

YEHIEL RAVREBE: JEWISH POET AND SCHOLAR

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Yehiel Ravrebe (1883–1939), until recently a relatively obscure figure, has now begun to arouse interest in the Soviet Union/Commonwealth of Independent States, as well as abroad.¹ He was active in a surprising number of areas in both pre-Soviet and Soviet Jewish culture and, had his life not been cut short by Stalinist persecution, might have made even more of an impact than he did.

1. Life

Yehiel Izrailevich Ravrebe was born in the small town of Baranovka in the province of Volhyn (later the Zhitomir district) on April 3, 1883.² His father, a *shohet* (ritual slaughterer) and perhaps a *melamed* (teacher of children) as well, was a follower of the *tsaddik* (Hasidic rabbi) of Makarov, as were indeed all the town's inhabitants. Ravrebe has left some interesting memoirs of this personality in an essay in Russian, "The Wedding of the Makarov Tsaddik."³

From early childhood the boy impressed his neighbors with his outstanding memory and diligence. In addition to his attainments in the usual study of Bible and Talmud, for which he became known as an *ilui* (Talmudic prodigy), he also attained mastery of the Hebrew language and even the Kabbala. His

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1. See M. Beizer, *The Jews of St. Petersburg*, (Philadelphia, 1989), pp. 236–244. More recently there appeared the articles by Kh. Firin (= Victor Kel'ner), "Zhizn' i gibel' Iekhielia Ravrebe" (The life and death of Yehiel Ravrebe), *Narod moi* (Leningrad), No. 13 (1991), p. 5, and by Valerii Gessen, "Razreshite dopolnit'" (Allow me to add), *Narod moi*, No. 2 (1992), p. 1. The authors thank Mr. Kel'ner, who lives in St. Petersburg, for providing some of the documents on which this article is based, and Dan Haruv of Jerusalem for bibliographic assistance.
 2. We accept the date in Rejzen's biographic article in his *Leksikon fun der Yidisher literatur, prese un filologye* (Lexicon of Yiddish literature, press, and philology), 2nd ed., Vol. 4 (Vilna, 1929), col. 260, presumably based on information furnished by Ravrebe himself who, it should be noted, spelled his name רברבי in Hebrew and Yiddish. Dov Krivitski, Ravrebe's cousin, contributed a biographic article in Hebrew to the *Zhvil* memorial volume, in which he prefers 1882 as the year of birth: "Yehiel Ravrebe," *Zhvil* (Tel Aviv, 1962), p. 145. On the other hand, an autobiographical report Ravrebe composed for his workplace gave 1884. Both of these dates seem incorrect. The Centre for Research and Documentation of East European Jewry of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem has obtained photocopies of several questionnaires submitted by Ravrebe when he was working at the State Public Library in Leningrad in the 1930s. We shall cite them further as follows: Quest. 1 = "Lichnyi listok po uchetu kadrov" (Personal document report for manpower [department], October 8, 1937; Quest. 2 = *Trudovoi spisok* (employment record). His workplace autobiography, "Moia avtobiografia" (My autobiography), was also dated October 8, 1937. For whatever reason, Ravrebe would sometimes change data from one document to the next.
 3. "Svad'ba makarovskogo tsadika," *Evreiskaia letopis'*, Vol. 4 (1926), p. 159–167.

youthful Yiddish and Hebrew poems were published and elicited a compliment from the leading Hebrew poet Chaim Nachman Bialik.⁴ His literary success led to his becoming acquainted with Jewish intellectuals of his province. At the same time he was attracted to socialism, which led to police searches of his home for illegal literature.⁵ The fact that he published his early Yiddish poetry mostly in socialist-territorialist organs may indicate that he favored that trend in Jewish socialism.

In 1906, engaged to be married⁶ and, as an only son, exempt from army service, Ravrebe made his way to Vilna, the capital of Jewish learning. His parents assisted him in his efforts to gain a higher education in the "Jerusalem of Lithuania." In time he would obtain both *semikha* (rabbinic ordination) and an external matriculation certificate.⁷ In Vilna he broke with the socialists and became friendly with persons from the opposite end of the spectrum, such as the official or "crown" rabbi and the Hebrew writer Judah Leib Kantor.⁸

In 1908⁹ the young writer and Talmudist moved to the capital, St. Petersburg, where he became a student at the "Higher Oriental Courses," actually a seminary of Jewish studies, sponsored by Baron David Guenzburg. This institution, though short-lived and with few students, produced a galaxy of Jewish talents in various fields, among others the Zionist leader Zalman Shazar, the historians Yehezkel Kaufman and Solomon Zeitlin, and the Hebrew writer Zvi Woyslawski. Ravrebe gradually abandoned Yiddish belles lettres, but continued to publish Hebrew poetry until after the Bolshevik Revolution. His classmate Zalman Rubashov, later Zalman Shazar, president of Israel, recalled in a revealing essay that Ravrebe would take the part of the Hebraists against the Yiddishists in the "Jewish Literary Society," although he was too introverted to be much of a debater.¹⁰ He was also active in the "Lovers of Hebrew" society, under the auspices of which he translated Saint-Saens' opera *Samson and*

4. Reizen (see note 2), col. 261.

5. Krivitski (see note 2), p. 146.

6. His wife Esfir (Esther) Leibenson was from his home town.

7. On the basis of the "autobiography," the matriculation was obtained during the St. Petersburg period of his life.

8. Krivitski (see note 2), p. 146. For a more impressionistic portrait, see Zalman Shazar: "Yehiel Ravrebe," *Zhvil*, p. 139-145. We cite the 1962 version of Shazar's essay in the *Zhvil* memorial volume rather than the earlier version (*Moznayyim*, Vol. 25 [September 1955], p. 231-235, reprinted with minor changes in his *Or ishim* [Light of personalities], new ed., Vol. 2 [Jerusalem, 1973], p. 82-90) because in the memorial volume some lapses of memory in connection with the attempt to bring Ravrebe to Palestine were corrected.

9. "Autobiography."

10. Shazar, "Yehiel Ravrebe" (see note 8), p. 141. Bertha Joffe, who as a girl had private Hebrew lessons from Ravrebe and also knew him in later years, has described him to the authors as a "farshlosener mentsh" (closed person). Mrs. Joffe, daughter of the St. Petersburg rabbi David Tebele Katsenelenbogn and today a resident of Haifa, must be one of the last persons living who knew the childless writer personally.

Delila into Hebrew.¹¹ This opera, unlike some others translated by Ravrebe, was actually performed before an enthusiastic audience (in the hall of the St. Petersburg Conservatory on March 20, 1912), with the translator active in all stages of preparation.¹² Apparently the first opera ever performed in Hebrew, *Samson and Delila* was staged once more in 1915.¹³

In addition to pursuing these literary activities, Ravrebe was an outstanding student and, consequently, was asked to become a teacher at Baron Guenzburg's "Courses." The outbreak of World War I, however, put an end to the institution. During the war years, Ravrebe lacked steady employment; he reported teaching Hebrew, history, and literature in the Jewish schools of the capital until March 22, 1917, and we know that he also gave private Hebrew lessons.¹⁴

A turn for the better came in 1919. On February 2 of that year¹⁵ he began to teach at the newly opened "Jewish University," later referred to as the Institute of Higher Jewish Studies¹⁶ in Petrograd, and remained on its faculty until its liquidation on June 1, 1925. There he taught Semitic languages and medieval Hebrew literature, while also serving as the institution's librarian.¹⁷ Simultaneously he enrolled in the Oriental Faculty of Petrograd University, from which he graduated in 1922. After the Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society resumed activity, he became a member of its governing committee and its museum commission,¹⁸ and from 1920 to 1926 reorganized the museum's archive. From 1924 to 1926 he was also director of what he called the Jewish academic library.¹⁹

In 1927 Ravrebe accepted an invitation to teach Semitics at the Belorus-

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11. *Shimshon u-Delila*, translated from French into Hebrew by Y. Ravrebe (St. Petersburg, 1912).
 12. G. Kressel, "Hatsagat ha-opera ha-ivrit ha-rishona" (The performance of the first Hebrew opera), *Bamah*, Vol. 50-I (1971), pp. 161-168; cf. *ha-Safah*, Vol. 1 (1912), pp. 39-41.
 13. Reizen (see note 2), col. 262.
 14. "Autobiography." There is a gap in Ravrebe's employment record for the rest of 1917 and 1918. This may explain why he reported starting to teach at the "Jewish University" in Petrograd in 1918, though the institution only opened its doors in February 1919. We assume that he had something to conceal and, indeed, his early Jewish education was never reported by him for obvious reasons. He also consistently reported teaching *evreiskii iazyk* (the Jewish language), which in contemporary Soviet usage meant Yiddish, while, of course, he taught Hebrew.
 15. 1918, according to Quest. 1 and "Autobiography" (see previous Note).
 16. See Binyamin Lukin, "Jewish Scholarly Life in Leningrad in the mid-1920s: Background to a Letter," *Jews and Jewish Topics in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, No. 2(15) (1991), pp. 66-75.
 17. Quest. 2.
 18. The Historical Society's activity reports, *Evreiskaia starina*, Vol. 11 (1924), pp. 396-397; *ibid*, Vol. 12 (1928), p. 406.
 19. Quest. 2. Reference is evidently to the combined library of the Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society and of the Society for the Spread of Enlightenment among the Jews of Russia, which was in large part transferred to the Ukrainian Academy of Arts and Sciences Institute for Jewish Culture, in Kiev, after "bourgeois" societies were liquidated early in 1930.

sian State University and Hebrew at the Jewish section of its Pedagogical Faculty, and moved to Minsk.²⁰ In the wake of intra-Party conflicts and the campaign against "bourgeois nationalism" these courses soon became problematic; the Hebrew courses were renamed "Hebraisms in Yiddish" and, at the end of the decade, eliminated altogether.²¹ In 1930 he returned to Leningrad, where the Jewish institutions at which he had previously worked no longer existed. The same year his wife died. For a long time he had little or no work²² until, in August, 1931, he managed to find employment at the Hebrew section of the State Public Library's manuscript division, evidently obtaining the position formerly held by the scholar David Maggid. Ravrebe was soon promoted from librarian second class to the principal librarian of the section; at that time he prepared a systematic description of the Hebrew manuscripts in the second Firkovich collection.²³ In this post he was wont to complain that his administrative responsibilities had an adverse effect on his scholarly productivity.²⁴ The librarian-scholar did succeed in obtaining a large room in a shared flat. This was in a huge house on what was later called Kirov Prospekt, where he lived with his mother-in-law and his nephew Pinhas Zal'tsman and where Kirov lived until his assassination in 1934.

The State Public Library attempted to assist its employee, who enjoyed a growing reputation as a Semitics scholar. Repeated efforts to obtain an additional room as a study did not bear fruit.²⁵ More important was an attempt, after academic titles and degrees were restored in the country in 1934, to gain for Ravrebe both the title of academic worker and the degree of Doctor of Science.²⁶ Despite support by member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences V. V. Struve, both requests were rejected and were, in fact, withdrawn in 1937, when Ravrebe became a political liability to the institution.²⁷

Meanwhile, in Palestine, Ravrebe's relative, Dov Krivitski of Rehovot,

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20. Ibid.; cf. A. Greenbaum, *Jewish Scholarship and Scholarly Institutions in Soviet Russia, 1918-1953* (Jerusalem, 1978), esp. pp. 57, 88.
 21. See the report on Minsk pedagogical courses published in *Di Yidishe sprach*, Vol. 4/5 (1930), p. 94. In 1929 Ravrebe was accused by the former Poale Zionist and militant Communist Zvi Fridland of expressing a preference for Hebrew over Yiddish in his Minsk courses. See Mordechai Altshuler, *ha-Yevsektsia* (Tel Aviv, 1981), p. 267, citing the Yiddish newspaper *Oktyabr*, Sept. 15, 1929.
 22. He worked for brief periods as bookkeeper in a children's sanatorium and as assistant librarian in the Leningrad Hydrological Institute (Quest. 2).
 23. I. Ianon, *Reshimat kitvei-yad be-'aravit-yehudit be-Leningrad* (A Handlist of Judeo-Arabic Manuscripts in Leningrad), (Jerusalem, 1991), p. 10.
 24. Quest. 2.
 25. Reports of the Housing Administration of the Leningrad soviet in 1934 and 1935, from the files of the Leningrad Public Library.
 26. Struve's petition to the Attestation Commission of the People's Commissariat of Education of the RSFSR was considered on December 5, 1935. Kel'ner has reprinted the petition in his article on Ravrebe (see note 1).
 27. Attestation Commission (see previous note), session of April 5, 1938.

began an effort to secure an immigration certificate for him. With the help of the poet Bialik, the writer Asher Barash, the journalist Zalman Rubashov, and the bank executive Zaks, he succeeded, but it appears that Ravrebe did not make use of the certificate.²⁸

Ravrebe's arrest can now be dated with certainty to the night between October 25 and 26, 1937, on the basis of both the Library's note stating that on October 26 Ravrebe "left work," and the arrest and trial record obtained last June from the Leningrad branch of the KGB.

The investigation of Ravrebe was combined with that of the physician and Hebrew poet Nahum Shvarts, who was arrested at approximately the same time. The file of the investigation states that Ravrebe and Shvarts had been the last members still at large of a "nationalist group" arrested in 1934, which included Bobrovskii, Haim Shteinson (Lenski), Robert Levin, Vil'kovich, Shimon Tribukov (ha-Boneh), Alexander Zarkhin, Zarin, and Efim Raize. In fact, the above-named belonged to a small circle of poets and lovers of Hebrew literature centered around the outstanding Hebrew poet Lenski.²⁹ Ravrebe and Shvarts were charged, *inter alia*, with establishing contacts with Zionist-Revisionists and with the "clerical" Chief Rabbi of Palestine, Abraham Isaac Kook.³⁰

Charged with being a member of a fascist, Zionist, and anti-Soviet group which tried to undermine Soviet nationality policy, Ravrebe was sentenced on May 8, 1938, to eight years of forced labor, and sent to Siberia.³¹ On February 7, 1939, he died in a transit camp near Vladivostok on the way to Magadan.³² Ravrebe's case was officially "closed" only in 1989.

As tragic irony would have it, Ravrebe wrote in his workplace "autobiography" on October 8, 1937, a few weeks before his arrest: "The second period of my life begins with the October Revolution, when I—a shadow of a

28. Krivitski (n. 2), p. 146. Shazar (n. 8), p. 145, has a different and unlikely story about trying to rescue Ravrebe from Siberia by means of the immigration certificate. Still another version is found in an article by M. Ungerfeld, "Ha-tov vеха-metiv" (The good one who does good), *La-merhav*, January 8, 1971, pp. 6, 8. There Bialik, on the basis of a letter by him dated January 1, 1934, is given credit for the successful effort to obtain the certificate. It is, of course, possible that Ravrebe never received the certificate, although Krivitski reports receiving confirmation that it had been sent to the British consul in Moscow.

29. See: Haim Lenski, *Me-ever nehar ha-Lethe* (Beyond the Lethe), enlarged edition (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1986); Hamutal Bar-Yosef, "Was Haim Lenski a Shlimazl?", *Jews and Jewish Topics in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, No. 2(15) (1991), pp. 48–54; and Mordechai Altshuler, "Shenotav ha-aharonot shel Haim Lenski" (The last years of Haim Lenski), introduction to and letters by and to Haim Lenski, *Behinot*, No. 8/9 (1977–1978), pp. 141–222.

30. See Gessen (note 1).

31. For the trial record, see appendix.

32. The date and place of death were first disclosed in a letter and an unpublished article by Valerii Gessen. The authors wish to thank Mr. Gessen for his assistance in this and other instances. Ravrebe's year of death has erroneously been recorded by some writers as 1955; this was the year in which news of his death reached Israel and led to Shazar's above-mentioned commemorative article.

man—turned into a living person, who under the completely changed conditions became a participant in the cultural and scientific life of our country.”

2. Works

As noted above, Ravrebe began his literary career as a poet. Due to the imprecise bibliographic information in Rejzen's *Lexicon*, we have been unable to locate all his Yiddish poetry, some of which may have appeared under pseudonyms.³³ Nor do we know whether his poetry in Yiddish or Hebrew ever evoked the response of critics. However, there are indications that his poems were read by an appreciative audience. The facts that numerous journals and miscellanies accepted them and that he was a frequent contributor to the leading Hebrew literary journal *ha-Shiloah* until 1917 are indicative. Further evidence that he was well thought of as a poet are a protest of his omission from the first edition of Rejzen's *Lexicon* in 1914³⁴ and a note of regret by Zalman Rubashov in 1929 that Ravrebe had given up belles-lettres in favor of research and that his name was not to be found among the Hebrew writers struggling to publish inside or outside the Soviet Union.³⁵

The reasons for the change noted by Rubashov are not hard to find. Hebrew writing at that time was counter-indicated for a Soviet scholar beginning his career, while his Yiddish poetry was hardly to the taste of the Communist critics. This may be the real meaning of Rejzen's concluding sentence, obviously based on information received from Ravrebe himself: "His latest belles-lettristic works (poetry and prose of a mystical character) in Hebrew and Yiddish are as yet unpublished."³⁶

This "mystical character" is typical also of much of his published belles-lettres, which often seem to deal with the wonders of creation and nature.³⁷ There is scarcely a poem of his in which night does not appear and the forest is frequently pictured as well. A number of poems celebrate quiet and alone-

33. A poem such as "Herbst" (Autumn), published in *Der nayer veg*, No. 24, December 4 (17), 1906, and signed A.-ski, could be his on stylistic grounds, but one cannot be certain.

34. In reviewing the first (one volume) editions of Rejzen's *Lexicon of Yiddish Literature* in 1914, B. Kremer bracketed Ravrebe with Devorah Baron and other "talented writers" who wrote in Yiddish as well as in Hebrew and should have been included (*Shaharit*, Vol. 2, No. 2 [1914], pp. 40-41). They were included in the much expanded 4-volume edition published in the 1920s. There was also a complaint when, some forty years later, G. Kressel did not include Ravrebe in his *Leksikon ha-sifrut ha-ivrit* (Lexicon of Hebrew literature). Kressel noted apologetically that he had intended to include Ravrebe but the publisher's limitations on the size of the volume prevented it; see his article cited above (note 12), pp. 162-163.

35. Rubashov, in welcoming his friend's reappearance in print in the 1928 issue of *Evreiskaia starina*, stated: "We are grateful for that [his research] too, but it is no substitute for his poetry," Z. Rubashov, "Im kovets histori be-Leningrad" (On a historical collection [published] in Leningrad), *ha-Tekufah*, Vol. 25 (1929), pp. 630-631.

36. Rejzen's biographic entry on Ravrebe (see note 2).

37. See one of his early poems, "Mir iz tayer" (This is dear to me), *Folksshtime*, No. 6 (April 30, 1906), vol. 55. There are many other examples.

ness.³⁸ Some Hebrew poems are addressed to a female figure, but it is not clear whether to a real or imaginary beloved, or to the poet's muse.³⁹ His only prose sketch, in Yiddish, about a world peopled with strange creatures, is strangely reminiscent of and possibly influenced by *Der Nister*.⁴⁰

Exceptional among his works is a wartime poem which expressed hope for an end to the frightening events.⁴¹ Another, possibly related poem, about the calm after a storm, may have anti-revolutionary nuances.⁴² A mystical nature poem from 1918 is his last known publication in the field of original belles-lettres.⁴³

No work of literary criticism by Ravrebe is known, but one publicistic article—the only one we have discovered—touches on current literary concerns. In 1922, in a Russian-language article, Ravrebe condemns Jewish poets “in both languages” who indulge in poems of revolutionary elan and joy while ignoring the tragedies which have recently overtaken the Jews around them. The “miracle of joy and good cheer,” as the literary historian Israel Zinberg referred to the phenomenon of pro-revolutionary Jewish poets, was indeed miraculous under the circumstances, but hardly joyous or cheerful.⁴⁴

Ravrebe's successful translation of Saint-Saens' opera *Samson and Delila* was mentioned above. Some other librettos he translated remain unpublished, but the story “The Copper Snake,” translated by Ravrebe from Hebrew into Russian, appeared in 1923.⁴⁵

The same year can serve as a dividing line between Ravrebe's belles-lettristic and scholarly work, although it should be noted that he had participated in a pioneering folklore publication in 1914.⁴⁶ Ravrebe's post-1918 scholarly work can be divided into that in Yiddish and in Russian. Yiddish was the language of his officially sponsored Soviet Jewish research and reflected his asso-

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38. See, for example, “Banahal” (By the Stream), *ha-Shiloah*, Vol. 19 (July-December, 1908), pp. 25–26; “A boym” (A tree), *Yugend*, ed. Zerubavel (Stanislaw, 1908), p. 1918.
39. E.g., “Ben ha-'arbayyim” (At eventide), *ha-Shiloah*, Vol. 28 (January-June 1913), p. 272; “Lehatim” (Heat), *ibid.*, Vol. 29 (July-December 1913), p. 551.
40. “In vald” (In the forest), *Di velt*, No. 2 (1907), p. 72–75. *Der Nister* (real name Pinhas Kahanovich) was forced by Soviet criticism to change to a realistic style. Later he was one of the Jewish writers killed by Stalin between 1948 and 1952.
41. “Bimetsulah” (In the depths), *ha-Shiloah*, Vol. 32 (January 1915–June 1917), p. 153.
42. “Min ha-sa'arah” (From the storm), *ibid.*, Vol. 34 (January-June 1918), p. 220.
43. “Afarsemon” (The persimmon tree), *ha-Tekufah*, Vol. 2 (April-June 1918), pp. 568–572.
44. “Poeziia i zhizn” (Poetry and life), *Evreiskii vestnik*, No. 3 (June, 1922), pp. 10–11.
45. D. Frishman, “Mednyi zmei,” translated from Hebrew by I. I. Ravrebe, *Evreiskii al'manakh*, ed. B. I. Kaufman and I. A. Kleinman (Petrograd, Moscow, 1923), p. 76–82 (original title: *Nehash ha-nehoshet*). Nothing seems to have come from an offer by Ravrebe to translate Israel Zinberg's *History of Jewish Literature* from Russian into Hebrew; see the Bialik-Zinberg correspondence on the subject in Zinberg, *Toledot sifrut Yisrael*, Vol. 7 (Tel Aviv, 1971), pp. 207, 214–215, and in H. N. Bialik, *Iggerot* (Letters), Vol. 3 (Tel Aviv, 1938), pp. 212, 213.
46. Sh. An-ski, *Dos yudishe etnografishe program* (The Jewish ethnographic program), with the collaboration of Ravrebe and others, ed. L. Ia. Shternberg (Petrograd, 1914).

ciation in the 1920s with the Jewish Department of the Institute for Belorussian Culture (later the Belorussian Academy of Sciences) in Minsk. Russian was the language he employed at the same time for works intended for the Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society's journal *Evreiskaia starina*. In the 1930s, after the Society's liquidation, he submitted Russian contributions to general Soviet academic publications.

Ravrebe's associations with the "bourgeois" historical society and his remoteness from Communist militancy soon drew the ire of Party critics. His memoir of a wedding at the court of the *Tsaddik* of Makarov, which had nostalgic overtones and included a call for research on the Hasidic movement, led to a polemical attack and an ironic reference to him as the "Makarov Marxist."⁴⁷ A review by Ravrebe of Klausner's book on Jesus, which mentioned the "race factor"—i.e., Jewish-Christian relations—was viewed as pandering to nationalism.⁴⁸ It is possible that an article in *Evreiskaia starina*, on a traveler from Palestine to Poland, reflected concealed Zionism.⁴⁹ Two Yiddish articles on Aramaic and Hebrew of the ancient and medieval periods seem to have appeared without criticism although the topics themselves were problematic, as was Ravrebe's teaching Hebrew at the Jewish section of the Minsk pedagogical faculty.⁵⁰ However, his familiarity with Talmudic and later rabbinic literature was rare in Soviet scholarship and led to his employment in the Minsk responsa project, in which rabbinic responsa were excerpted as an aid to the study of Jewish social history.⁵¹

In his above-mentioned articles on Hebrew and Aramaic philology, Ravrebe espoused the view that the language of the Mishna was the living Hebrew of the time, not an artificial scholar's idiom.⁵² He also presented the

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47. See L. Holmstok and Y. Rubin, "Afn front fun der Yidisher historiografye" (On the front of Jewish historiography), *Tsum XV yortog fun der Oktyabr-revolutsye: historisher zamlbukh* (On the 15th anniversary of the October Revolution: historical collection), (Minsk, 1932), pp. 144, 149. Reference is to Ravrebe's "Svad'ba makarovskogo tsadika" (see note 3).
48. Holmstok and Rubin (see note 47), p. 149, attacked Ravrebe's review of Klausner's *Yeshu hanotsri* (Jesus the Christian), *Evreiskaia starina*, Vol. 11 (1924), pp. 348–349. See also the attack on Ravrebe and on the Minsk historian Israel Sosis by Kh. Dunets, "Af eynem fun di sektorn fun der natsarbet" (About one of the sectors of the national work), *Shtern*, Vol. 10/11 (1930), p. 59.
49. Ravrebe, "Puteshestvennik kontsa XVIII veka: Avraam Kunki" (A traveler of the end of the 18th century: Avraam Kunki), *Evreiskaia starina*, Vol. 12 (1928), pp. 208–212.
50. His main Yiddish articles are: "Di vokalizirung fun ayin in Semitishe shprakhn un in alt-Yiddish" (The vocalization of "ayin" in Semitic languages and in old Yiddish), *Tsaytskrift*, Vol. 2/3 (1928), pp. 733–740; and his more extensive "Tsu der shprakhforshung ba Yidn in di letste yorhundertn far der Kristlikher ere" (Some research on Jewish languages in the last centuries before the Christian era), *Shriftn fun Pedfak Yidseksye, Vaysrusishe melukhe-universitet* (Minsk, 1929), pp. 77–100, probably his last article in Yiddish.
51. *Byuletin fun Yidopteyl, Institut far Vaysruslendisher kultur*, No. 1 (1926), p. 2; No. 2 (1926), p. 3. Cf. "Nauchnaia khronikha" (Scientific chronicle), *Evreiskii vestnik*, ed. S. M. Ginsburg (Leningrad, 1928), p. 219. B. Shulman worked on this project with Ravrebe; part of the material was published in Yiddish translation in *Tsaytskrift*, Vol. 1 (1926), pp. 225–238.
52. Ravrebe, "Tsu der shprakhforshung," (see note 50), p. 83.

interesting idea that the shift from the late books of the Bible (Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Job) to apocryphal works, such as the Books of Maccabees, reflected a change from a universal to a national perspective, resulting from the newly-gained independence of the Jewish people.⁵³

It was only in the 1930s, after having been discredited in Minsk, when Ravrebe returned to Leningrad to work in the manuscript division of the Public Library,⁵⁴ that he came into his own as an Orientalist and that his most important article appeared. In it he analyzed some recently discovered Canaanite texts from Ras Shamra (Ugarit). The article, in the Bulletin of the Academy of Sciences, caused a stir even outside the USSR.⁵⁵

His arrest in 1937 put an end to what had promised to be an impressive career in Soviet Oriental studies. His unpublished writings are said to have been burned by the relatives with whom he lived after his wife's death.

Ravrebe's file shows that he had completed for publication a *divan* of Moshe ibn Ezra's poetry and a collection of Jewish Aramaic epigraphy. In addition, the first volume of his catalogue of documents on the Karaites of the USSR was actually in press, but was presumably not published because of the author's arrest. One would like to know if unpublished scholarly manuscripts from Ravrebe's pen came into the possession of the Soviet Academy of Sciences after his arrest, as was the case with Zinberg. If so, perhaps they too can be made available.

Appendix

CERTIFICATE

On the basis of materials in the Division of the KGB of the USSR for Leningrad province, it appears that Ravrebe, Iekhiel Izrailevich, born April 1883, a native of Volhyn province, the shtetl of Baranovka, a Jew, non-Party member, with higher education, before his arrest worked as a scientific staff member of the State Public Library, and lived at Kirov Prospekt, No. 26/28, apt. 32.

He was arrested on October 26, 1937. Charged with "being a fierce nationalist who was hostile toward the policy of the All-Union Communist

53. Ibid., pp. 84–85.

54. He provided a description of the Hebrew manuscript collection in the Library's *Informatsionnyi biulleten' evreiskoi gruppy ot dela natsional'nostei*, Vol. 1–2 (1935), pp. 36–39.

55. Ravrebe, "O klinopisnykh tekstakh iz Ras-Shamra" (On cuneiform texts from Ras-Shamra), *Izvestiia Akademii nauk, Otdelenie obshchestvennykh nauk*, No. 1 (1935), pp. 85–102. Krivitski (see note 2), pp. 146–147, claims, on the basis of a newspaper clipping from the United States, that Ravrebe deciphered previously undecipherable texts from Ras Shamra. It seems, however, on the basis of the article and the positive reaction of the Soviet Bible scholar I. G. Frank-Kamenetskii, that Ravrebe suggested different readings of previously interpreted texts. See Frank-Kamenetskii, "K voprosu razvitiia drevneevreiskogo glagola," (On the question of the development of the Hebrew verb), *Jazyk i myshlenie*, 3/4 (1935), pp. 44–46.

Party (Bolsheviks), an active participant in a counter-revolutionary illegal Jewish, nationalistic, fascist group which had as its goal the establishment of a powerful counter-revolutionary Zionist organization to oppose the nationality policy of the Soviet regime," i.e., with the crime stipulated in articles 58-10 and 58-11 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR.

By a decision of a Special Meeting at the NKVD of the USSR on May 8, 1938, I. I. Ravrebe was sentenced to eight years in a corrective labor camp, for which punishment he was to be sent to Sevvostlag [North-east camp] (Kolyma).

By a decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR of January 16, 1989, based on the conclusion of the procurator of the city of Leningrad of March 30, 1989, the case against I. I. Ravrebe was closed.

Simultaneously we are sending to you a photocopy of I. I. Ravrebe's *Trudovoi spisok* (employment record) and certificate that he was an associate of the State Public Library.

Employee of the Department of the KGB of the USSR of Leningrad province
A. N. Evseev

June 17, 1991

[stamped with seal]