

An object as a source: Bialik's Belarusian passport

This intriguing document, which I found in the Belarusian National Archives, relates to the great Hebrew poet Hayim Nahman Bialik (1873-1934).

The document is dated from July 1921, the period when Bialik left Bolshevik Russia together with other Hebrew writers and their family, thanks to the help of his friend, the Russian writer Maxim Gorky. After leaving Odessa, Bialik reached Constantinople, from where he headed to Carlsbad

(Czechoslovakia) to attend the Twelfth Zionist Congress in September 1921. What we did not know is that Bialik possibly made this trip with a Belarusian passport.

The passport was issued gratis by the Belarusian People's Republic (BNR) consulate at Constantinople to Bialik and his wife Manya (spelled Menia in the passport) on the 15 July 1921. The official but factitious purpose given for Bialik's trip was to 'go home' to Grodno. The passport contained also a Belarusian visa indicating that Bialik and his wife were going to 'Ruthénie Blanche via Budapest'. Ruthénie Blanche was one of the French name for Belarus, literally 'White Rus'. However Bialik was born in Volhynia, a Ukrainian region. In order to turn Bialik into a Belarusian citizen, his place of birth on the documents was indicated as Slonim in the Grodno region, instead of his native Ukrainian Rady. The passport holds Greek, Bulgarian, Hungarian and Czech transit visas which correspond to Bialik's trajectory to reach Carlsbad from Constantinople.

There is no doubt that this passport actually belonged to Bialik who is clearly recognisable on the photograph and who indicated Odessa as his place of residence. There is no certainty that Bialik and his wife actually used this passport to travel across Europe to reach Carlsbad. However this document, even if not used, is revealing of important developments characterising this crucial historical moment. 1921 is the year when the Civil War between the Reds and the Whites took a turn in favour of the Reds with the signing of the treaty of Riga in March, by which point Poland and the Bolsheviks divided between themselves the territories of Ukraine and Belarus. This final confirmation that the Bolshevik had cemented victory after the October 1917 revolution and established a Soviet state pushed many intellectuals like Bialik to leave the Bolshevik-controlled territory. Many ended up in the European capitals, Paris and Berlin.

This is also a period of political turmoil, marking the end of the long First World War. The dismantling of four continental empires (German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, Ottoman) led to mass displacement of populations, ethnic violence and a recomposition of the political map. Many 'small nations' such as Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Belarus and Ukraine, declared



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their independence during this period of instability. By 1921 and in the aftermath of the treaty of Riga that created new boundaries and solidified the areas of influence of more powerful states, these small nations knew it was their last chance to create or consolidate their sovereignty. The BNR government, created in March 1918 but in exile since November 1918, was actively seeking at this period the support of Jewish intellectuals and politicians to its cause. The brother of the political thinker Chaim Zhitlovsky, Samuil Zhitlovsky, took the lead of its Ministry for national minorities created in March 1921. The BNR also recruited Isaac Lur'e, close to Zionist circles, as BNR representative in Copenhagen, and the Zionist student David Anekshtein as Conseiller to the BNR mission in Berlin. For a few months, they actively sought to gain the financial and political support of eminent Jewish personalities to the Belarusian cause. Zhitlovsky represented the BNR at the 12th Zionist Congress in Carlsbad and met with the leaders of the Zionist movements (Sokolow, Motskin, Weizmann). At a moment where pogroms were raging on the Belarusian territory, they also pushed the Belarusian leaders to condemn pogroms publicly and denounce Poland's and Soviet Russia's role in these. This temporary Belarusian-Jewish alliance also led to the establishment of a 'Belarusian Public Committee in Germany for the help to people starving in Belarus'.

So, the attribution of a Belarusian passport to Bialik in 1921 makes sense in this context of intense Jewish-Belarusian rapprochement. Anekshtein's, Lur'e's and Zhitlovsky's relentless efforts to familiarise the Jewish intellectual, political, and mostly Zionist, elite with the Belarusian cause, through meetings, interviews, correspondence and trips undoubtedly contributed to an increased awareness of Belarus. Their work created the conditions for Bialik's temporary 'Belarusianisation' and was crucial to carry the voice of the Belarusians beyond diplomatic circles, out to the Jewish cultural elite in émigré Berlin. However, this Jewish-Belarusian cooperation had mixed results and seemed to be over by 1922, at a moment when the BNR had lost the crucial support of other allies such as Lithuania.

'Bialik's Belarusian passport - the Belarusian People's Republic and the Jews in 1921' (in Russian), **Белорусский паспорт Бялика: Белорусская народная республика и евреи в 1921 году.** *Judaic-Slavic Journal*, 2022, (6), 68-100.

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National Archives of the Republic of Belarus, F.827, Op. 2, D. 19, L. 1 and 3ob.

