H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gabriella Safran, Steven J. Zipperstein, eds. *The Worlds of S. An-sky: A Russian Jewish Intellectual at the Turn of the Century.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006. xxxii + 542 pp. $27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-5344-9.

Reviewed by Michael C. Hickey (Department of History, Bloomsburg University)

Published on H-Russia (October, 2007)

Is He or Is He Not Rappoport?

Shlomyme-Zanvl Rappoport (b. 1863, Vitebsk Province, d. 1920, Warsaw), better known by his pen name Semyon Akimovich An-sky, has of late spawned a healthy scholarly industry. Although he produced a sizable corpus of fiction, poetry and songs, non-fiction works, and theatrical works (including the famous play *The Dybbuk: Between Two Worlds* [1914]), scholarly interest in An-sky is propelled less by his literary talent than by the complex twists of his life and public identity.[1] Scholars often describe An-sky as the personification of the multiple political and intellectual paths followed by Jews in the Russian Empire.

Some scholars see An-sky in his first three decades as an archetype of the fully acculturated Russian Jew who had "lost himself" in the Populist movement. An-sky was born to a poor family in the Pale of Settlement (Vitebsk) and provided with a traditional Jewish education, but as a teen he (and his lifelong friend, the famous socialist Chaim Zhitlowsky) gravitated towards Russian literature and the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*). In his early twenties, An-sky tried his hand at writing Yiddish belles-letters, traveled extensively through the Pale and the Empire's interior, worked at various manual labor jobs, and became an eager disciple of Russian Populism. By age twenty-nine, he had become a protégé of the Populist writer Gleb Uspensky; assumed the *nom de plume* An-sky; published non-fiction essays on the lives of Russian and Ukrainian workers in *Russkie vedomosti* and *Russkoe bogastvo*; and gone into exile in Western Europe. He spent the years from 1891 to 1905 in Western Europe, writing essays on Populist-inflected Russian topics for Russian liberal and populist journals and newspapers, and working as private secretary to one of the giants of Russian Populism, Peter Lavrov.

Many scholars have described An-sky in his last three decades as the archetype of the Jew who, faced with the limits of assimilation, sought a "return" to Jewishness (*yidishkayt*). In the late 1890s, An-sky came under the spell of I. L. Peretz, a seminal figure in Yiddish literature. In 1896, he began drafting works of semi-autobiographical fiction in Yiddish. Like many Jewish intellectuals throughout Europe, he responded to France's Dreyfus Affair by devoting himself more energetically to Jewish political and literary life. By the outbreak of Russia's 1905 Revolution he had begun to envision a new secular tri-lingual (Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian) Jewish culture. For An-sky, ever the Populist, Hassidic folk-life would provide the building materials for this project. In 1900-05 he continued to write in Russian on Russian topics, but he also penned Yiddish stories, poems, and songs, including "The Oath" ("Di Shuve"), which the Bund (the General League of Jewish Workers of Russia, Poland, and Lithuania) adopted as its anthem. In late 1905, An-sky returned to Russia and joined the fray of revolutionary politics. While he remained a member of the Socialist Revolutionary (SR) party, An-sky's politics proved as catholic as his cultural vision, and he associated freely with Bundists, Zionists, and Liberals.

After the 1905 Revolution's collapse, An-sky devoted himself almost entirely to the study of Jewish folklore. In 1912, he launched the two-year-long Baron Horace Guenzburg Jewish Ethnographic Expedition. In travels though the Pale of Settlement (in particular in Ukraine, Volhynia, and Podolia), An'sky's team collected thousands of folk tales, songs, manuscripts, and artifacts. These materials probably informed his most famous work of literature, the play *Between Two Worlds*, better known as *The Dybbuk*, which he wrote before the outbreak of

World War I. During the war, An-sky helped organize Jewish refugee relief work and toured Galicia, where he chronicled the injustices meted out by the Russian Army to the region's Jews. Although he remained a member of the PSR and was close to many Bundists, An-sky also began making public statements in support of Vladimir Jabotinsky's Zionist program. During the 1917 Revolution, he divided his energy between PSR politics (he was elected as an SR to the Petrograd City Duma and the Constituent Assembly) and efforts to display artifacts from his ethnographic expedition at the Petrograd Jewish Museum. In 1918, he fled Bolshevik repression and ended up in Vilna, where he subsequently helped organize a Jewish Historic-Ethnographic Society and completed a mammoth Yiddish study documenting the sufferings of Jews caught in the war zone. An-sky died in Warsaw in 1920 and is buried next to I. Peretz. In the years after this death, productions of the *The Dybbuk*, would secure An-sky's legacy in Jewish literary history.

The Dybbuk and the 1912-14 ethnographic expedition are the main topics of the volume under review, which both documents An-sky's life and career, and presents a range of analysis by an impressive roster of scholars. The book itself is the outgrowth of an An-sky conference held at Stanford in 2001. At its core are sixteen scholarly essays, many of which make extensive use of newly available materials from archives in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev, and New York. Preceding the essays are an editors' preface, which explains the volume's genesis; a fifteen-page timeline of An-sky's life prepared by Gabriella Safran; two pages of bibliography listing the most common archival and published sources cited in the book; and a thirty-page introductory essay by Stephen Zipperstein. The essays, which fill over three hundred pages, are followed by an English-language translation of the previously un-published Russian-language censored variant text of *The Dybbuk*, introduced with an essay by that text's editor and a translator's note.

But there is more. The package also includes a CD with performances of twenty-five Yiddish and Russian songs written by, collected by, or closely associated with An-sky. A few of these are remarkable transfers from wax disks made during An-sky's 1912-14 ethnographic expedition to Ukraine. The rest were recorded specifically for this CD by musicians and singers in the United States and in Russia, using arrangements by musician Michael Alpert. With the CD is a very informative booklet with an essay on An-sky's "musical world" by Gabriella Safran and musician Michael Alpert, and an abridged translation of an unpublished 1915 lecture by Jewish musicologist Iuly Engel, who helped An-sky collect Jewish folksongs during the 1912 expedition season. The booklet also provides a paragraph-long introduction to each selection, as well as lyrics in Yiddish (in the Hebrew alphabet and also transliterated), Russian (again, in Cyrillic alphabet and transliterated), and in English.

In his graceful, incisive essay, Stephen Zipperstein highlights the complexity of An-sky's career, about which we know a great deal, and his personal life, about which we know comparatively little. He shows the peripatetic and perpetually homeless An-sky to have been a rather nice fellow and a romantic who was tragically unlucky at love. Zipperstein carefully lays out what has been perhaps the most influential recent interpretation of An-sky's life, David Roskies's argument that An-sky epitomized the "paradigm of return": the Jewish intellectual who has become assimilated and turned his back on his Jewishness, is traumatized by confrontation with anti-Semitism in the gentile world (e.g., pogroms or blood libel trials), publicly confesses errors, seeks the restoration of Jewish identity by "returning" to the Jewish people and past, and uses the tools of Russian populism to construct a new vision of Jewish secular culture based upon Hassidic folk culture. In his cogent summaries of the book's sixteen essays, Zipperstein essentially frames the volume as a disputation over Roskies's argument.

David Roskies himself begins the volume proper with an essay comparing An-sky and Sholem Aleichem (Solomon Naumovich Rabinovich), whom he sees as two very different exemplars of the "master narrative of Russian Jewry," the return to Jewishness. Roskies contrasts the comic, masculine, Hassid-free world of Aleichem's fiction (such as his tales of Tevye the Milkman) to the tragic world of An-sky's stories and plays, with their strong female characters and their fascination with Hassidic spirituality. Roskies, for whom Hassidim seems to represent "real" Jewish culture, clearly considers An-sky the greater of the two writers and describes him as a hero of modern Jewish culture. Sylvia Anne Goldberg's brief essay takes issue with Roskies. Goldberg argues that An-sky did not "return" to *yidishkayt* because he never really left Jewish culture. Rather, his entire life was a search for a new kind of Jewishness appropriate to a rapidly changing world. Gabriella Safran's deeply researched essay locates An-sky in a different paradigm: the "St. Petersburg tradition." Taking as her subjects An-sky's 1892 stay in Petersburg (as an illegal Jew without residence papers), his relationship with Gleb Uspensky, and his adoption of his pseudonym, Safran argues that An-sky created himself as a work of fiction, that his identity was under

constant revision, but always within the constraints of Petersburg-based Russian literary genres. In an elegantly written and impressively documented essay, Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern asks if An-sky was really able to "return." He examines An-sky's attempt to construct his own Jewish identity through a "traditional" Jewish marriage, the creation of a new Russian Jewish intellectual movement, and an attachment to Hassidism (for An-sky, the last remnant of "pure" Jewish culture). Petrovsky-Shtern argues that each of these projects proved a tragic failure; An-sky simply could not "return."

Brian Horowitz frees us from the debate over Roskies and instead addresses the relationship between An-sky's politics and his "literary imagination." He sets An-sky into two closely related intellectual contexts: that of Russian Populism and that of Russian and Russian-Jewish intellectuals who, in the wake of the 1905 Revolution, made spiritual values the center of their pursuit of liberation. According to Horowitz, An-sky believed that spirituality and idealization of physical weakness were the essence of Jewish culture, which led him towards the study of Hassidic folklore manifest in *The Dybbuk*. Mikhail Krutikov also focuses attention on An-sky's Populist political commitments. Krutikov argues that An-sky did not "return" to Jewish identity, nor was he caught "between two worlds." Rather, An-sky created an identity that was at once Russian and Jewish. Krutikov sees this as a heroic achievement that might inform contemporary efforts to construct a Russian-Jewish identity.

In his monumental study *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917* (1981), Jonathan Frankel was one of the first scholars to root An-sky's conception of Jewish culture to his Populist faith. In the volume under review, Frankel provides an essay that elegantly compares and contrasts An-sky's 1907 work *In Shtrom* (*With the Flow*) with four other Yiddish and Hebrew novels about Jews during the 1905 Revolution, works he describes as "instant fictionalization of politics." With exceptional clarity, Frankel lays out the major themes of each novel and explains what made *In Shtrom* distinctive. Each author, he shows, captured the rush of Jewish revolutionary enthusiasm in the spring and summer of 1905 and highlighted the importance of Jewish youth and women to that year's political tumult. In other regards, though, An-sky's novel departed from similar works by Mordkhe Spektor, Yitsakh Mayer Weisenberg, Sholem Aleichem, and Aharon Avraham Kabak. Unlike the others, Ansky did not draw attention to Jewish generational conflicts. He portrayed Jewish socialists and Zionists as engaged in a common struggle and downplayed class tensions within the Jewish community. Instead, he emphasized the common interest of "the Jewish people," as individual human beings, in liberation–an interest that An-sky the (the Socialist Revolutionary) believed Jews shared with the Russian masses.

The four essays that follow Frankel's concentrate on disparate aspects of An-sky's aesthetic and the staging of *The Dybbuk*. In the book's longest essay, Seth Wolitz argues that An-sky is best understood within the "paradigm of the Empire Jew," whose cultural creativity drew on Jewish and Russian experience in the greater context of the Wagnerian-inflected Russian Silver Age. Wolitz observes that in *The Dybbuk*, An-sky's greatest artistic achievement, romantic love triumphs over and dissolves traditional communal authority. Izaly Zemtsovsky sees musicality as a central aspect of An-sky's creative and scholarly work, from his storytelling voice to his ethnographic attention to music to his use of songs in *The Dybbuk*. Michael C. Steinlauf examines what *The Dybbuk* meant to audiences in 1920 in Warsaw, where it was first produced for the stage by the Vilna Troupe. For the actors, the production's "New Jewish Style" was a means to "return" to Jewishness, while Jewish audiences instantly greeted the play as an expression of anxiety at a world in chaotic change. *The Dybbuk*, though, did not initiate a flowering of Polish-Jewish art theater, nor did its later performance in Polish usher in an era of Polish/Jewish cultural rapprochement. Vladislav Ivanov describes the 1922 staging in Hebrew of *The Dybbuk* by the Habima Theater (a Hebrew-language company associated with the Moscow Art Theater and founded in 1917), a production that brought world-wide fame to Habima and to director Evgeny Vakhtangov. For Ivanov, this production, with its emphasis on pathos and ecstasy, gave birth to twentieth-century theater.

The remaining essays examine aspects and legacies of An-sky's efforts at ethnography. Nathaniel Deutsch looks at An-sky's attempt to document the quickly disappearing traditional world of Eastern European Jewish women during his 1912-14 ethnographic expeditions. An-sky, who became fascinated with the tale of the Maiden of Ludmer (which Deutsch suggests informed *The Dybbuk*), was one of the first intellectuals to recognize the centrality of women's experience to Jewish culture. Benyamin Lukin traces An-sky's efforts to display artifacts collected during the ethnographic expeditions and his project for a network of Jewish museums. Lukin argues that An-sky conceived of Jewish museums as tools for the development of Jewish self-knowledge, the for-

mulation of a new secular Jewish culture, and the nurturing of a new generation of Jewish artists. John E. Bowlt, on the other hand, in a marvelously contrary and erudite essay, demonstrates that An-sky's collection had little impact on Russian-Jewish artists. Rather, An-sky was important in that, like other collectors who "secularized" objects by removing them from their life context, he helped pave the way for abstraction. Few artists, though, had access to his collection, and those who did view it at Petrograd's short-lived Jewish Museum in 1917 paid relatively little notice. The new generation had already begun to formulate their own aesthetic, which owed more to Cubism and Futurism than to Jewish folk art, and they rejected An-sky's notions of a "Jewish style."

In the book's penultimate essay, Cecile E. Kuznitz uncovers the complex, destructive competition for materials, volunteers, and funding between the YIVO Institute and the Historic-Ethnographic Society that An-sky helped found in 1919. Both called Vilna home and both (in the spirit of An-sky) sought to build a new Jewish culture on the basis of history and folklore. Kuznitz concludes, though, that the Society had the more inclusive, catholic conception of Jewish culture and the more impartial approach to politics, perhaps the greatest of the legacies bequeath it by An-sky. In the final essay, Jack Kugelmass meditates on An-sky's legacy to Jewish anthropology and ethnography. An-sky's concern for "return" in the context of a broad cultural crisis had little resonance among post-World War Two anthropologists, who, in any case, paid very little attention to Jews as subjects. Kugelmass reflects, though, that his own work may have been influenced by one of An-sky's methods as an ethnographer, namely his use of deception to lure information out of informants. He also compares An-sky's ethnographic agenda to that manifest in Barbara Myerhoff's well-known book on modern American Jewry, *Number Our Days* (1978).

Of equal importance to the scholarly essays are the translated text of the censored variant of *The Dybbuk* and the CD of music associated with An-sky. In an appendix, Vladislav Ivanov (who edited the play's Russian text) examines the genesis of play (written first in Russian, then translated by into Hebrew by Hayyim Bialik, then translated to Yiddish by An-sky), as well its author's struggle with Tsarist censors. I will refrain from summarizing the play itself, which here is rendered gracefully into English by Craig Cravens. In this text, words and phrases struck by the Tsarist censor are indicated in brackets, while those inserted by An-sky at the censor's insistence are underlined. These demonstrate the seemingly minor matters of language that could capture a censor's attention. Here, for instance, is a change typical of those required by the censor, Baron Drizen, before he agreed in October 1915 to approve the play for public performance: a line early in Act Two, referring to the Prophet Elijah, was to be changed from "he always appears dressed as a pauper or a peasant" to "the hidden righteous ones always appear dressed as paupers or peasants" (p. 400). As for the music CD, I was most compelled by the haunting strains of klezmer captured on wax discs by An-sky's team in 1912-14. Also impressive, though, are Michael Alpert's new arrangements of songs associated with An-sky, including Russian miners' songs, Bundist songs, Yiddish children's rhymes, and Russian-Jewish soldiers' songs. These manage an air of authenticity without feigning to be replications of the original folk performances, which is no mean achievement. The modern musicians and singers deliver excellent performances.

Safran and Zipperstein have done a fine job of assembling and grouping these essays. One might wish that they had pushed a few of the authors to sharpen their arguments and had pressured others to correct errors of fact. I hope that I do not seem overly persnickety by pointing out that, contrary to the statement on page 118, Lenin *did* permit the Constituent Assembly to convene in January 1918 (but only for one day!). But these are minor blemishes on a volume of great value. Readers approaching the book knowing nothing of An-sky will find much to hold their attention and will leave it well informed. Readers well-versed in An-sky's work and familiar with the relevant scholarship will find a great deal to chew on as well. Also, the addition of the translated text of *The Dybbuk* and the music CD makes the more affordable paperback edition a valuable teaching tool.

Note

[1]. An-sky completed an unpublished Russian text of *The Dybbuk* in 1914, but the first published variant of the play was the Hebrew translation by Hayim Nacham Bialik, which appeared in Moscow in the journal *Hatekufah* (*The Era*) in 1918. An-sky's own translation into Yiddish appeared in 1919 in Vilna.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia

Citation: Michael C. Hickey. Review of Safran, Gabriella; Zipperstein, Steven J., eds., *The Worlds of S. An-sky: A Russian Jewish Intellectual at the Turn of the Century.* H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13713

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.