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Jewish Culture and History

Testing the Boundaries: Migration and Metamorphosis in Two Short Stories by Lev Lunts

“A work of literature may reflect the times,  
but may also not reflect the times and be none the worse for it.”<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract*

*Through a reading of fiction and letters by Lev Lunts (1900-1924), this article argues that a positive and independent attitude to being a Russian Jewish writer was entirely possible in the early 1920s. Unlike Babel and Mandelstam, Lunts interrogated his hyphenated identity by inventing stories of migration to different places and times, using the devices of time-travel, metamorphosis, and fantasy. His two short stories: “The Homeland” (1922) and “Crossing the Border” (1923) see semi-autobiographical characters traversing liminal spaces between the Jewish and the Russian, East and West, past and present. Lunts and his characters are attracted and repelled by the boundaries imposed by genre, ideology, citizenship, ethnicity, taste, and language.*

In the years immediately after the Revolution, the young writer, Lev Lunts, rejected proletarian realism, modernist prose and the Russian tradition.<sup>2</sup> In forging his own idiosyncratic path, he openly explored the complexities of identifying as a Russian Jewish writer. In sharp contrast to the earnest contributions to Gorky’s *The Shield* (1916), or to Mandelstam and Babel’s better known autobiographical prose, Lunts subjected the issues faced by Petrograd’s established Jewish population to parody, satire, and even to fantasy.

Reading Lunts's prose expands awareness of the diversity of approaches to being a Russian Jewish writer that were available in the early 1920s.

While Lunts is anthologised in Shroyer's *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature* (2007), and discussed briefly in Murav's *Music from a Speeding Train: Jewish Literature in Post-Revolution Russia* (2011), the nature of his Jewishness has barely been explored.<sup>3</sup> Even the introduction to the most rigorously annotated complete works available in Russian states that "Lunts's Jewishness is as abstract as Lunts's Spain."<sup>4</sup> Given the significant difference between being a student fascinated by Spanish literature and a writer who sees in his own hyphenated identity a source of inspiration for experimental prose, this statement must be questioned. In this essay, I explore the parameters of Lunts's self-identification as a Russian Jewish writer, before turning to a discussion of two short stories. Written between 1922 and 1923, "The Homeland," and "Crossing the Border," demonstrate Lunts's interrogation of what it meant to be a Russian Jewish writer. These two stories involve migration across geographical, political, and even temporal borders; they are populated by characters who undergo physical metamorphoses and adopt disguises. Many of these transformations involve the protagonists becoming more, less, or differently Jewish. While a status quo is restored at the end of each story, ambiguities of belonging or identification remain unresolved. Lunts and his characters are both attracted and repelled by borders and the capacious space between them.

### *A Russian Jew in Petrograd*

Lev Natanovich Lunts (1901—1924) was born in St Petersburg and spent almost all his short life in the city. His parents, a supplier of pharmaceutical instruments and a concert pianist, had emigrated there from Vilna Gubernia in the late nineteenth century. Lunts fulfilled all the expectations that they could have invested in the next generation. After

graduating from the First St Petersburg Gymnasium in 1918, he enrolled at the Petrograd University and Pedagogical Institute simultaneously, studying for degrees in history and Romance languages. A precocious and energetic student, he was eager to contribute to the formation of post-revolutionary culture; he worked for the theatre division of the newly-created *Narkompros* and taught literature at the State Institute of the History of Art before receiving his degree.<sup>5</sup> While the years immediately following the Revolution saw Petrograd's population suffering terrible privations and acute shortages of food and fuel, Maxim Gorky fostered a vigorous cultural scene by supporting students and their literary mentors.<sup>6</sup> Gorky's House of Arts, often remembered as an 'ark' for preserving the intelligentsia from some of the consequences of the Revolution, was a communal living and work space established in the very centre of Petrograd. Lunts left his parents' home in early 1921 to live in the House of Arts and it was here, among a congenial community of writers, that he founded a literary circle, the Serapion Brothers.

The Serapion Brothers, some of whom were women, produced poetry, plays, fiction, playful manifestos, and autobiographies; they maintained an apolitical stance, and rejected realism as the foundation of Soviet literature. Despite his broad support of the Revolution, Lunts offered a damning appraisal of new Soviet literature: "We consider Russian literature of our day to be remarkably sedate, stuffy, and monotonous. We are *permitted* to write stories, novels, and tedious dramas in either the old style or the new, which must be without fail about everyday life, and without fail contain current themes."<sup>7</sup> He also argued that, because Russian writers had not nurtured a tradition of adventure stories and exciting plot, the Serapions would have to find their inspiration in Western literature by Stevenson, Dumas, and Dickens. Lunts's first play, *Outside the Law* [*Vne zakona*], a tragedy set in Spain was banned by Glavrepertkom and criticised as contrarevolutionary by Lunacharskii.<sup>8</sup> Lunts's opinions and work were to become so unacceptable that, twenty years after his death, Lunts

was still deemed worthy of condemnation by Andrei Zhdanov for his “rotten a-politicism and petty-bourgeoisism.”<sup>9</sup> Today, Lunts is a rare figure among twentieth-century Russian writers to whom readers’ affection is straightforward: his death in 1924 meant that he did not have to face any of the complications, or make any of the compromises that became increasingly necessary to operating as a writer in the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup> Until the 1990s he was largely known by name only from the attack by Zhdanov, a circumstance that naturally raised his profile among curious readers and encouraged them to ‘discover’ and republish his works as soon as it was feasible.

Published sources by and about Lunts are limited to the first – also the last – few years of his adult life in which his health worsened. While living in the House of Arts he was confronted with the dilemma of emigrating or remaining in Petrograd. Lunts’s parents emigrated to Germany in the summer of 1921 and agitated for him to join them. In theory, Lunts would have been able to join his family in obtaining Lithuanian citizenship and thereby receive an exit visa from Russia. In practice, his being of age for military service, and the bureaucracy that necessitated simultaneous applications in both Petrograd and Moscow, made this a complex undertaking.<sup>11</sup> Lunts struggled with his reluctance to leave Petrograd and his literary circle: his home and sources of inspiration. His literary friends and mentors who had already emigrated to Germany had set unattractive examples with their descriptions of paralysing apathy and homesickness.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, Lunts knew he could address the serious decline in his health by exchanging his damp, under-heated room in the House of Arts for his parents’ new home and the care of German doctors. In a letter to Gorky from August, 1922, he wrote: “I must go... but I don’t want to go.”<sup>13</sup> A month later, he offered his parents an extensive list of reasons why he would not join them: “Not because I can’t but because I don’t want to.” In this letter, he described his sense of rootedness in his native land, explaining that being Jewish had no effect on this strong conviction: “I can’t be without

Russia, I am a Jew, but my native land is Russia and my native language is Russian.”<sup>14</sup> By the end of September 1922, another letter to his parents saw him pointing out that it was his second Jewish New Year without them; he complained: “You write little and seldom, yet there are four of you and one of me,” and asked why they had not left behind any kerosene. By the end of 1922, his attachment had evidently shifted in the direction of his family. “I want to go abroad with a new zeal,” he wrote, and explained that Gorky had invited him on a research trip to Spain to help him get an exit visa. In March, 1923, Lunts informed his parents that he had received his visa; he left Russia for Germany on the 1<sup>st</sup> June. After several days spent in Berlin with homesick Russian friends, Lunts was to spend the rest of his life near his parents in German sanatoria; he died on 10 May 1924, at the age of 23.

Gary Kern has argued convincingly that “though an atheist, Lunts was steeped in Jewish culture.”<sup>15</sup> In a letter to his parents in Germany, Lunts referred to the Jewish calendar and to attending synagogue on Rosh Hashanah.<sup>16</sup> He also took a particular interest in Hebrew, expressing chagrin in a letter to his father that he had not “listened to Papa” and been more diligent in studying Hebrew as a child.<sup>17</sup> Two months later, Lunts described taking every available class in Hebrew at the university as preparation for his Masters exams.<sup>18</sup> This fascination with Hebrew does not indicate a commitment to Zionism: there is no evidence from letters or publications that Lunts considered a future in Palestine, or took an interest in the concept of Zionism. Instead, we might understand Emma Vygotskaya’s characterisation of Lunts, “A better Russian Jew you’ll never find” to refer to his willingness to address the paradoxes inherent in being a Jew with Russia as his native land and Russian as his first language.<sup>19</sup> A letter to Gorky from August 1922 shows that Lunts’s examination of his Jewish identity was not confined to letters to close family:

My first doubt (and the cruelest): did I do the right thing by striking out into literature? It isn’t that I didn’t believe in my powers: I believe in myself, perhaps, too

confidently. But I am a Jew. Dedicated, faithful, and I take joy in it.<sup>20</sup> And, I am a Russian writer. But then I am a Russian Jew, and Russia is my native land [*rodina*], and I love Russia more than all other countries. How to reconcile this? I've reconciled everything for myself, for me it's clear and obvious, but others think differently.

Others are saying: "a Jew cannot be a Russian writer."<sup>21</sup>

Here, Lunts acknowledges the view that his attachment to his community in Petrograd, to the House of Arts and the Serapion Brothers, to a new Soviet culture, Russia, and Russian, could all be cancelled out by his Jewish identity. We do not know the extent to which he encountered 'others' who held this view, but it does not seem to have dented his confidence. Lunts's willingness to discuss his identity in this way was unusual. There is little evidence available to explain how the many other Jewish residents of the House of Arts felt about their Jewish ethnicity, religion, culture, or language.<sup>22</sup> This lack of material may speak to negative attitudes, reluctance to engage, or simply to a lack of interest. There is, however, no evidence to argue that anyone disliked Lunts's literary experimentation or self-parody, even when they found themselves appearing as characters – if not caricatures – in his self-described 'Jewish stories'.

Neither a "dedicated, faithful" and joyful attitude to one's Jewishness, nor an enthusiasm for Hebrew were characteristic of Russian writers in the decades either before or after the revolution.<sup>23</sup> Lunts's study of Hebrew and his interest in themes from ancient Jewish history and legend aligned him with the repertoire of the Habimah Theatre in Moscow, from whom he accepted a commission to provide an intermediate translation into Russian of Alfieri's *Saul* at the end of 1922.<sup>24</sup> Lunts had experience in writing for the theatre, but felt his Hebrew was not sufficient to accept more permanent work from Habimah as a playwright or director.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, he did not fall into either of the two groups of young Habimah participants described by the actress Hanna Rovina; he was neither a Communist who knew

little Hebrew, nor someone with Hebrew and an interest in Zionism but no experience in theatre.<sup>26</sup> The print environment most conducive to Lunts's diverse interests was the *Jewish Almanac* [*Evreiskii al'manakh*], a collection of literary, literary critical, and sociological texts published in 1923, which included Lunts's short story *Rodina*. Writing to his parents in Germany in 1922, Lunts was enthusiastic about the collection: "By the way, one Jewish story of mine is in the *Jewish Almanac* Kleinman and B. I. Kaufman are publishing."<sup>27</sup> The language of the *Almanac* was Russian and its fictional material was either oriented to the past, or offered fantastic historical distortions; references to the revolution or new literary policies were scarce. The first entry in the *Almanac* is a story, 'Iov Dulder, a Variation on an Ancient Theme.' While this is a legend about a learned Jewish merchant, the story is set in 1913 and the devil and Platon Karataev from *War and Peace* are to be found among the characters are.<sup>28</sup> Lunts's 'Rodina', premised on time travel from Petrograd to ancient Babylon, is bracketed by two poems translated from Hebrew by Emma Vygotskaya's brother, David, also a close friend. There are two very different plays: 'Zoarovavel,' a tragedy set in Susa in 520 BC, and Andrei Sobol's 'The Interval. A Game' [*Pereryv. Igra*], a comic sketch about a theatre troupe trying to stage the Beilis trial.<sup>29</sup> Importantly, the *Almanac* included essays on both Hebrew and Yiddish literature; Gornfel'd critiqued a history of 'Jews in Russian Literature' written by someone 'unfamiliar with any of the Jewish languages which Jews write in.'<sup>30</sup> Gornfel'd argued that literature by Russian Jews could not be considered exclusively as Jewish Literature and cited numerous instances in which Russian Jews had influenced Russian Literature.<sup>31</sup> The *Almanac* presented a selection of Russian Jewish literature and criticism that was diverse, inventive, and playful; its writers appear neither to be oppressed by the past or limited by factions in the present.

The letter to Gorky focuses on another facet of Lunts's identity which he saw as a further barrier to his being considered a Russian writer: his attraction to Western literature:

I love Western literature more than Russian. [...] I can be silent and I want to be silent (if it wasn't for money) another 10 years because I believe in myself. But all around me they say that I am not Russian... That I love plot because I am not Russian. And that I won't make it as a writer.<sup>32</sup>

Rather than concluding with Wolfgang Schriek that this letter shows Lunts to have felt “doubly estranged in Russia,” I suggest that Lunts saw in himself and his writing a combination of three discrete and equally powerful identities: Russian, Jewish and Westernising.<sup>33</sup> This letter should be read as an expression of confidence and pragmatism, that Lunts was keen to show his mentor that he had not internalized the view of ‘others,’ and that he interpreted “a Jew cannot be a Russian writer” less as a threat than as a creative challenge.

### *Babylon on the Neva*

The short story “The Homeland [*Rodina*]” was completed in July, 1922, while Lunts was living in the House of Arts. It starts in the present day with two young Russian Jews as protagonists: fictionalized versions of Lunts and his closest ‘brother’ among the Serapions, Venya (Veniamin) Kaverin. An account of a Friday evening in Petersburg acts as a framing story.<sup>34</sup> While Lev’s parents are observing a traditional Shabes in the next room, he and Venya drink vodka and go for a walk to the Choral Synagogue. In its basement, they find a stone doorway that transports them to Babylon, two thousand years earlier. The friends are also physically transformed into two Judeans born in Babylonian exile. Their names are re-Judaized: Lev becomes Yehuda, Veniamin becomes Binyomin.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to the single evening in the frame story, the Babylon section accounts for many years and forms the majority of the text. The shift from Petersburg to Babylon is accompanied by a shift in voice from Lev’s first person narrative, the jocular, conversational Russian of a student, to a

distanced and archaic ‘Biblical’ style in the third person.<sup>36</sup> Binyomin and Yehuda meet in Babylon and recognise each other by their matching scars of three dots in a triangle on their left shoulders. Binyomin becomes a prophet, eventually channelling the voice of God and convincing the Judeans to return to their ancestral home of Jerusalem. Yehuda enslaves himself so he can stay in Babylon and marry. Once Binyomin and his followers have set off across the desert, however, Yehuda decides to join them. He sprints for six days to catch up, only to be disowned by Binyomin. The separation is complete when Binyomin calls for his own left arm to be cut off, ridding himself of the scar that marks his connection with Yehuda and modernity. He throws his detached arm at Yehuda who is then stoned by the other Judeans. Here the Babylon section ends abruptly and we are back in the synagogue basement. The status quo is not entirely restored because Lev is now alone, with the severed arm of his friend lying beside him on the stairs. The frame story had opened with both protagonists scrutinizing their own reflections in a mirror; it closes with Lev recognising his un-athletic Petersburg self in a shop window.

When Venya looks in the mirror in Lev’s room at the start of the story, he observes a mismatch between his ‘Jewish’ features and his sense of self, stating “I am foreign to myself.”<sup>37</sup> Here, the word *chuzhoi*, meaning foreign or alien, is set against *rodnoi*, an adjective from the same root as *rodina*, the native land or homeland of the story’s title. This juxtaposition of *chuzhoi* and *rodnoi* is used throughout the story; it also applies to the protagonists’ senses of being at home, or not, with their physical features and names. Lunts presents the paradox that Venya, a Russian Jewish student and atheist in post-revolutionary Petersburg, someone who can say “I don’t like Jews. They’re dirty,” actually looks like one of the Jewish prophets depicted in Gustav Doré’s illustrated Bible.<sup>38</sup> Lev furnishes his description of his friend Venya with literary clichés: “Black hair lashes about his stern forehead, and savage, deep, desert eyes shine passionately under his calm, clear brows.”<sup>39</sup> He

takes a step further into generalisation with the observation: “But in every Jew, even in you, there’s – how can I put it? – an ancient prophet.”<sup>40</sup> It is this paradox that provides the motivation for the story’s plot: Venya is returned to the time and place where he belongs and his name reverts from Venya-Veniamin to Binyomin, son of Jacob. The ‘truth’ of the stereotype is realised when, as Binyomin, he channels the word of God and leads his people through the desert towards Jerusalem. No longer a drunken student stumbling around Petersburg on a Friday night, this metamorphosis allows him to experience life as his ancestors might have lived it, an existence in which he lives up to his Old Testament name and its association with “the Biblical forebears of the entire Jewish race.”<sup>41</sup> By sending Venya to Babylon, Lunts fulfils his own wish for a heroic Jewish past, offering an environment in which the dissonant (*chuzhoi*) aspects of Venya’s identity – his name and appearance, for example – find a home (*rodina*).

In “The Homeland,” one way to look ‘Jewish’ is to resemble a character pictured in an illustrated bible. Venya, however, is the only resident of Petersburg in “The Homeland” who looks like an ancient prophet. Lev characterises his own appearance according to a different and far less heroic stereotype: “I’m small and puny, my nose turns down and peers at my lip. Lev they call me – like Judah – but where is the lion in me?”<sup>42</sup> Here, he points out the irony of looking ‘puny’ while being called ‘Lev,’ the Russian word for ‘lion’. His name is even less appropriate when he refers to its association with the lion of Judah. In Babylon, Lev is physically transformed: he takes on the muscular body of a sprinter, gains red hair and a beard, and is unaffected by the heat of the desert.<sup>43</sup> His name has changed to Yehuda, in congruence with his new leonine appearance. On his return to Petersburg, however, the physical transformation is reversed: “In the mirror: a little man, bald, with a narrow forehead and moist, cunning eyes. It is I: dirty and abominable. I recognized myself. [...] Everything beautiful and ancient in me [...] remained there on the road to Jerusalem.”<sup>44</sup> The appellation

'lion' is a misrepresentation once again, given Lev's unattractive appearance. In "The Homeland," Lunts amplifies the distance between the "beautiful and ancient" Jewish past he has discovered in books and the present, in which his *alter ego* embodies the negative Jewish stereotypes voiced by Venya at the start of the story.<sup>45</sup> It is important, however, to note that the physical appearance Lunts chose for Lev is, as stylised as one of Doré's illustrations of a biblical prophet. Photographs and descriptions of Lev Lunts by his friends suggest the author's appearance was nothing like that of the fictional Lev. This is one of many ways Lunts tried on disguises, or distorted aspects of his real life, for the entertainment of his readers in the House of Arts. Evidently, he took the same liberties with his friends. There is no evidence that the real Veniamin Kaverin was as estranged from his Jewish identity as Venya in "The Homeland." However, the story's immediate audience could not have failed to enjoy the fact that, shortly before it was written, Venya had opted to disguise his own identity: Kaverin was a pseudonym he had adopted in place of the more obviously Jewish Zil'ber.<sup>46</sup>

The two other Russian Jews in "The Homeland" belong to the generation of Lev and Venya's parents. These characters only appear in the Petersburg sections of the narrative and Lunts represents them as having far less potential for transformation. The man who unlocks the Choral Synagogue has no characteristics beyond basic negative stereotypes of Jewishness. This "old *shames*" is shabby and wretched; the students find him repellent, if not "dirty". He is deformed both in his person and in his speech: Lunts offers a conventional representation of a 'Jewish' accent in Russian by replacing 's' with 'sh' (*shivodnia* rather than *segodnia*; *shiuda* instead of *siuda*).<sup>47</sup> The second older Russian Jewish character in "The Homeland" is Lev's father. This character remains as static as the *shames* in terms of the story's plot, his function is to lead his family in prayer on a Friday night while Lev and Venya drink in the next room. He is portrayed as a traditional Polish Jew with a grey beard

and peyes; a considerable distortion of Lunt's actual father's appearance and profession. This fictional father's way of life has a clear demarcation between the hard work and graft of the week, and the spiritual and moral transformation effected by observance of the Sabbath; according to Lev, he "trades six days a week, cheats people and steals. But on the seventh day he sees Saul."<sup>48</sup> He also dreams of the "blue skies" of Palestine: "where he has never been, but which he saw, sees, and will see."<sup>49</sup> Palestine acts as a reliable and attractive imaginary location, neither native nor foreign; it is a place to be visualised rather than a destination. This character represents an older generation of Russian Jews who are able to preserve two separate identities: one Jewish, observant, and idealistic, the other pragmatic, Russian, and secular. Both religious practice and Zionism are shown to be unrealistic and irrelevant to the younger generation.<sup>50</sup> While we learn that Lev has visited the synagogue basement three times before, the implication is that adventures in ancient Babylon are more attainable than religious transcendence. In contrast to the wall in the basement, the apartment wall which separates Lev from his family's Friday-night prayers has no door; it offers a rare example in Lunts's fiction of a solid and effective border. Neither the *shames* or the father detain the author of "The Homeland" for long: they have no influence on the development of the plot and are 'quoted' as stock characters. In the story, Lev has a far less nuanced attitude to his father's way of life than is evident from Lunts's affectionate letters to his real father. Significantly, the deployment of these two types in the story includes tropes that could more usually be considered anti-Semitic: in particular the association of a Jewish trader with cheating and stealing. However, Lunts achieves an interesting effect, the narrator's almost perfunctory use of these two characters speaks to his sense of their limitations as material for a story. It is as if stock Jewish characters and anti-Semitic tropes are so familiar to the author that they can function as irrelevant landmarks on the protagonists' journey to the Babylon.

Lunts's consistent use of 'Petersburg' for what was, in fact, Petrograd suggests a willingness to attach his story to a continuing Russian literary heritage. However, rather than paying homage, Lunts quotes and distorts the tradition of the so-called 'Petersburg text,' even to the extent of erasing it altogether.<sup>51</sup> As one might expect from his literary manifestos, Lunts subjects modernist literary devices of fragmentation and dynamism to a similar treatment, he quotes them in passing on the way to something more interesting. For example, descriptions of the city in the framing sections use the style and imagery of Lunts's contemporaries: "The Revolution: empty streets. A white evening. The street swims along like a railway track receding in the distance. Streetcar posts fly by like a flock of birds."<sup>52</sup> A sentence like this imitates the many writers who described the destruction caused by the Revolution, the emptiness of a city that was no longer Russia's capital, and a feeling of modern life in fast forward. Here, Lunts also incorporates the themes and formal techniques used by Gogol, Dostoevsky, Andrei Bely, and others, such as the personification of streets and inanimate objects. Nonetheless, the brevity and insignificance of his Petersburg is irreverent, as if he intended to cut the 'Petersburg text' and its recent legacy down to size. On their walk to the synagogue, the two friends stop on the Obukhovsky bridge; Lev encourages Venya to play the part of the ancient prophet he resembles in appearance. The pair try to act out an imaginative scenario in which they realise they have met in a previous time, in a different, "hot, linear, and monstrous" city, "wearing different clothing, strange clothing".<sup>53</sup> The episode ends in self-conscious laughter, they are unable to remain in character: "We exchange frenzied looks, standing taller, feverish, and we recognize each other. Then, suddenly we shrink back down and laugh."<sup>54</sup> Lunts shrinks both Petersburg and the 'Petersburg text,' implying that his native city is not conducive to heroic actions or grandiose narratives. Given that his Petersburg is populated exclusively by Russian Jews, with the

Obukhovskiy Bridge and the Choral Synagogue as its only significant architectural landmarks, Lunts also defamiliarises Petersburg.<sup>55</sup>

One might assume that the decision to connect Petersburg with Babylon was a further attempt at defamiliarization, as it had been in the work of other authors.<sup>56</sup> However, the Babylon of the story turns out to be more familiar to natives of Petersburg, or to readers of Russian literature, than Lunts's Petersburg. We learn that Babylon "spread out on the Euphrates with straight streets and straight intersections. Straight as sunbeams at noon, the streets dropped to the river."<sup>57</sup> As critics have noted, Lunts used Petersburg's street map as the model for Babylon, with the result that the 'foreign' city is more recognisable to the reader than the 'native' one.<sup>58</sup> The relative spatial positions of Babylon and Petersburg are, however, ambiguous. Babylon is superimposed on Petersburg, but it is also adjacent, on the other side of the basement wall. This complex arrangement is achieved with some success by Lunts through the use of triads of adjectives. In any one triad, at least one adjective might refer to the 'wrong' location, or apply to both Petersburg and Babylon. Thus, Lev writes about Petersburg: "My home faced Zabalkansky Prospekt – straight, foreign (*chuzhoi*), but beautiful," while the narrator describes the sky in Babylon as "grey, cold, and homelike (*rodnoi*)." The misapplication of, for example, 'cold' to Babylon, or *chuzhoi* to Petersburg, creates a shift in perception which aligns, or disrupts, the reader's sense of the story's location. The triads of adjectives also point to the symbolic importance of the triangle throughout the story. Jerusalem occupies the third point of a triangle as the homeland common to Jewish inhabitants of Petersburg and Babylon. However, its ambiguous location, apparently east of Petersburg and west of Babylon, speaks to its status as imaginary and unreachable for any of the Jewish characters. Lev and Venya can walk through a door from Petersburg to Babylon, but neither Binyomin nor Yehuda ever arrive in Jerusalem, across the desert from Babylon. The triangle, marked on the arms of Lev-Yehuda and Venya-Binyomin,

also refers to Lunts's own sense of his tripartite identity, with Western Europe in place of Jerusalem. The consistent and indelible presence of these marks is explained at the end of the story: they are vaccination scars, the marks of Western science: "three white pockmarks in a triangle, the eternal stamp of Europe's wisdom."<sup>59</sup> By the final line of "The Homeland," the descriptive triads have resolved into pairs, returning Lev and the reader to a recognisable and still unresolved paradox: "Above Petersburg the sky is grey and cold, native but foreign (*rodnoi, no chuzhoi*)."<sup>60</sup>

"The Homeland," is clearly more than a self-affirming heritage trip back in time. None of the characters reach Jerusalem, which remains less real, or less realised, than either Petersburg or Babylon. Before finding its home in the *Jewish Almanac*, Lunts submitted "The Homeland" to the far more consequential journal, *Red Virgin Soil*. In his report to the journal's editor, Boris Pil'niak rejected "The Homeland" on the ground that it was 'uneven' in quality. He also referred to the story as being about "Jewish nationalism," suggesting he can only have read it perfunctorily.<sup>61</sup> The story's ending, with the protagonists abandoned in liminal spaces, Venya on the way to Jerusalem and Lev on the street in Petersburg, contraindicates any 'nationalist' or Zionist message. In any case, Lunts's fantasy of a regressive metamorphosis was ill-fitted to the direction Russian prose was taking in the early 1920s. Journals like *Red Virgin Soil* were largely publishing future-oriented or factual stories; these contrasted the far-off or recent past with a present full of potential, or forecast imaginary but achievable future scenarios. Murav's point that a "backward-glancing Jewish temporality" persisted among Jewish writers after the revolution is confirmed by Lunts's "The Homeland," and by other works in the *Jewish Almanac*.<sup>62</sup> Ancient Babylon has the potential for adventure and heroism in Lunts's story, whereas events in Petersburg are mundane and even funny. Although the story seems to end with modernity uppermost, Lev's jacket and trousers are so ragged that they barely conceal his torn Babylonian tunic and body

wounded from the stoning. If showing Petrograd's modernity to be a thin, ragged, and reversible layer over the past was provocative, so too was peeling back the layers of assimilation and acculturation that made up the identity of a modern Russian Jew. Lunts's story operates by repeatedly rearranging layers of clothing or map overlays to the extent that Lunts's and Petersburg's final identities are ambiguous, even arbitrary. A similar effect is achieved with the disinterested use of anti-Semitic tropes and stock characters, they are noticeable and irrelevant at the same time. By the end of "The Homeland" the reader's ability to identify a city or a person as Russian or Jewish has been entirely disrupted.

### *Crossing the Zbruch*

Lunts's "Crossing the Border" is a short novel in letters written at the beginning of 1923; it remained unpublished until 1994 and is largely unknown.<sup>63</sup> Set between August and September, 1921, the majority of the letters are written by Lev Ozerov, a young writer, and an older couple, Aaron and Anna Bomzik. All three have left their lives in Petersburg behind and are heading for Poland. The story starts when they have reached the Russian town of Dunaevtsy and follows them to Kapystintsy in Poland via the border town of Gusiatin.<sup>64</sup> Now a town in Ukraine, Gusiatin was then split in half by the border between Soviet Russia and Poland established by the Treaty of Riga in 1921, just as before the war it had been divided by the border between Russia and Austro-Hungary.<sup>65</sup> Lunts's characters write from "Russian Gusiatin" and "Austrian Gusiatin," retaining the older name. The border itself was a river, the same Zbruch described by Babel in "Crossing the Zbruch," published in *Red Virgin Soil* three years after Lunts wrote his story.<sup>66</sup>

Lev Ozerov is one more *alter ego* of Lev Lunts. Ozerov's five letters, addressed to a fellow writer in Petersburg, are similar in tone to Lunts's own correspondence in their lack of self-importance and amused outlook.<sup>67</sup> "Crossing the Border" can be read as an imaginative,

even therapeutic, projection of Lev Lunts's own imminent emigration. A further possibility, that Lunts was looking backwards to his recent family history, has been suggested by Kern, who proposes he "took the emigration of his parents to Lithuania in May, 1921 as the occasion for a satire of Jewish manners."<sup>68</sup> While such a journey could have taken place, Gusiatin was certainly not on the route either Lunts or his parents would have taken to Germany and it is likely that he had never been there. Given the availability of informants and published sources to someone like Lunts, living in centre of cultural life in Petrograd, the extent to which his story decouples the region from its recent experience of war and ethnic cleansing is astonishing.<sup>69</sup> Lunts and his readers would have been well aware of the irony of going to Gusiatin for "an outing (*provetrít'sia*)."<sup>70</sup>

The story's most obvious satire is achieved at the expense of Aaron and Anna Bomzik. Their insistence that they are in constant danger repeatedly conflicts with accounts by other letter writers. For example, the initial letters offer four descriptions of the night-time journey by cart from Dunaevtsy to Gusiatin. The Bomziks describe threats, extortion, and physical suffering. The smuggler who owns the cart reveals that he successfully tricked "some fools" into overpaying for the passage by exaggerating its danger.<sup>71</sup> One more passenger, crossing the border to find his unfaithful wife, has paid for his passage with his galoshes and waistcoat but finds "the way was quiet."<sup>72</sup> Ozerov's own version further undermines any sense of a furtive night journey and actually shows disappointment that the border crossing will be too smooth to be written up as a story:

We got to the border in the morning and stopped at a house. Just imagine: the whole place filled to the rafters with people. All with piles of luggage. All screaming. And it's on the main street. This is what they call sneaking across the border. [...] Looks like we'll cross the border without any adventures or incidents worthy of literature.<sup>73</sup>

The Bomziks not only have an exaggerated sense of danger, they are gullible. Ozerov's second letter, from "Austrian Gusiatin," offers a concise explanation of how he expedited his own border crossing. Firstly, he provoked the Cheka in "Russian Gusiatin" into arresting him and the Bomziks. He then pretended to bury something in the prison yard, so that the Cheka, keen to help themselves to whatever treasure he had hidden, would get rid of him by sending him over the border. In addition to being victims of Ozerov's search for a good story, the Bomziks exercise far less autonomy over their border crossing. Threatened with being shot, they must bribe their way out of the Cheka prison with a diamond ring. They pay several others to conduct them to the river, but their attempts at secrecy are entirely unsuccessful; they tell one man "We absolutely don't want to cross the border," and he answers, "Ah ha, so you're going to cross the border."<sup>74</sup> They end up having to wade through the river only to find their possessions can cross by bridge.

The Zbruch river, and the bridge somewhere north of Gusiatin, form the actual border.<sup>75</sup> They are inscribed as Jewish spaces by the Bomziks in various ways. Firstly, they equate their crossing of the Zbruch with the biblical narrative in Exodus: "wading, as once our ancestors crossed the Red Sea."<sup>76</sup> Next, they describe the bridge as surrounded by their Jewish "brothers" engaged in a vigorous exchange of goods and currency:

At both ends of the little bridge our brother Jews are standing and trading. A Red Army soldier and a gendarme are standing on the bridge and shouting: "Get out of here!" But our brothers give them a little bribe and go on making a racket. And when they strike a bargain, they hurl the goods over the bridge to the other side!<sup>77</sup>

These local Jewish traders are fully in control of their surroundings: they have freedom of movement and trade. They can manipulate the authorities – the Red Army and the Polish gendarmerie – from either side of the border. The Zbruch and the bridge are, it seems, both arbitrary and ineffectual as borders. The border in Gusiatin is intended to separate Soviet

Russia and Poland, but, as Lunts shows, their populations and ways of life are identical. In the Gusiatin border zone, people without exception operate through self-interest. Jews, Soviets (including the Cheka), and the gendarmerie are all engaged in increasing their capital, whether it be currency, diamonds, women, or literary material.

This is equally true of the Bomziks. While they give lengthy accounts of impediments to “doing business in Poland (*delat’ dela v Pol’she*)”,<sup>78</sup> their naïve perspective is ultimately revealed as a deliberate narrative disguise:

They expelled us from Poland because of that young man [Ozerov]. They arrested us at the border and we were almost shot. I should mention that because we gave away our last ring we are now totally ruined. If we don’t count that, our journey does turn out to have gone smoothly and successfully. We did manage to do some business in Poland, we got to know this and that person, and we’ll do more business in the future. We did find the clothes brush and as for the diamond rings, the ones we gave out, well, upon my life and upon Anna’s, they were all fake.<sup>79</sup>

Here, the Bomziks transform from hapless victims to predicting a successful future in trade on both sides of the border. They anticipate no lasting consequences from arrest or deportation, and the border becomes a generative site of opportunity. In addition to the Bomziks, Lunts’s reader is also likely to be amused by her own credulity regarding their financial ruin. Thus she finds herself reproducing Ozerov’s unkind laughter, which comes from his enjoyment of exploiting the Bomziks. Furthermore, his idea of interesting material includes a “fat Jew and his wife” who are characterised as emotional and disingenuous. The Bomziks cry because they have lost all their possessions, “as once our ancestors cried by the rivers of Babylon,” but they can always find one more diamond ring with which to seal a bargain or get out of trouble.<sup>80</sup> In “Crossing the Border,” Lunts augments his repertoire of Jewish stock characters which, as we have seen, already includes the money-collecting

*shames* and the observant Jewish father who “trades, cheats people, and steals” six days a week and prays on the seventh.<sup>81</sup> In contrast to the perfunctory and disinterested quotation of anti-Semitic tropes in “The Homeland,” however, “Crossing the Border” stretches similar conventions beyond their limits, using them as material for humour and ridicule.

The Jewish Russian spoken by the *shames* in “The Homeland” is underdeveloped in comparison to the Jewish Russian written and spoken by the Bomziks in “Crossing the Border.” Their letters are replete with Yiddishisms: there are interjections (“Oi, Issidor Danilovich”), psycho-ostensive calques (“may it be cursed (*da budet ono prokliato*)”), and repeated use of the particle *-taki* after pronouns (“They arrested us (*nas-taki arestovali*)”).<sup>82</sup> However, these Jewish markers are frequently exaggerated and caricatured, or appear when the Bomziks quote themselves, as in: “Then me and Antsa thought ‘Oi!’”<sup>83</sup> In addition, the Bomziks’ language frequently accumulates Yiddish idioms and altered sentence structure just at the moment they misunderstand something or contradict themselves. One such example occurs in Kapystintsy:

Here there is such judeophobia (*iudofobstvo*), just like in ancient Egypt, that it is completely impossible for newly-arrived Jews to make a living. All the local Jews walk around in unusually long coats and hats and are called Ich-Meirs, that’s because the Poles, cursed be the hour of their birth, call all Jews Ich-Meir.<sup>84</sup>

The idiomatic language used here indicates the letter-writer’s contradictory position. The comparison of Kapystintsy to ancient Egypt is as farfetched as the comparison of the Zbruch to the Red Sea. By using a formulaic curse as an epithet to refer to “the Poles,” any intended critique of the Poles’ use of the blanket term “Ich-Meirs” for all Jews is undermined. In addition, the Bomziks are ready to exploit the difference between themselves and the “Ich-Meirs” for their own ends:

They said to us: “Ich-Meirs cannot stay here.”

“Feh! Us, Ich-Meirs? May we only live well to the same extent that we are Polish!”

*Nam skazali: “Zdes’ Ich-Meiram zhit’ ne vol’no”.*

*“Fe! My – Ich-Meiry? Chtob my tak zhili, kak my som poliatsy!”<sup>85</sup>*

Despite their self-perception that they do not look like the local Jews, the Bomziks are immediately identified as “Ich-Meirs.” In this exchange, the Poles mix Russian and Polish, and the Bomziks mix Jewish Russian with Polish, using a hybrid verb form for ‘we are’, ‘*my sq*’ (the dialect form ‘*som*’ instead of the Polish ‘*jesteśmy*’ in Polish, or the Russian ‘*my –*’). In their account, this linguistic disguise is temporarily successful in convincing the Poles that they are not Jewish. However, their self-assessment is suspect, given that their speech includes obvious markers of Jewishness such as the interjection “Feh,” and the Russian calque of one more psycho-ostensive Yiddish expression.<sup>86</sup> The humour in this episode originates from the Bomziks’ inflated sense of their ability to code switch and the fact that the more they try to turn their Russian into Polish, the more Jewish they sound.

When Ozerov begins to interfere in the Bomziks’ lives in Kapystintsy, their chances of passing as Poles diminish. An “Ich-Meir” wearing a long coat (*lapersdak*) shouts after them: “Look at the new Jews! They’re walking around like goys! (*Zeit di novye evrei! Oni khodiat-taki kak goi!*).”<sup>87</sup> As a crowd gathers, this individual escalates the situation still further: “Come and look at the nose on that Pole! Look at these Jews pretending that they’re not descendants of Jacob! (*Khodite posmotret’ na nos etogo poliaka! Zeit evreev, kotorye skryvaiut, chto oni proiskhodiut ot Iakova!*).”<sup>88</sup> A day later, the Bomziks redouble their attempts at disguise by buying meat from a non-kosher butcher. They run into an old woman who begs: “Give something for a poor woman! Have pity! (*Podajte bednoi zhenshchine! Khobt rakhmones!*),” and then shouts: “Come and look at these Jews eating treif! Hey, treif-eaters! Look! Watch! (*Khodite smotret’ na etikh evreev, kotorye kushaiut treif! U, trefliaches! Zeit! Smotrite!*).”<sup>89</sup> Both the “Ich-Meir” and the old woman turn out to be

Ozerov. His successful strategy for disguising himself as a “local Jew” involves combining Yiddish and Russian words or phrases within a single sentence, for example “*Zeit evreev*” has “Look at” in Yiddish and “the Jews” with the appropriate Russian case ending. This imitation of local Jewish Russian is far more successful than the Bomziks’ attempts at Polish. In his third Kapystintsy disguise as a hotel porter, Ozerov adapts his vocabulary once again, demanding their sheets “because you’re kikes! (*potomu chto vy zhidy!*).”<sup>90</sup> This dawn raid on the bedclothes is the first step towards their being sent back over the border to Russia by the Cheka; the violence of the porter’s actions makes clear that the use of *zhidy* here is as the pejorative term in Russian, rather than the neutral term used in Polish and Ukrainian. Lunts is both adept and well-informed when representing the different varieties of Russian spoken by his characters in the border zone. For example, when the Bomziks repeatedly call Ozerov “a young goy,” they are not suggesting that he is not Jewish. Instead, they use the Yiddish “goy” as a synonym of “sheygets,” a disparaging term for a non-observant Jew. This helps distinguish Ozerov from the Bomziks, and from the traders and traditional Jews in Gusiatin and Kapystintsy. When the Bomziks discover that their persecutor in Kapystintsy is Ozerov, they ask him “How can you be an Ich-Meir?” and receive an answer with a familiar Jewish cadence, “Why shouldn’t I be an Ich-Meir?”<sup>91</sup> “Crossing the Border” celebrates the ability of a young, Russian Jewish writer to travel wherever he wants, and to act or write as an anti-Semite or an observant Jew. As a result, Lunts successfully disaggregates the category of “Jew.”

Babylon makes further appearance in “Crossing the Border”. In Kapystintsy, Ozerov answers an advertisement for extras in “a monumental film, ‘The Fall of Babylon’ drawn from Russian life.”<sup>92</sup> Here, the ancient city has been relocated to the countryside near Kapystintsy as a film set. Lunts’s imaginary film re-stages the June Offensive, and Ozerov is chosen to play the part of Kerensky. It is only when he is hired as an actor that his skills at

impersonation fail; his successful disguises, it transpires, have relied on his ability to manipulate spoken language: “The Fall of Babylon” is a silent film. Ozerov is fired after being unable to communicate the question “What about the Land Committees?” through gesture alone. Lunts did not think much of silent cinema’s achievements in 1923, and this parodic episode hints at a lack of talent in the Soviet film industry.<sup>93</sup> It also points to a possible inspiration for the more consequential use of Babylon in “The Homeland.” D.W. Griffiths’s epic silent film, *Intolerance*, was released in Russia in 1919, and Lenin encouraged Soviet filmmakers to put its innovative techniques to the service of political agitation.<sup>94</sup> *Intolerance* was certainly ‘monumental’ and consisted of parallel storylines set in different centuries, one of which was an account of the fall of the Babylonian Empire. Lunts did see in film a chance to further his interest in adventure and epic plot; he wrote two screenplays of his own before leaving Petersburg, both of which anticipated Soviet film’s transition to sound by a decade.<sup>95</sup> Lunts foresaw how his prose experiments with language mixing and parody could flourish in this new medium: in a letter to Elizaveta Polonskaia he joked that she would suspect him of wanting “to see how heroes on screen would speak with Jewish accents.”<sup>96</sup> While no connection has been proven, Lunts’s representations of Babylon seem to have a legacy in Russia literature. It is notable that Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita* (written 1928-40) is split between 1930s Moscow and Jerusalem at the time of Jesus’s death, and that the first Soviet film with a music soundtrack was *New Babylon* (1929).

### *Conclusion*

If, as Lunts wrote to Gorky, a Russian Jew could not hope to be categorised as anything other than a Jewish writer, the two stories discussed in this essay would not have convinced anyone to the contrary. On the other hand, Lunts’s writing could be judged to be uncomfortably close to an anti-Semitic tradition in its tendency to associate Jews with trade

and trickery, to represent them either as extremes of fun or tragedy. Laughter at the expense of the Bomziks, the one-dimensional *shames*, or Venya's comments about "dirty" Jews are problematic. However, this may be due to a reluctance to read pre-Holocaust Jewish writing from Eastern Europe as anything other than tragically prescient. Lunts's comic interrogations of his own identity and ridiculing of tired stereotypes are perhaps not what is expected of Russian Jewish writing by a Western audience familiar with Babel or Vasily Grossman.

Lunts's positivity towards his Russian Jewish identity is evident from the correspondence discussed in the first part of this essay. His letters do not suggest he was self-hating or keen to disguise his Jewishness. Instead, he used his skill in framing stereotypes and quoting anti-Semitic speech within his narratives to parody existing literary templates and representations of Jews. It will be useful, in conclusion, to offer a counter-example to Lunts's complex narratives and representations of Jews, one which employs the literary commonplaces Lunts was keen to transform. In 1897, the non-Jewish Aleksandr Kuprin published a short story composed of an army ensign's diary.<sup>97</sup> The ensign's regiment are not on the battlefield; they are earning a living digging sugar beet for landowners in the Voronezh region. The ensign embarks on the unsuccessful courtship of a sophisticated landowner's daughter who has been to Nice, Baden Baden, and Monte Carlo. Trying to impress her with a story from his own foreign travels, he can only come up with an anecdote from when "Our battalion was stationed in a tiny little border town: Gusiatin. It was usually called Russian Gusiatin because on the other side of a narrow river, only about fifty paces away, was Austrian Gusiatin." He describes crossing this border with a pleasure-seeking party of officers and their wives. As soon as they set foot on "foreign (*chuzhoi*) territory," they were surrounded by a crowd of "dirty Rusyns," who expressed "that deep sympathy our Eastern brother-Slavs feel for us Russians." Then we read of one more encounter:

The Austrian Jews stood in clumps on the road wearing hats made from tail fur, peyes down to their shoulders, and lapserdaks, under which their white stockings and pantaloons could be seen. When we got nearer, they started to point us out to one another; there was something threatening about their rapid guttural speech, with its characteristic whining at the end of each phrase.<sup>98</sup>

While the Jews are only fifty paces across the border, we are in no doubt they are part of a “foreign” landscape; they are even arranged like vegetation in “clumps.” As the ensign approaches the Jews in their identical costumes, they begin to move and talk; they are no longer decorative but animalistic and threatening. Even taking into account the irony directed at the ensign’s attempt to aggrandise his foreign adventure, this episode is far less complex than the Bomzik’s similar accounts of imagined danger in the same location, twenty years later. There is no ambiguity in Kuprin’s account: his border provides a clear demarcation of native and foreign territory; furthermore, both his characters and readers can be confident in identifying ethnicity by appearance and speech.

Unlike Kuprin, Lunts pushes the boundaries on all levels. Playing with existing literary stereotypes in “Crossing the Border,” he manages to animate, rather than objectify, the Bomziks. Their letters are afforded equal narrative space to Ozerov’s, they are unpredictable and treated with affection. Venya’s observation about “dirty” Jews results in his being taken to Babylon to become more familiar with his heritage. Ozerov’s use of “kikes” is part of a disguise: Lunts is not Ozerov and Ozerov is an excitable young writer rather than an anti-Semite. By distancing or giving multiple frames to these references, Lunts expands the range of Jewish characters in his stories; he moves from the *shames* to Lev Ozerov, from recycling stereotypes to pushing them beyond their limits. In so doing, he creates Russian Jewish identities that are fluid, flexible, and empowered. Lunts reinserts the Jew in Russian literature as a dynamic element that negotiates or travels between spaces

otherwise separated by geographical or linguistic borders -- or boundaries of taste. In his work, Babylon can be Petersburg, Austrian and Russian Gusiatin are identical, and Russian Jewish writers can choose to be Russian, Jewish or both.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Lev Lunts, “Why we are the Serapion Brothers,” in *In the Wilderness. The Prose of Lev Lunts*, trans. and ed. Gary Kern (Las Cruces: Xenos Books, 2014), 127—31, 129.

<sup>2</sup> See: “There is not one single first class historical novel in Russian literature” in Lev Lunts, “Go West!” in *In the Wilderness. The Prose of Lev Lunts*, trans. and ed. Gary Kern (Las Cruces: Xenos Books, 2014), 150—162, 154. Lunts does make an exception for *War and Peace*.

<sup>3</sup> *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature*, ed. Maxim Shrayer, vol. 2 (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 255—67. Harriet Murav, *Music from a Speeding Train. Jewish Literature in Post-Revolutionary Russia* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2011), 22—3.

<sup>4</sup> Lunts studied Spanish literature at university. Lev Lunts, *Obez’iany idut!: Proza, dramaturgiia, publitsistika, perepiska*, ed. Y. Lemming (St Petersburg: Inapress, 2003), 741. (All translations cited from this source are mine).

<sup>5</sup> *Narkompros* was the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (1918-46), a Soviet agency that administered literacy programming and publishing. The State Institute of the History of Art (1912-31) flourished after the Revolution, and employed many of the House of Arts residents as lecturers.

<sup>6</sup> See Martha Hickey, *The Writer in Petrograd and the House of Arts* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2009).

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<sup>7</sup> Lev Lunts, “Why we are the Serapion Brothers,” 129. This was a speech delivered at a meeting of the Serapions on December 2, 1922.

<sup>8</sup> According to a letter from Roman Jakobson to Lunts’s father after his son’s death, this play was staged in Prague and deemed the best of the new Russian plays by none other than Pirandello. Lev Lunts, *Obez’iany idut!*, 429.

<sup>9</sup> Andrei Zhdanov, “Doklad o zhurnalakh ‘Zvezda’ i ‘Leningrad’,” (Moscow, 1952), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Other Serapion Brothers became valued Soviet writers, Stalin Prize winners, and leaders in cultural policy. See Viktor Shklovsky, *Gamburgskii schet* (St Petersburg: Limbus Press, 2000), 370.

<sup>11</sup> Lev Lunts to Maxim Gorky, Petrograd, 16<sup>th</sup> August 1922, in Lev Lunts, *Obez’iany idut!*, 547.

<sup>12</sup> Lunts knew Pil’niak’s work and may have read his sketch of homesickness and Russian soil written just after his return from Berlin in April, 1922. See: ‘Zagranitse,’ in *Vstrechi s proshlym. Vypusk 7* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1990): 189—195. Viktor Shklovsky kept in touch with the Serapions after his escape from Petrograd and completed his autobiographical novel in letters about émigré life in Berlin in the spring of 1923. See: *Zoo or Letters not about Love*, trans. Richard Sheldon (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001). Lunts met Shklovsky in Berlin in June, 1923, and observed that he had learnt a single German word, “Bitte”. Lev Lunts to Maxim Gorky, Hamburg, 20<sup>th</sup> June, 1923, in Lev Lunts, *Obez’iany idut!*, 569.

<sup>13</sup> Lunts, *Obez’iany idut!*, 546.

<sup>14</sup> “Letters from Lev Lunts. Introduction and Notes by Wolfgang Schriek,” *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, No. 15 (1978): 343—359, 345.

<sup>15</sup> Lunts, *In the Wilderness*, ix.

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<sup>16</sup> It is unclear from the Shriek translation whether a mistake in the Hebrew was Lunts's own or whether Lunts marked in Hebrew vowels.

<sup>17</sup> "Letters from Lev Lunts," 352.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>19</sup> Emma Isaakovna Vygotskaya (1898-1949) and her husband were close friends of Lev Lunts. They moved from Moscow to Petrograd in 1922, where she worked as a translator for *Vsemirnaia Literatura*.

<sup>20</sup> Lunts's words, "*ubezhdennyi, vernyi, i radiius' etomu*," are not specific enough for us to apply them to religious belief or observance.

<sup>21</sup> Lev Lunts to Maxim Gorky, Petrograd, 16<sup>th</sup> August 1922, in Lev Lunts, *Obez'iany idut!*, 546.

<sup>22</sup> See "More Jewish than his Jewish-Russian literary peers raised in Russianized families." *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature*, 256.

<sup>23</sup> V. Shubinskii, "Prekrasnei pravdy," in Lev Lunts, *Obez'iany idut!*, 5—11, 8. See also Osip Mandelstam, "The Noise of Time," in *The Prose of Osip Mandelstam*, trans. Clarence Brown (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1965), 88.

<sup>24</sup> Lev Lunts, *Obez'iany idut!*, 704.

<sup>25</sup> "Letters from Lev Lunts," 352.

<sup>26</sup> Hanna Rovina quoted in: Ivanov, Vladislav. 2010. Habimah. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Habimah> (accessed August 13, 2018).

<sup>27</sup> *Evreiskii al'manakh. Khudozhestvennyi i literaturno-kriticheskii sbornik*, ed.s B. N. Kaufman, I. A. Kleinman (Petrograd-Moscow: Petrograd, 1923). That Lunts did not seize just any opportunity for publication is clear from his aversion to publishing in the humorous magazine *Mukhomor*. See "Letters from Lev Lunts," 352.

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<sup>28</sup> The author of ‘Yov Dulder’ was P. K. Guber, author of the de-canonising history of Pushkin’s erotic life, *Don-Zhuanskii spisok A. S. Pushkina*, also published by Petrograd in 1923.

<sup>29</sup> See: Harriet Murav, *Music from a Speeding Train*, 3.

<sup>30</sup> However, he admitted that some Russian Jewish writers agreed with L’vov Rogachevskii, raising the possibility that Lunts’s ‘others’ may have been Russian Jews like himself. See “Russkoe slovo i evreiskoe tvorchestvo,” *Evreiskii al’manakh*, ed. B. Kaufman, I. Kleinman (Petrograd-Moscow: “Petrograd”, 1923), 178—195, 186.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 178-195.

<sup>32</sup> Lunts, *Obez’iany idut!*, 546.

<sup>33</sup> “Letters from Lev Lunts. Introduction and Notes by Wolfgang Schriek,” *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, No. 15 (1978): 343—359, 343.

<sup>34</sup> Lunts retains Petersburg throughout, not Petrograd. Lunts, *Obez’iany idut!*, 446.

<sup>35</sup> Lunts spells ‘Binyomin’ according to Yiddish Ashkenazic convention.

<sup>36</sup> In Russian, this ‘Biblical’ style is achieved by repetition (“U nego ne bylo ni ottsa, ni materi, ni deda, ni druga”), swapping subject and object within the sentence (“v Vavilone rodilsia Ieguda” rather than *Ieguda rodilsia v Vavilone*), and putting the verb before the pronoun (“Byl on iudeem” rather than *on byl iudeem*). Lev Lunts, “Rodina,” in *Obez’iany idut!*, 39—49, 41.

<sup>37</sup> Lunts, *Obez’iany idut!*, 34.

<sup>38</sup> Lunts, *In the Wilderness*, 44. Gustav Doré’s illustrated Bible was available in Russian translation as: *Bibliia ili sviashchennia knigi vetkhago i novago zaveta. Russkii perevod ispolnennyi sviateishim pravitel’stvuiushchim sinodom. S 230 risunkami Gustava Doré*, 3 volumes (St Petersburg, Moscow: Izdanie knigoprodavtsa-tipografa Mavrikiia Osipovicha Vol’fa, 1876—8).

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<sup>39</sup> Lunts, “The Homeland,” in *In the Wilderness. The Prose of Lev Lunts*, trans. and ed. Gary Kern (Las Cruces: Xenos Books, 2014), 27.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>41</sup> See Gary Kern, *In the Wilderness*, 43.

<sup>42</sup> Lunts, *In the Wilderness*, 27.

<sup>43</sup> See Leonid Livak, *The Jewish Persona in the European Imagination: A Case of Russian Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 90.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>46</sup> Lunts, *Obez'iany idut!*, 383.

<sup>47</sup> Leonid Livak, *The Jewish Persona in the European Imagination*, 89. In his novel *Zoo, or Letters Not About Love* (Berlin: Helikon, 1923), Shklovsky drew a parallel between the Biblical ‘shibboleth’ story (Judges, 12) and the way Jews were identified during pogroms in the Civil War. In Shklovsky’s version, the Philistines are unable to pronounce the ‘sh’, allowing the Israelites to identify them.

<sup>48</sup> As the translator of Alfieri’s *Saul*, Lunts most likely refers to the tragic hero of the play and his battles between the good and evil tendencies within him. Lunts, *In the Wilderness*, 28.

<sup>49</sup> Lunts, *In the Wilderness*, 28.

<sup>50</sup> This relationship has been compared to the one in Babel’s “The Rabbi’s Son” published two years later in *Red Virgin Soil*. See Zsuzsa Hetényi, “Evreiskaia Bibliia – zakon, traditsiia ili...? Lev Lunts: Rodina (1922),” *Cahiers du monde russe*, vol. 39, no. 4 (1998): 621—8, 624.

<sup>51</sup> See V. N. Toporov, *Peterburgskii tekst russkoi literatury* (St Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPb, 2003), 5—118.

<sup>52</sup> Lunts, *In the Wilderness*, 28.

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<sup>53</sup> Lunts, *In the Wilderness*, 29.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>55</sup> The Choral Synagogue's provenance would also have been ambiguous given that its design was inspired by Berlin's New Synagogue, which itself imitated 'Moorish' or 'Eastern' architecture.

<sup>56</sup> The comparison of St Petersburg to Babylon was a commonplace in Russian modernist prose. It was also used in Adam Mickiewicz, *Dziady. Cz. 3* (Kraków: Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza, 1920), 259.

<sup>57</sup> Lunts, *In the Wilderness*, 31.

<sup>58</sup> See Zsuzsa Hetényi, "Evreiskaia Bibliia – zakon, traditsiia ili...?" and Gary Kern, *In the Wilderness*, 43.

<sup>59</sup> Lunts, *Obez'iany idut!*, 48.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>61</sup> Lunts, *Obez'iany idut!*, 383.

<sup>62</sup> Harriet Murav, *Music from a Speeding Train*, 3.

<sup>63</sup> Lunts, *Obez'iany idut!*, 398. "Crossing the Border" was first published in *Litsa. Biograficheskii al'manakh*, 5, ed. A. L. Evstigneeva (Moscow: Feniks Atheneum, 1994), 361—373.

<sup>64</sup> I have chosen to transliterate place names as they were spelled by Lunts, in order to convey his lack of interest in realism or documentary.

<sup>65</sup> In today's Ukraine, the towns are Копучинці (Копичинці), Дунаївці (Dunaivtsi), and Гусятин (Husiatyn). Gusiatin was largely destroyed during the Russian occupation in the First World War; its Jewish population were expelled in 1915. After the war, the city was governed by Ukraine, Poland, the Bolshevik government, and then Poland once again. By 1921, the Jewish population of Gusiatin had declined to 368 people, less than 10 percent of

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the population in 1890. For a photo of Gusiatin from 1920, see Krinsky, Carol Herselle.

2016. Synagogue Architecture. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe.

[http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Synagogue\\_Architecture](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Synagogue_Architecture) (accessed January 29, 2018).

<sup>66</sup> Isaak Babel, “Perekhod cherez Zbruch,” first published in *Krasnaia nov’*, No. 3 (1925): 125—131. In 1924, ten days after Lunts’s death in Germany, Elizaveta Polonskaia wrote from Petrograd: ‘a new prose writer is born, his name is Babel’, he’s extremely nice, a Jew.’ E. G. Polonskaia to Lev Lunts, Petrograd, 20<sup>th</sup> May, 1924, in Lev Lunts, *Obez’iany idut!*, 695.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Mishka’ could be Mikhail Zoshchenko, Mikhail Slonimskii, or both. Letters from 1923 point to the frequency of jokes among the Serapions about the interchangeability of the two Mishas. See Lev Lunts, *Obez’iany idut!*, 627, 631.

<sup>68</sup> Kern, *In the Wilderness*, 78.

<sup>69</sup> See S. Ansky, *The Enemy at his Pleasure. A Journey Through the Jewish Pale of Settlement During World War I*, trans. J. Neugroschel (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004).

<sup>70</sup> Lunts, *Obez’iany idut!*, 54.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>75</sup> Kern compares this bridge to the one in Podwołoczyska (Pidvolochysk), forty miles north. *In the Wilderness*, 63.

<sup>76</sup> Lunts, *Obez’iany idut!*, 58.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 57, 63, 66. Compare “*da budet ono prokliato*” to Yiddish “*zol es farsholtn vern.*” The particle *-taki* is still used to make Russian ‘sound Jewish.’ See Anna Verschik, “Jewish Russian and the Field of Ethnolect Study.” *Language in Society* 36, no. 2 (2007): 213–32, 227.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 60. See: “So many Hassidim had named their sons after the first rebbe of Ger, R. Itche Mayer Alter (d. 1866), that Jews of the vicinity of Warsaw were called *tshmayerlekh* (< *itshe-mayerlekh*).” Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, trans. Shlomo Noble (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 230. *Itshe-mayer* / *itshe-meyer* became a derogatory appellation for a traditional or uncultured Jew in Poland.

<sup>85</sup> Lunts, *Obez’iany idut!*, 60.

<sup>86</sup> A similar expression (“*Zoln mir beyde azoy lebn, vi ikh bin nit shuldik!*” or “May we both live long to the same extent that I’m not guilty!”) is given in the YIVO Encyclopedia as an example of a bono-petitive’ or ‘good seeking’ expression, one of the “highly characteristic formulaic utterances in Yiddish [...] typically inserted parenthetically into longer statements and purport to reflect the speaker’s emotional attitude to the topic of conversation.” James Matisoff, 2010. *Talk: Blessings, Curses, and Other Expressions. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe.*

[www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Talk/Blessings\\_Curses\\_and\\_Other\\_Expressions](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Talk/Blessings_Curses_and_Other_Expressions) (accessed December 16, 2017).

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<sup>87</sup> The Yiddish here is slightly incorrect; it should read ‘*Khot rakhmones*’. Lunts, *Obez’iany idut!*, 63.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>89</sup> This is a hypercorrection: the Yiddish *hot* is rendered as the Germanised *hobt*, Russianised as *khobt*. *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>93</sup> Lunts invented a game called “Kinematograf” played in the House of Arts. He would pretend to direct his friends in acting out predictable scenes and tableaux from silent propaganda films. Lunts, *Obez’iany idut!*, 740. Emigrés in Berlin complained about having to work as film extras to earn a living: see Nabokov’s *Mashen’ka* [Mary] (1926). V. Nabokov, *Mashen’ka. Zashchita Luzhina. Sogliadatai, Drugie berega* (Moscow: OLMA Media Grupp, 2003), 31—142, 38.

<sup>94</sup> See William M. Drew, *D.W. Griffith's Intolerance: Its Genesis and Its Vision* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1986), 137–9. See also, L. B. Khariton to L. N. Lunts 31 August 1923, Petrograd. Lunts, *Obez’iany idut*, 528—9, 602.

<sup>95</sup> See *Things in Revolt. The Theater of Lev Lunts*, trans. and ed. Gary Kern (Las Cruces: Xenos Books, 2014); and Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society, 1917-1953* (Cambridge: CUP Archive, 1992), 137.

<sup>96</sup> Lunts, *Obez’iany idut!*, 582.

<sup>97</sup> A. Kuprin, “The Army Ensign [*Praporshchik armeiskii*]” in *Sobranie sochinenii v 9 tomakh*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Khud. Literature, 1971), 187—226.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.