

## Victor Yefimovich Kelner, 1945–2021 (ז"ל)

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MOST ACCOUNTS OF the revival of Eastern European Jewish studies since the collapse of communism focus, understandably, on the scholarly works it has generated. But one can also trace its effects by looking at the lives and careers of those who produced that scholarship in situ, in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. No life captured that revival more vividly for me than that of Victor Yefimovich Kelner, who was felled by COVID-19 in St. Petersburg in February 2021 at the age of seventy-six. He was my closest friend in Russia and an unforgettable mentor to me and many other younger historians.

Quite a few people born in the USSR in the year 1945 were named Victor or Victoria. Kelner's father Yefim (Chaim) had been severely wounded while serving as a Soviet army officer, and like nearly everyone in his generation, Jewish or otherwise, the Soviet triumph over Nazism in the "Great Fatherland War" became the defining event of his life. Victor grew up in the shadow of that war, and of another, mostly cold but no less present, especially in the realm of culture and humanistic learning. As a Soviet border guard (see fig. 1), Victor served on the Cold War's front line before completing his undergraduate and graduate degrees in history at Leningrad State University. His scholarly interests at the time were comfortably within the USSR's acceptable limits: a dissertation on the early history of the British labor movement, and a book and a slew of articles on the history of publishing and the book trade in late Imperial Russia. This being the Brezhnev era, it was understood that Jewish topics were off limits, though it's not clear that Victor's inclinations were pointing in that direction at the time.

By 1989, when we first met, that was beginning to change. A mutual friend introduced me to Victor as someone with insider knowledge of Russian imperial archives who might be willing to help an American graduate student navigate their mysteries, starting with the people who worked in

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Figure 1. Viktor Kelner as a Soviet border guard, ca. 1965. Photo from the personal collection of V. E. Kelner.

them, their unwritten rules, and the ways to get around them. In those days there was almost no publicly accessible information about Jewish holdings in Soviet archives, let alone information you could access with a few clicks on a computer. You showed up with a topic and some hunches and hoped for the best; success depended in no small measure on cultivating relationships with locals, including archive staff members.

One day I mentioned to Victor that a staff member in the manuscript division of the enormous State Public Library—or “Publichka,” as it was affectionately known, prior to being renamed the “Russian National Library” in 1992—was unusually friendly. In contrast to the typical gruffness of such interactions, she actually smiled when going over my daily requests for this or that file. “She’s the most dangerous of all,” came his reply, a Party member whose job included keeping a dossier on foreign researchers. After I despaired of being able to decipher the anarchic handwriting of An-sky, the turn-of-the-century ethnographer and author of *The Dybbuk*, Victor showed up unannounced in the reading room, sat down next to me, and showed me how to identify patterns in individual letters, eventually moving to words, and finally to whole sentences. In the apartment where he lived with his wife Yelena (a chemist) and their son Stanislav, I found a home in Leningrad. Their building was on a street named for Mother Theresa, which seemed odd given Soviet ideological proclivities. Or at least that’s what I thought, until Victor informed me

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that the street (“ulitsa M. Tereza”) was actually named for the French Communist Party leader Maurice Thorez. Thus was a running joke born.

The few foreign scholars who had previously researched Jewish subjects in Soviet archives had usually done so under the guise of a different (and innocuous) topic. Conversely, there were scholars in Russia even in the 1990s who shunned contacts with foreigners, especially Westerners, for fear of unpleasant repercussions. Victor was not one of them. He had already begun to uncover troves of Jewish materials that had languished since the 1930s in “special containment,” a standard quarantine mechanism at every Soviet archive. While working his way up in the Department for the Study of the Book at the Publichka, he was discovering the lost continent of Russian Jewish history.

It was interesting to observe how Victor approached this land mass from his particular vantage point. By instinct and training, he was inclined to gather, systematize, and codify. Like many Soviet scholars of his generation, he had had enough of Marxism-Leninism, dialectical materialism, and political teleology. A kind of theory-free empiricism was the order of the day, designed to establish the truth of what happened, who the principal players were, and what they had said and done. When Victor described someone’s work as “factology,” it was not a put-down. When he sought to connect his work to existing scholarship, that meant building bridges to Simon Dubnov (1860–1941), Yuli Gessen (1871–1939), and other prerevolutionary historians of the Jews—the last scholars to have had access to the materials that were now being released from confinement.

In certain ways, Victor was ideally positioned to take up this enormous labor of recovery. His training in book history had honed his skills in bibliography, publishing, source criticism, and the study of manuscripts and censorship. His first major publication in Russian Jewish history, undertaken together with the historian Dmitrii Eliashevich, was a sequel to the *Systematic Guide to Literature on Jews in Russian* (published in Russian in 1892), an indispensable reference work covering thousands of articles and books published between 1708 and 1889.<sup>1</sup> *Literature on Jews in Russian, 1890–1947* (published in Russian in 1995) reproduced the format of its century-old predecessor while extending its coverage up through the aftermath of the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> Both volumes were massive undertakings.

1. *Sistematičeskii ukazatel' literatury o evreiaĭb na ruskom iazyke so vremeni vvedeniia grazhdanskogo sbrifita (1708 g.) po deĭabr' 1889 g.* (1892; repr. Cambridge, 1973).

2. Viktor E. Kel'ner and Dmitrii A. Eliashevich, *Literatura o evreiaĭb na ruskom iazyke, 1890–1947: knigi, broshiuury, ottiski statei, organy periodičeskoj pečati: bibliografičeskii ukazatel'* (St. Petersburg, 1995).

No one conducting research on imperial Russian or Soviet Jewry can proceed without them.

I, on the other hand, had a dissertation to write. My graduate training at Berkeley roughly coincided with the high-water mark of theory, and my head was full of epistemes, public spheres, imagined communities, and self-fashioning. Victor's response to my halting attempts to render these and other concepts in Russian was usually a smiling shrug of the shoulders. He wasn't going to let me disrupt his empiricism, the same spirit that led him to comment on the idea of a conference about theories of antisemitism, "What's there to say? Antisemitism is bad. End of discussion!" There was an unmistakable humor in all this, but a certain degree of unease as well. I worried that, in the wake of the Soviet collapse, the study of Russian and Eastern European Jewry was slipping into a neocolonial dynamic, in which scholars from the East such as Victor delivered raw goods to Western metropolitans like me, who then generated the finished products, theory-infused works of interpretation that constituted the academy's prized currency. Wasn't this the kind of thing the Russian Revolution had sought to overcome?

It wasn't long before that worry was laid to rest. During the 1990s Victor embarked on what was virtually a second academic career, now in Jewish studies, helping to found the "Petersburg Judaica" group as well as "Sefer," the field's umbrella organization for the Russian Federation. He began to publish articles on the prerevolutionary Russian Jewish intelligentsia, focusing especially on the crisscrossing of ideas and politics and relations with their Russian counterparts. For the first time in his life he was able to travel abroad. In Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and New York, he experienced an exhilaration at reaching long-inaccessible archives (among other things) not unlike what I felt when I first arrived in the Soviet Union. His scholarly productivity seemed to accelerate over time, culminating in major biographies of Dubnov and his fellow activist, the lawyer Maxim Vinaver (1863–1926).<sup>3</sup> No longer content to treat these figures as past masters whose statues merely needed a good dusting off, Victor deployed the formalist technique of "defamiliarization" to achieve analytical distance from his protagonists. Dubnov's repeated updating, across four decades, of his pioneering works on the history of Hasidism and on the "universal" history of the Jews, Victor discovered, was driven not just by the desire to incorporate the latest scholarly findings (as Dubnov claimed),

3. Viktor E. Kel'ner, *"Missioner istorii": Zhizn' i trudy S. M. Dubnova* (St. Petersburg, 2008). German translation: *Simon Dubnow: Eine Biografie* (Göttingen, 2010). Kel'ner, *Shehit: M. M. Vinaver i evreiskii vopros v Rossii kontsa XIX - nachala XX v.* (St. Petersburg, 2018).



Figure 2. Viktor Kelner at the European University in St. Petersburg (2018). Photo from the personal collection of V. E. Kelner.

but by the shifting place of Jews in late Imperial Russia and the numerous skirmishes among the various factions of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia.<sup>4</sup> This became the key to understanding Dubnov's cardinal idea of diaspora nationalism, the politics it implied, and the scholarly agenda it fostered.

Perhaps it was Victor's disappointment with the path taken by post-Soviet Russia, or the impressions he brought back from Israel, or perhaps it was Russian Jewish history itself: one way or another, the ideological vacuum left by the collapse of communism was largely filled by an assertive diaspora Zionism. The Jews as a robust nation (or as he used to say, *zbiżnesposobnyi*—literally, “capable of living”) became the bedrock of his thinking about the Jewish past and future. In this sense, he followed the pattern of many former Soviet Jews who gravitated to Likud in Israel and the Republican Party in the United States. Victor experienced the rebirth of Jewish studies in Russia as a kind of emancipation, but into a world still enmeshed in primordial antagonisms.

As it usually does, emancipation came with a certain melancholy, as more than a million former Soviet Jews emigrated in the 1990s and early 2000s, leaving those who remained in Russia without some of their closest friends and relatives. Victor's brother and son left for Germany. In the

4. Kel'ner, “*Missioner istorii*,” 13 and 22.

greatest tragedy of his life, his wife was robbed and murdered in 2010 in the lobby of their apartment building. To the extent that one can ever recover from a blow like this, Victor did so by pouring his heart into teaching and research (see fig. 2). His colleagues in the Jewish studies program at the European University at St. Petersburg, where he was professor of Russian and Eastern European Jewish history for the last decade of his life, became a second family. He delighted in the work of his students, many of whom, at his urging, learned Hebrew or Yiddish, thanks to courses and study-abroad opportunities that were unavailable to Victor in his youth.

Our last encounter was at his seventy-fifth birthday celebration in February 2020, on the eve of the pandemic that would soon take Victor's life. Surrounded by friends from childhood, the Publichka, and the European University, he was in a reflective mood, perhaps pondering all that he had gained and lost over the preceding seven decades. He had told me on various Skype calls that teaching and research were what kept him going; he was worried that he might be forced to retire. Jewish history had given him a second career, a second life really, and he made the most of it.

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