." "You view them as a "them" in relation to your people, whom you see as "natives,"" Shelley says. "After all these centuries. That's anti-Semitic." For the moment mutual anger, or rather confusion and despair, beclouds prudent judgment. "We don't live on air. We have roots. Even now can you admit your complicity? Just once?" Shelley demands. "My complicity? My complicity? I grew up in New fucking Jersey," Nick blurs out in outrage, having heard exactly what he tries to escape by reaching out to the Jewish woman (AD 251). The fictional dialogue between two first-generation Americans, a Ukrainian man and a Jewish woman, flags, waiting for its author Melnychuk to breathe more life into it by giving it trajectory. Two scenarios may be actualized here, both reflecting the present state of Jewish-Ukrainian—or, more broadly, Jewish-East Slavic—confrontation and dialogue. (Jewish-Polish dialogue is a separate, complex problem that lies outside the scope of this essay).

In an early satellite of Melnychuk's novel, which was published as a short story in Southwest Review in 1999, the initial exchange takes place on a train stuck in a tunnel under Manhattan. The Ukrainian American man asks the Jewish American woman for her phone number, hoping to see her again, and she says "No" (Melnychuk, "The Woman Who Defeated Stalin" 110). There is no coyness nor rashness in her response, only a staunch refusal of further dialogue. In Ambassador of the Dead, the two characters go through a series of "private sessions" in which "the talking wasn't always fun, it felt like a compulsion, the completion of something, as though a story whose strands had been knotted before" the two characters had been born "were finally loosened" (AD 252). Children of immigrants from the Old World, Shelley and Nick get married. "Unusual, you know, a Jew and a Ukrainian," says one of the novel's main Ukrainian "ambassadors of the dead" (AD 246).

In the course of the "sessions," the two unburden each other and move beyond a reckoning of criminals and victims. I will use the term unburdening of guilt to describe the nature and meaning of what strikes me as an expressly exilic phenomenon of the Jewish-Ukrainian and Jewish-Russian confrontation. I have been observing and experiencing such unburdening since leaving the Soviet Union in 1987 as a refugee and coming to the United States. In my own experience, opportunities for an unburdening of mutual accusations had never presented themselves either in Moscow, where I was raised, or within the boundaries of the former Pale; under the rickety shadows of destroyed syna-
gogues, in the unsettled towns, in Kamenets-Podilsk, Ukraine, where both my grandfathers grew up in the 1910s. Were it not for emigration, would I be writing about Jewish-East Slavic confrontation?

I am compelled to write about Melnyczuk’s brave novel because it articulates and romanticizes what I believe to be a central feature of an ongoing dialogue between Jews and Slavs who have left Russia and Eastern Europe. Despite the layers of redoubled accusations, both pre-Shoah and post-Shoah, living in the West accords Jews and Slavs the distance of space and, in the case of their children and grandchildren, the distance of language and time that facilitate and even necessitate a mutual unburdening.

2

While reading and thinking about Askold Melnyczuk’s Ambassador of the Dead, I kept returning in my thoughts to David Aizman (1869–1922), a writer from a different time and epoch. Born in Nikolaev, a coastal city in Ukraine where Isaac Babel spent ten years of his childhood, Aizman lived most of his adult life as a perpetual wanderer. In an autobiographical note penned on the eve of World War I and reminiscent of the tearful laughter of Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye, Aizman wrote:

What else can I say? To the present day I have no certain place of living [. . .]. A nomad, I live in hotels and paltry furnished apartments. I suffer a great deal from the absence of a residence permit [. . .]. It is unethical to give bribes. I give bribes. It is dishonest to bypass the law. I bypass the law. I am a writer. I pass myself for a shop assistant. It is only as a shop assistant that I can legally stay in Petersburg, if only temporarily [. . .]. Odessa, 15 January 1914.”

Outside the circle of students of Jewish-Russian culture, David Aizman is as unknown today as he was famous in the first decade of the 1900s, when the leading Russian periodicals printed his stories and novellas, and major theaters staged his plays. Maxim Gorky’s Znanie was among his publishers, and an eight-volume edition of his works was published from 1911 to 1919. “After Dostoevsky and also partly Garshin,” Aleksandr Amfiteatrov wrote in 1908, “we have not had a verbal artist who would know how to ‘strike the hearts with an unprecedented force,’ more poignantly, consistently and effectively than David Aizman” (188). David Aizman has earned high praise both from his contemporaries and from today’s students of Jewish-Russian letters. In 1985, in a passionate reassessment of his career, Alice Stone-Nakhimovsky described Aizman’s early stories as works of “a Jewish Chekov” (176). Despite the efforts of the past two decades—by Nakhimovsky, Claudia Colombo, Shimon Markish, and Mikhail Vainshtein—David Aizman remains vastly forgotten by the reading public both in the former Soviet Union and
outside of it. No books by Aizman are in print in Russia or available in English translations. If distant echoes of Aizman’s fame and acclaim had ever reached the ears of the American public, this would have been through Sina (1976), Leonard J. Lehrman’s opera based on Aizman’s novella “Cheta Krasovitskikh” (“The Krasovitskii Couple”).

Having established a name for himself as a “defender of the Jewish poor” and chronicler of the “encounters” between Jews and Slavs (Russians, Ukrainians) in the early 1900s, Aizman widened the scope of his fiction and embraced different stylistic modes. Aizman’s literary career may be described as one fluctuating between the style of his original literary master, Anton Chekhov, and the narrative aesthetics of the neorealists, in particular Maxim Gorky and Leonid Andreev. From such early stories as “In a Foreign Land” (1902) and “The Countrymen” (1903), the Chekhovian power of understatement and subtle narrative gestures continues to distinguish Aizman’s best works. Aizman’s “The Heart of Being” (1907), zooming in on a victim of a pogrom and a pogromist who share a hospital room, self-consciously pays tribute to Chekhov’s “Ward 6” (1892). In his other works, especially in “Ice Breaking” (1905) and “Anchel’s Morning” (1906), Aizman succumbed to the osmotic pressures of Gorky’s fiction of social upheaval. In Aizman’s “Enemies,” one hears Andreev’s rhetoric of terror and angst, of which Lev Tolstoy famously said that the writer tries to “scare,” but the reader does not feel “frightened.” In 1907 Gorky himself reproached Aizman for writing of the anti-Jewish violence with “much screaming and no wrath.”

The sheer portrayal of Russian and Ukrainian anti-Semitism and the anti-Jewish violence of 1905-06 made Aizman too unpalatable for the Soviet literary canonizers. Starting with the early 1930s, his books went out of print in the Soviet Union, and he was chiefly remembered as a playwright connected to Gorky and the Znanie circle of writers. To read about pogroms, today’s student of Jewish-Russian culture turns to Semyon Yushkevich’s novel The Jews or to Babel’s childhood stories, and not to Aizman’s harrowing account in “Bloody Deluge” (1908). Neither a Zionist nor a Jewish revolutionary writing about both Zionists and revolutionaries, Aizman has fallen prey to cultural amnesia by both Russian and Jewish readers. Why revisit his life and works today?

In 1896 Aizman left Odessa and went to study painting in Paris, where he met and married a Jewish-Russian doctor. In 1898 Aizman and his wife moved to the Haute-Marne region in the French countryside. While living in France, Aizman gained his voice as a Jewish-Russian writer and made his debut in Russkoe bogatsvo [Russian Wealth], then a leading Russian monthly with a populist stance. Two of David Aizman’s most original works of fiction, “Na chuzbince” [“In a Foreign Land,” 1902] and “Zemliaki” [“The Countrymen,” 1903], are set in France and were written while he was living outside the Russian Empire. Of these stories, Shimon Markish wrote in 1985:
“I do not know a more penetrating and heartfelt depiction of the irrational, obsessive love for that land, that people, which, it would seem, have done everything to instill [in the Jews] hatred for them” (213).

“The Countrymen” represents Aizman’s finest work, indeed a gem of modern Jewish writing in Diaspora. This story about the unburdening of guilt has served as my companion and guide in reading Melnyczuk’s *Ambassador of the Dead*, published almost exactly a century later. It is David Aizman’s “The Countrymen” that I would like to revisit in the pages to follow, before returning to Askold Melnyczuk’s novel and the present and future anxieties of the Jewish-Slavic confrontation.

Written in 1902 in Paris and set in rural France of the 1890s, “The Countrymen” appeared in the St. Petersburg journal *Russian Wealth* in 1903. The protagonist of Aizman’s story is a twenty-year-old woman, Varvara Stepanovna Klobukova. Attracted by a lucrative job, Klobukova leaves her native town of Mertovodsk (literally “town of dead waters”) for the castle of Countess Saint-Blin in Haute-Marne (Saint-Blin is the actual name of the village where Aizman and his wife spent several years). Her duties at the castle are hardly onerous; massaging the indulgent countess for an hour every day. Living in private rooms with a *cabinet de toilette*, eating “innumerable dishes of the most refined quality,” Varvara initially takes pleasure in “the extraordinary luxury and comfort of a kind she had never known.” As the novelty of her life in the French castle wears off, Varvara grows bored and depressed. When, after hours of insomnia, she finally falls asleep, she sees “Mertovodsk in her dreams”: “the market square littered with manure; a soldier at the watch tower; pigs strolling on the boulevard; the tipsy sexton Lavrentii; the firm legs, brown like oak, of the dishwasher Gorpyna; and many other figures, vistas and objects dear to her heart [. . .]” (Z 235). Living vicariously by the letters she receives from home, Varvara contemplates giving up her large salary and comfortable life, and only financial obligations to her impoverished family keep her from returning to Russia.

Another weepy story about a Russian person withering in exile? Not at all. It is not the universal workings of nostalgia that preoccupy Aizman in “The Countrymen.” The story’s autobiographical setting and props and Varvara’s isolation in rural France are the stage that Aizman erects to model a Jewish-Slavic encounter abroad and to test the parameters of unburdening.

Through a chance conversation with an elderly Frenchman, Varvara learns that her “fellow countrymen” are living in Chaumont, a nearby town and the county seat of Haute-Marne. “The Russians” own a millinery, the Frenchman tells her, and gives her directions to their store. He explains that Varvara’s “countrymen [. . .] were banished from Russia [. . .] and came to live here.
From your country they chase away the Israelites. They don’t want them, but we don’t mind. We let them stay.” “‘Ah, they’re Kikes!’ Varvara [. . .] drew out in her mind. ‘Yids.’” Aizman presents the old Frenchman’s prejudice toward the “Israelites” as dulled and residual, mainly of the socioeconomic sort. “‘They charged me an arm and a leg, but they gave me real felt, shiny. When I sell them fish, I’ll also charge them an arm and a leg [. . .],’” the old Frenchman tells Varvara as she turns away, angry at him for having misled her (Z 238–40).

The knowledge that the “Russian” family in the nearby French town are Jews embitters Varvara: “And because under the label ‘fellow countrymen’ she was now being served up these [. . .] ‘stinking Kikes,’ she felt deep, vexing, almost insulting disappointment” (Z 238). Bowing to his master, Aizman alludes to Chekhov’s “The Winning Ticket” (1887), a classic satire of wishful thinking, as he describes Varvara’s disappointment: “She felt as if she had seen in the paper that she had a winning lottery ticket, and then it turned out that it was a misprint, and she hadn’t won anything [. . .].” Aizman summarizes the stereotypical contempt toward the Jews that prevailed among members of the urban lower-middle-class of the time: “One couldn’t say that Varvara [. . .] hated Jews. She had never had any significant encounters with them; she had never observed them closely; she didn’t associate them with any specific evil things and couldn’t feel justifiable animosity toward them. But she found them laughable and worthy of contempt, if not revulsion” (Z 240). From everything we know and conjecture about Varvara’s background and education, she does not come from a family of pogromists and visceral anti-Semites. Her attitudes toward Jews and Judaism stem from her philistinism and ignorance. Her knowledge of the Jews amounts to a caricature:

She considered them repulsive and chafing creatures; and at the same time, along with her father—and probably all of Mervovodsk—she knew and could on occasion explain, that Jews cared about nothing but commerce and money-lending, that they ate garlic and something called kugel, that they emitted a foul smell and had crooked noses, and, finally, that a Russian person suffers on their account. (Z 240)

Despite the initial revulsion, Varvara cannot suppress her curiosity about the “Russians” living in the nearby French town. Before she knows it, she is already rehearsing the intonation with which she would say her zdravstvuite [“hello”]. “So Kikes, so what,” she muses. “Still they are as if my own people [. . .] There are occasionally decent folks among Jews” (Z 243). The following morning, dressing to go out to town, Varvara contemplates speaking “Russian, a lot and for a long time” (Z 243). In her imagination, “decent” Jews look like a certain de-Jewified Dr. Morgulis from her home town: “neatly dressed, not rolling their r’s too badly, their noses not crooked at all” (Z 244).
Varvara approaches Chaumont in a “strange mood,” feeling “good and happy,” and yet extremely anxious. Displaying a half-baked sense of justice, Varvara acknowledges to herself that “the Jews may decline to see her.” “What if they treat her coldly or even rudely?” Varvara thinks. “Didn’t they emigrate from Russia because they are oppressed there? This means they don’t like Russia and Russians? They could, perhaps, offend her, insult [. . .]” “They wouldn’t dare!” Varvara angrily interrupts her own train of thought. “Why wouldn’t they dare,” her guilty conscience counters. “What would hold them back? Here they have nothing to fear.” Intuitively, just minutes before meeting her countrymen “the Jews,” Varvara articulates what perhaps amounts to the sine qua non of the impending unburdening of guilt: she encounters the Jews in exile, outside Russia, on neutral grounds.

As Varvara peers in through the glass door of the house with the sign “Chepellerie moderne,” she sees a “short, stooped, scrawny man, his hair completely gray [. . .] he had only one eye, and this blemish wasn’t completely concealed by his big round spectacles, sitting athwart his short, fleshy nose.” After Varvara steps inside the store and loudly utters her zdravstvuite, the gray-haired man behind the counter makes “a strange jerking motion.” “Oy . . . what’s that?” he exclaims with an expression of “fright,” and then “freezes for a moment” (Z 247–28). In the old man’s missing eye and momentary fright the reader may recognize the physical and psychological damage caused by the pogroms. But the Jewish man’s habitually defensive reaction on hearing Russian speech immediately turns into an outpouring of joy and hospitality. That the old Jewish man is genuinely happy to meet her Varvara recognizes right away, and as he summons his wife in Yiddish, Varvara’s “heart” is said to be “smiling” at “the guttural sounds which she didn’t understand, but knew so well.” Back in her hometown, the Yiddish speech and the Yiddishisms of the Jews’ Russian might have caused Varvara to cringe, but now they move her and comfort her. “You’re Russian? You’re from Russia?” the old man speaks in a “state of great agitation.” “Oh, how wonderful! [. . .] You know, we’ve been here eleven years now, and it’s only the third time I see a Russian person” (Z 248–49). Here the unburdening of Varvara’s guilt before the Jews—also of her normative contempt for them—has begun to take place, and it is the old Jew’s mission to convince the young Russian woman that he bears no grudge for the persecution he endured in Russia.

The initial reaction of Dvoira, the store owner’s wife—a “short plump woman” with a “typical Jewish face, with a large curved nose and big beady eyes”—combines “tranquillity,” “cold pride,” and quiet anger. “What are you so happy about?” Dvoira asked [her husband] in a half-whisper, in Yiddish.” Ignoring his wife’s mordancy, the old man “rattles” on: “My name’s Shapiro. We’re from Russia [. . .] Of course, we’re from Krivaia Balka. Oh yes! We used to live in Krivaia Balka [. . .] But please come into the room.” While Aizman preserves the actual names of the French towns, he conceals
the Russian towns under semitransparent veils. Under the fictional “Krivaia Balka” Aizman disguises “Krivoi Rog,” a town in the Kherson province—the province where Varvara also comes from (presently in Ukraine). In 1897, out of a total population of 14,937, 2,672 Jews were living in Krivoi Rog, and anti-Jewish violence erupted there in October 1883 (“Krivoi Rog” 856). Shapiro’s further comments betray Aizman’s detailed knowledge of the region, as the village of Starye Krintsy, which Shapiro mentions, most likely alludes to Belaia Krintsia, halfway between Kherson and Krivoi Rog. Varvara’s home town of Mertvovodsk possibly hints at the town of Zheltye Vody (literally “yellow waters”), in the upper western corner of the Kherson province and some thirty miles north of Krivoi Rog. Additionally, Krivaia Balka may also hint at Balta, a town in the former Podolia province (presently in the Odessa province of Ukraine), where a well-documented pogrom took place in 1882.

Resorting to Yiddish, Dvoira tries to undercut her husband’s efforts to make Varvara feel at home: “‘She’s just fine here [. . .] She can go where she came from’” (Z 250). Shapiro orders the French maid to bring the samovar (“She’s a Russian person. She needs tea from a samovar!”) and urges his wife to display hospitality. While Varvara may or may not sense the friction between husband and wife, concealed by the Yiddish, old Shapiro’s efforts begin to pay off. “‘The little old Jew is okay,’ rushed through [Varvara’s] head. ‘ Hospitable, kind, it seems’” (Z 251). And here Aizman places a self-conscious paragraph documenting the process of Varvara’s unburdening:

However, Klobukova’s feelings moved faster than her thoughts [chuvstvo operzhalo um], and she didn’t care for her own mind’s condescending tone. Her entire being was drawn to the noisily bustling Jew and even to his gloomy and pouty wife [. . .]. She spoke with complete openness, hiding nothing, and all the while felt as though she was addressing members of her own family or people she had known well and for a long time. (Z 251)

Reciprocating his guest’s openness, Shapiro tells Varvara about his business and his children. “‘Why did you leave Russia?’” Varvara asks, breaching the dangerous subject. “‘It just turned out this way.’” Shapiro replies with an “embarrassed, guilty smile.” “‘Did you have a hard life in Krivaia Balka?’” Varvara asks again (Z 253). Shapiro’s circumspect response hides a reluctance to put his Russian guest on the defensive: “‘Not hard, but you know [. . .] well, how could I explain this to you...for instance, fish seeks deeper waters, and man [. . .]’” “‘What are you telling these tales for?’” Dvoira interrupts her husband. Her hostile silence has given way to an angry outburst: “‘Did she ask you about fish? We escaped from Krivaia Balka because we were pogromized. There’s the answer for you!’” Shapiro tries in vain to stop his wife: “‘Please, Dvoira. Leave it alone! [. . .] This isn’t the right time!’” There is no stopping
Dvoira, as she needs to unburden herself fully before her Russian guest by laying out the facts:

“There’s always the right time for it! [. . .] Why leave it out? You think we had a sweet life there? We suffered, endured, trying to survive our entire life there. And then came the good people—your Russian people—and made a pogrom” [. . . Because the Shapiro family fled after an 1882–83 pogrom and has been in France for eleven years, the story must be set around 1895–96]. “And they whacked him in the eye with an iron [. . .] and he lost his eye. Why would we stay there after that, tell me please? So they would torment us more? You think it wasn’t enough? I think we’d had plenty. So that’s why we left [. . .].” (Z 253–54)

Note that both Dvoira and her husband use the word “Russian” inclusively, referring to the Slavs—Jews and Ukrainians—living side by side with the Jews in the Pale of Settlement.

Shapiro tries to admonish his wife. “Don’t interrupt!” Dvoira yelled, casting a furious glance at her husband. “Don’t interrupt, I’m telling you, be quiet! I, thank God, haven’t gone mad as yet! I too am allowed to say a few words!” Dvoira is immensely proud of her children’s success and her financial stability; “Could we possibly have all this in Russia? [. . .] And so we settled here, and thank God, we’re happy here.” In her presentation, the main difference between the position of the Jews in the Russian Empire and in France is that the Jews enjoy equal protection by the law, which ensures their decent treatment by the French: “And no one abuses us or hurts us, and no one makes our lives miserable, no one yells ‘stinking Kike’ at us. We’re treated like people here, you see!” (Z 254–55). (What would Dvoira Shapiro have said if she had lived to see the Dreyfus affair [1894–1906]?)

Aizman’s narrator keeps close tabs on the dynamics of Dvoira’s and Varvara’s unburdening: “Having gotten everything off her chest in [Varvara’s] presence, she now felt relief.” Relief signifies the beginning of Dvoira’s unburdening that makes possible her dialogue with Varvara. At the same time, owing largely to Shapiro’s warmth and hospitality, Varvara herself has already been unburdened of her initial unease about the Jews. Aizman’s narrator reports that “for the first time she had had a long conversation with Jews; for the first time she had listened to them attentively and seriously, without a desire to mock them, and Dvoira’s seething words had cast upon her a quiet sadness and a dim sense of self-reproach” (Z 255). When the samovar arrives, Dvoira finally assumes the role of a cordial (if morbidly proud) hostess. Three-way sparks of geniality begin to fly across and around the living room, “Dvoira’s tongue had been finally untied [. . .] and some half an hour later Dvoira no longer had any secrets from her guest [. . .] pouring out her whole heart” (Z 258). Before the reader knows it, Dvoira is showing her Russian guest the trousseau she has been
preparing for her daughter. The Shapiroins insist that Varvara stay for Friday night dinner and spend the night in their house, in their daughter’s bedroom, and Varvara agrees, “both gladdened and confused by this invitation” (Z 260).

This is Varvara’s first time in a Jewish home, and she receives her first taste of Judaic traditions. For the sake of their guest, the hosts simplify and abridge the rituals usually accompanying their Friday night dinner; Shapiro says but a quick prayer. The traditional dinner consists of stuffed carp, broth with noodles, chicken, and compote. Reminding the reader of her sheer ignorance and naïveté about Jewish life and customs, Varvara asks her hosts: “And where’s the kugel?” (Z 261). How far has Varvara come in one evening of unburdening, earlier thinking of the Jews as “worthy of contempt, if not revulsion,” and now asking after the thing which she previously associated with “moneylending [. . .] garlic [. . .] foul smell and crooked noses!” The Shapiroins explain that kugel, still baking in the oven, is served on Saturday at midday. “There’s no kugel for you, but you will get to sing zemiros,” the husband Shapiro “announced to his guest” (Z 261). Zemiros are Hebrew melodies traditionally sung at the Sabbath meal.

Dialogue and understanding between representatives of antagonistic groups, Jews and Slavs in Aizman’s story, require mutual unburdening. The deliberate grammatical ambiguity of the term underscores the very nature of the act of unburdening, whereby the self and the other both unburden and are unburdened of mutual accusations. The order varies. The old Jewish man in Aizman’s story wants to make the young Russian woman feel unharmed—and even loved—in spite, no, in view of her burden of collective responsibility for persecution of the Jews in the old country. To face Varvara not as a child of the tormentors of the Jews and a tormentor “by default,” Dvoira must first unburden herself of her massive anger. Varvara, “whose feelings moved faster than her thoughts,” begins to unburden herself not only of the “dim sense of self-reproach,” but also of her inherited, centuries-old prejudice. Most paradoxically, however, Shapiro and his wife seek to unburden themselves of the guilt both of them feel and express—he through acknowledging it, she by denying it—before Russia. This strangest kind of guilt, the victims’ guilt before the victimizers, lies at the center of Aizman’s second masterpiece about Russian Jews in exile, the story “In a Foreign Land,” set in the same part of France as is “The Countrymen.” A young Jewish doctor says this to his husband about leaving Russia: “I imagine a wet nurse must feel this way having abandoned her own baby and nursing another one’s [. . .] I feel guilty!” (Aizman, Krovavyi razliv 2: 80).

Ultimately, for the Shapiroins the unburdening of guilt is simultaneously a mitzvah, a “good deed,” and a nostalgic tribute to their Russian past. There is, of course, a constant fluctuation, grammatical and ontological, as unburdening oneself becomes unburdening the other and further facilitates one’s self-unburdening. Unburdening, I repeat, occurs outside the boundaries of the
Russian Empire, in exile, in the West. This is to me one of the lessons of Aizman’s story and also of Askold Melnyczuk’s novel, which carries the problems of Jewish-East Slavic dialogue into the twenty-first century.

4

In the next few passages, I would like to take a closer look at Varvara Klobukova’s first shabes dinner in the French home of her Jewish countrymen. “What’s that, zemirots?” Varvara asks Shapiro. “They are Sabbath songs. We sing them between two dishes, in Hebrew, the ancient Jewish tongue,” Shapiro explains. “Oh, please sing it, please!” Varvara asks. “Will you help with high notes?”—“Yes, yes. Please start,” Varvara urges him (Z 261). Old Shapiro sings “Kol m’kadaysh sh’vi-i” [“He who sanctifies the Sabbath”], and Varvara sings along “with an expression of timidity and awe.” Aizman here creates an organic, seamless transition to what lies in the (Aristotelian) realm of the impossible, but probable. Back in Russia, would Varvara ever be singing at the Jewish Sabbath? A world of difference lies between this scene and Varvara’s earlier memory of Dr. Morgulis, a “decent person, no worse than your average Russian,” who even attends a Russian general’s Christmas parties.

The singing of zemirots constitutes a high point in Aizman’s story. In writing this poignant scene, Aizman tipped his hat again to his master, Anton Chekhov. Robert Louis Jackson, in his eye-opening reading of Chekhov’s story “Rothchild’s Fiddle” (1894), has shown that the story’s violent Russian coffinmaker and intimidated Jewish musician are able to find common ground in the poetry of the ancient Jewish psalmist, revered by both Jews and Christians. The ending of Chekhov’s story captures and modernizes the narrative predicament of Psalm 137 (“By the Rivers of Babylon”). The Jews play and sing in Russia, the land where they are oppressed and persecuted. Chekhov’s ending, Jackson argued, charts a course of a Russian-Jewish reconciliation.

Aizman’s story offers a partially—and painfully—ironic reversal of Psalm 137 with its themes of exile and vengeance, as well as of Chekhov’s (re)reading of the psalm in “Rothchild’s Fiddle.” Varvara, whose name derives from the Russian noun “varvar” [barbarian], plays the structural role of the Edomytes in Psalm 137. As do the captors of the Jews in the psalm, she asks Shapiro to sing for her a “song of Zion.” To quote the ancient Jewish psalmist: “By the rivers of Babylon, / there we sat, / sat and wept, / as we thought of Zion. / There on the poplars / we hung up our lyres, / for our captors asked us there for songs, / our tormentors, for amusement, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion.’ / How can we sing a song of the Lord on alien land?” (Tanakh 1272)

In Aizman’s story, the Jews are still living in the Diaspora, although they have left Russia, typologically their Babylon, and fled to France where conditions are milder for the Jews. France, which has given shelter to the fleeing Jews, is an alien land for both the Shapiro and Varvara. This is precisely the
point. Unlike his forefathers who refused to sing “the songs of Zion” for the Edomytes, Shapiro does sing the zemiros for himself and for Varvara. And Varvara—who is not the Shapiro’s “captor” but a fellow exile in a foreign land—even sings along. Still, mindful as the reader becomes of the extraordinary bonding occurring between Varvara Klobukova and the Shapiro’s, one should recall that prior to warming up toward Varvara, Dvoira acts in a hostile way and speaks vengefully about her former “captors.” “People will die,” Shapiro says dolefully and compassionately after Varvara tells him about the drought in the Kherson province. “What’s the big sorrow for us! […] Let them […]” Dvoira says wryly (Z 256). Before she can start unburdening herself of anger, she must sing the violent ending of Psalm 137: “Fair Babylon, you predator, / a blessing on him who repays you in kind / what you have inflicted on us; / a blessing on him who seizes your babies / and dashes them against the rocks!” (Tanakh 1273). Does Dvoira truly wish death and destruction on her former tormentors?

At the end of that evening, after they have retired to their bedroom, the Shapiro’s share their impressions of Varvara. “Such a remarkable person,” Dvoira says with passion. “[…] just like our own child, I swear!” “She must be well educated,” Shapiro remarks (Z 261–62). The reader, who knows more about Varvara than do the Jewish characters in the story, might here smile at Shapiro’s naiveté—Varvara’s schooling ended with junior high, and she is hardly “educated.” Is it Shapiro’s naiveté or further signs of his superb skills as an unburdener? Shapiro goes on to articulate one of his most precious (if wishful) thoughts: “You know, they torment us, but their young people, when they’re well educated, they’re so good, so good, there aren’t better ones in the world,” “So modest, so tender!” Dvoira picks up, seemingly inviting her husband to continue the unburdening.

“You know, Dvoirenu, what I’m now thinking?” Shapiro lifted up his head.

“What?”

“I’m thinking this: if back then you and I had suffered through it and never left Krivaia Balka, then, say for instance, our grandchildren, or even great-grandchildren, would they be able to live there safely, like human beings?”

Startled, Dvoira stirred in bed. “Oh, the old song!” she said in vexation. Shapiro didn’t reply. “Sure, it’s old,” he acknowledged after a pause. “Old is right.” […]

“In front of the little house, where our heder stood, there was always a swampy patch,” he spoke again, unhurriedly, smiling a quiet, clumsy, painful smile. “And when it rained, a sort of pond was formed there, and the boys used to wade there […] And I too waded. And my grandmoth-
er would drag me out of there and beat me. I would weep, and my grandmother would also weep, and she would give me a cake. I had scrofula on my legs, and after I waded in that water they became inflamed [...]. I don’t know if the little house is still there, and that swamp [...].” (Z 264)

Despite—or is it because of?—its thinly veiled symbolism and allegory, this scene of old Shapiro’s remembering his childhood, his grandmother, and the Jewish school built on the swamp moves me—a former Russian Jew writing about it in English and in America. The scene’s tainted idyll augments what and how in the twentieth century—the century of a tremendous and final outburst of Jewish artistic creativity in East-Slavic lands—some of the best Jewish writers learned from their non-Jewish predecessors. Here Aizman pays one last tribute to Chekhov’s “Rothchild’s Fiddle,” where the Russian coffinmaker hears from his dying wife and then recalls a pastoral scene of his youth, a meadow on the riverbank where he and his young wife sat under the willow trees, and of their blond baby boy who died in infancy. In the scene where Shapiro shares with Dvoira his childhood recollection, I hear the notes which Isaac Babel would later strip naked in his “childhood” stories. To recall Babel’s “Childhood. At Grandmother’s” (1915; pub. 1965), the Jewish boy’s grandmother treats him to tea, gingerbread, and a piece of her mind: “‘Learn [...] learn, you’ll achieve it all, wealth and fame. You must know everything [...] Don’t trust people. Don’t have friends. Don’t give them money. Don’t give them your heart’” (Babel 41).

Is this the advice Shapiro’s grandmother gave him in his childhood? Although such not-quite-rhetorical questions may not please a pedant, I am tempted to ask them as I think about Aizman’s story. Even in the privacy of her bedroom and her native Yiddish, Dvoira is not prepared to unburden herself of all the blame she lays on “‘your Russian people’” (italics added). Preparing to go to sleep in their daughter’s bedroom upstairs, “throwing boots off her feet,” Varvara remains a participant of this three-way evening of unburdening. To Dvoira, who holds the Slavs responsible for the Jewish suffering, the “tender” Varvara is an exception. Dvoira shuns her husband’s nostalgic speculation about the future of Jews in the Russian Empire: “‘Why don’t you please now go to bed,’ Dvoira whispered with irritation. ‘Sleep!’” Shapiro cannot seem to stop: “‘Fifty years were lived and worked there [...] Our fathers, grandfathers, great-grandfathers are all buried there [...] And four children’” (Z 264). “Strangled tears” resonant in “the trembling of her voice,” Dvoira pronounced her final cue of the story: “‘So what do you want? Why all this now? Now he’s going to drag it out and drag it out. Go to bed, I’m telling you!’” (Z 264). “‘If the time came [...] if only for the grandchildren, for the great-grandchildren [...]’” Shapiro tries one last time: “Dvoira no longer responded. ‘They’ll get hit on the head with a log,’ her heart was crying out. But she regained control of herself and suppressed her words. She lay without
moving, her head covered with the blanket. Shapiro looked at his wife; he wanted to say more, but he took pity on her” (Z 265).

Dvoira disallows the kind of unburdening that her husband attempts in the final scene of “The Countrymen,” because for her to go further in her own unburdening would compromise the kernel of her identity. Dvoira’s prediction of the future of Jews in Russia and the Pale (to reiterate, she uses the term “Russia” broadly to include Ukraine and the rest of the Pale of Settlement) is bleak and devoid of hope. Dvoira’s words, “They’ll get hit on the head with a log,” suggest that to her Varvara is just one “good” Russian or Ukrainian in a mass of anti-Semites. Is this what Dvoira teaches her two surviving children, who grow up to assimilate after a Western fashion? I ask this question because Dvoira might as well have been the grandmother or mother of Shelley in Askold Melnyczuk’s novel, set in America in the 1980s. “Just tell [my mother] you’re a doctor from New Jersey,” Shelley instructs her future husband, a son of Ukrainian immigrants. “Will that work?”—“No.” By creating a head-on confrontation between a Jewish American woman and a Ukrainian American man, Askold Melnyczuk placed the unburdening of guilt in the hands of the grandchildren of the Pale—the children of the Shoah. It is to Melnyczuk’s novel and the difficult scene of the Ukrainian-Jewish confrontation that I would like to return.

5

In Ambassador of the Dead, descendants of Ukrainians and Jews confront each other so as to unburden themselves. Through them, voices of their foremothers and forefathers from the old country—voices of Ukrainians who died in the Famine of 1932–33 and of Jews who perished in the Shoah—continue to fight their battles of yore. To the children and grandchildren, these battles always mean both less and more than to their parents and grandparents. They are divested of the eyewitnesses’ and survivors’ sense of historical immediacy and shrouded in more layers of controversy. Consider this exchange once again:

“We don’t live on air. We have roots. Even now can you admit your complicity? Just once?”


I finally broke the silence. “So are you reformed?”

“Don’t change the subject,” her voice was sharp with experienced anger.

We glared at each other. “Why is it so hard for you to say these things?”

“Because I’d like to think I’m better than I am,” I said. (AD 251)
Better than yourself or better than your parents? Shelley might have asked, but she “backtracked” to her harshest accusations regarding the role some Ukrainian individuals played in the pogroms and as Nazi collaborators during the Shoah.

Twice throughout their first “session,” Nick Blud asks Shelley about her religion. “So are you orthodox?” Nick inquires. “You don’t know much, do you?” Shelley replies. “Most goyim know nothing about Jews except what they see on TV” (AD 249). Later, as they pass through the ugliest spiral of their dialogue, laden with mutual accusations, Nick asks Shelley if she is “reformed” (AD 251). I suspect that in Nick’s imagination, Orthodox Judaism represents a refusal to dialogue with non-Jews. The logic of Nick’s questions suggests that he hopes Shelley would be “reformed” as he associates less “orthodox” trends of Judaism with a greater openness. Even as she begins to unburden herself of the Jews’ charges against the Ukrainians, Shelley refuses to discuss her Judaism. Does she not see that even if it is conceived in historical and sociopolitical terms, the Jewish-Slavic confrontation is nearly always, inescapably about religion?

To recall the culminating scene of unburdening in Aizman’s “The Countrymen,” Varvara eats shabes dinner in the home of her Jewish hosts. For the first time in her life, this young Orthodox Christian woman observes Judaic religious rituals and even participates in them (singing the zemiros along with the old Jewish man). Into this story of a Jewish-Russian unburdening Aizman plants a number of salient references to Russian Orthodoxy. Varvara’s last name, Klobukova, derives from the Russian noun klobuk, the headgear of an Orthodox monk. Toward the end of her evening with the Shapiro family, Varvara finds a great likeness between Dvoira and her own relative, the wife of an Orthodox deacon. Speaking of “their young people,” who when “educated” are “so good, so good,” Shapiro recalls the son of a local priest, who was “exiled to Siberia” (Z 262; the priest’s son bears a Ukrainian first name, Vasyl). Both to Varvara and to the Shapiro family, religious aspects of their dialogue are organically inseparable from ethnic, socioeconomic, and historical aspects of their encounter. Aizman deliberately elects a religious setting, a Sabbath meal, to emphasize that a confrontation between the Jews and the Slavs is inevitably a confrontation between members of the Judaic and Christian religious communities.

Can the Jews and Slavs unburden each other of their mutual historical and sociopolitical accusations? In Melnyczuk’s novel, the answer seems to be a hopeful yet cautious “yes.” Can such an unburdening occur without a Judaic-Christian religious reconciliation? This is the question I would like to pose to Melnyczuk after reading Ambassador of the Dead. Even in the 1980s, two decades after the Second Vatican Council (1965) and the subsequent burgeoning of the Jewish-Christian dialogue, Shelley as a member of the Judaic faith community and Nick as a Catholic still stand widely apart. (The
Ukrainians in Melnyczuk’s novel come from the western part of Ukraine and are Roman Catholics).

One should be mindful of the fact that unlike Dvoira or Dvoira’s children in Aizman’s story, who come from the same area of Eastern Europe as does Varvara, Melnyczuk’s Shelley does not share with Nick her roots in the old country. Shelley’s charges against the Ukrainians are much more poignant given that her Jewish ancestors do not come from Eastern Europe, but from Germany. Furthermore, Melnyczuk gives Shelley a diverse family background: her mother is a Jew from Germany, her father an Italian American. Shelley is Jewish according to Jewish law, yet her background is multiethnic, and in that sense she is more American than Nick, whose parents are both Ukrainian.

Thinking of the terms on which Shelley confronts Nick, I am reminded of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s profound essay, “Confrontation.” Published in 1964, it sets the boundaries of Judaic-Christian dialogue in the following fashion: “The confrontation should occur not at a theological, but at a mundane human level. There, all of us speak the universal language of modern man. As a matter of fact, our common interests lie not in the realm of faith, but in that of the secular orders” (Soloveitchik 24). At the same time, I cannot help thinking of the responsa that Rabbi Moshe Feinstein sent to Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on 21 March 1967. Hoping to solicit Soloveitchik’s signature under his “Formula of the Prohibition” against any dialogue of “rabbis and priests,” Feinstein made the following point: “For, aside from the fact that nearly every matter is one of religion, as the priests have another way of viewing such matters, and aside from the fact that their only intention is to exploit these meetings to arrive at matters of faith, it is obvious that there is an issur (prohibition) against any connections with them, even on ostensibly social-political matters, at all times during every era” (Ellenson 123). Owing to several circumstances, Soloveitchik did not sign Feinstein’s prohibition.

The dialogue between Shelley and Nick (intuitively) underscores the complexity of the Jewish-Slavic confrontation where historical and sociopolitical matters are deeply intertwined with matters of religion and faith:

“For years I wished my mother would assimilate—my father’s Italian, from Brooklyn—but then I thought: look at the Jews of Germany. Her family had been there since they were expelled from Spain. They’d become German. Almost. By then they didn’t know who they were. And what difference did it make? They were never German to the Germans.”

“So are you orthodox?” [Nick] asked. (AD 249)

How do Nick and Shelley ease themselves of the colossal burden—their parents’ and their own—of guilt, pain, and mutual distrust? How do they unburden themselves of the centuries of Ukrainian-Jewish confrontation? What are the limits of such unburdening? Melnyczuk’s Nick and Shelley, a
Ukrainian American man and a Jewish American woman, are married, but their married life occurs in the novel’s margins and shaded corners. As Nick Blud explains, “the history of [their] mutual accommodations doesn’t belong here” (AD 252). Will histories of mutual accommodation by Jews and Ukrainians enter the space of Melnyczuk’s new fiction? I leave Melnyczuk’s novel with more questions than answers. I keep returning to the short story based on an earlier version of Melnyczuk’s novel, published in Southwest Review. In the earlier version, a Jewish woman refuses to give her phone number to her Ukrainian train companion, and the unburdening fails to take place. The Jewish woman wants no dialogue with the Ukrainian man.

6

David Aizman returned to Russia in 1902, the year he wrote “The Countrymen.” Despite two lengthy stays, first in France and later in Italy (1907–09), he never became an émigré and died in Russia in 1922. Nor did he eclipse the achievement of his own early fiction, of “The Countrymen” in particular. The Jewish theme remained central to Aizman’s works, but his vision and hope of a Jewish-Slavic dialogue was literally and figuratively drowned in blood during the ferocious pogroms of 1905–06. In the novella “In a Foreign Land,” Aizman voiced his populist beliefs through the character of the Jewish doctor, who persuades his husband to return to Russia from French exile:

Muzhik, Jew, it's all the same. The muzhik and the Jew have common interests. Whatever they say, our destiny is closely intertwined with the destiny of the Russian people: when they're more miserable, we too feel more pain [...]. The time will come when sunlight and its warmth will shine upon Russia, and then our suffering will end. The Jewish question will be solved by itself and forever eliminated. (Krovavyi razliv 2: 112)

Here the fragile narrative logic of Chekhov’s “Rothchild’s Fiddle” is dressed up in Gorkyan historicist rhetoric, and much of Aizman’s fiction would follow this direction, away from Chekhov and toward Gorky, Andreev, and neorealism. But as a faithful observer and fictionizer of contemporary life, Aizman could not help but register that during the pogroms the vast majority of the Russian and Ukrainian workers showed no class solidarity with their Jewish brethren. What a terrible position for Aizman and his characters to find themselves in! The Jewish doctor, her husband, and their son return to Russia alongside their creator only to discover that the émigré Dvoira Shapiro was right: “They’ll get hit on the head with a log.”

In Aizman’s famous stories of the early 1900s, “Anchi’s Morning,” “The Heart of Being,” and “Bloody Deluge,” we hear the writer’s agony over the impossibility of a Jewish-Slavic dialogue in Russia. The Slavic mob pogromizes, and only a handful of individuals offer the Jews shelter and
assistance. Fewer yet are willing to fight for the Jews, as does an Orthodox priest’s daughter in “Bloody Deluge,” who assassinates a governor for his inaction during the pogrom. The helpless Jewish population suffers and bleeds, a few young men and women resorting to armed self-defense. Some of the children of pogroms become Zionists and leave Russia; others turn to revolutionary activity that promises total liberation. After several gendarmes rape young Anchi’s fiancée in the police station, he wakes up with a mad desire for revenge. What kind of dialogue can there be under such conditions? What unburdening? Why should old Shapiro expect his wife Dvoira to respond to his “old song” about what might have happened if they had stayed in Krivaia Balka? Why does Dvoira refuse to entertain her husband’s fantasy of a harmony between Jews and Slavs, between members of the Judaic and the Christian communities in the Russian Empire? She had seen too much horror back in the Pale to be able to unburden herself of the blame she lays on Russians and Ukrainians.

Even today, it is difficult to remain hopeful about the prospects of Jewish-Russian and Jewish-Ukrainian dialogue after reading the account of a pogrom in Aizman’s “Bloody Deluge”: “The mob was gone. The apartment became completely quiet. Abram, by now stripped of most of his clothes, was thrown onto his daughter’s naked body. Hanna was lying where she had fallen down, and a bloody breast, cut off her daughter’s body, was pressed into her mouth” (Krovavyi razliv 1: 114). After having faced such descriptions, it is hard to open oneself to dialogue and unburdening. In “The Heart of Being,” a Jewish teacher goes insane after his entire family is killed during a pogrom. Speaking to the self-confessed pogromist Pavliuk, the teacher recounts the violence: “I never did any evil [...]. And the people came to my house [...] and killed my family [...] They held me tight by the arms and forced me to watch while five men raped her, pregnant [...] And after they raped her, they cut her belly and ripped the baby from it. And they put a couple of galoshes into her belly [...] They sat me down on a bench, held me tight, and sawed off my hand [...]” (Krovavyi razliv 1: 24).

But this is not how I would like to conclude. Ending on this note of horror and despair would mean that Aizman and Melnyczuk have not unburdened me, their reader. Like old Shapiro in Aizman’s story, I refuse to give up [...]. An émigré whose own children are becoming Westernized Jews, Shapiro still longs for his ancestral home in Ukraine. Standing alone under the French sky, Shapiro fantasizes about the time when Jews and Slavs will come to unburden each other in the old country. It is to Shapiro’s fantasy that I return in closing:

With his lone eye he gazed mournfully at the clear, docile moon pouring its light on this alien Chaumont as well as on that distant, sorrowful country, where they had taken out his eye, where his dear ones were buried, a country to which he felt such a solid, such a sacred claim. He
gazed, and in his despondent heart he sang again the old, old song: If only for the grandchildren, if only for the great-grandchildren, if only one day [...].

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An early version of this essay was delivered at “BORDERLINES: Judaic Literature and Culture in Eastern Europe,” the Ray Smith Symposium at Syracuse University in April 2002. I would like to thank its organizer, Ken Frieden, for giving me the opportunity to participate.

1. Melnyczuk, Ambassador of the Dead 248; hereafter AD; all subsequent references are to this edition.

2. Terrifying Magnetism is the working title of my book in progress on the Jewish question in Russian literature.

3. “Avtobiograficheskaia zametka,” Aizman, Redaktor Sohtsvev 5–11; here and hereafter all translations from the Russian are mine.


5. See Mironov and Mironova 27.


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