



Solomon Mikhoels in memoirs: Aharon Steinberg – Haim Vovsi

Elina Vasiljeva

Daugavpils University (Latvia)

Abstract.

The article considers the phenomenon of Solomon Mikhoels (Solomon Vovsi, 1890 -1948), famous Jewish actor and director. The present study is based on a comparative analysis of two memoir ego-documents: the memoirs of his twin brother Haim Vovsi and the memoirs of the philosopher Aron Steinberg. The study builds upon the biographical and cultural-historical method tailored to the specificities of ego-literature, as well as the structural-semiotic analysis. The two memoir texts under study reveal unique facts of the biography and personality of Solomon Mikhoels, related to his childhood and adolescence, present the aspects that influenced his creativity, perception of the theatre, and the Jewish theatrical tradition. Both memoir texts refer to the same biographic period, but they discuss completely different facts; this testifies to the subjectivity of selection and the work of memory mechanism. The comparative approach allows to consider a specific structure of ego-documents that combine personal memories and elements of the "inclusion" of collective memory.

Keywords: biographical, comparative analysis, Jewish; memory, theatre

1. Introduction

Memories are a special kind of ego-literature, which some scientists attribute to the category of documentary materials, others single out elements of artistic modelling from the texts of such a kind. In this context, memories seem to be the most interesting variant of ego-text. This is determined by the proportions of personalization and subjectivization since they are directly related to the biographical facts of personalia. The analysis of memories, on the one hand, goes back to the classical principles of the biographical method; on the other hand, there is a certain author behind the memories, thus each text has its authorship and reflects not only factography, but a personal assessment.

The present article considers two texts of memoirs devoted to the childhood of the famous Jewish actor and stage director Solomon Mikhoels (Vasiljeva, 2010): the memoirs by his twin brother, Khaim Vovsi, written in the 1960s in Russian and the memoirs by the philosopher Aaron Steinberg, written in 1962 in Yiddish. Both texts have not been published: the manuscript with Kham Vovsi's memoirs, donated by Miron Vovsi, is kept in the archives of Daugavpils Local History Museum; the memoirs by Aaron Steinberg appear in a monograph devoted to his work "The Philosopher's Prose", which is prepared for publication by Nelli

5TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON NEW FINDINGS ON HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



20-22 NOVEMBER, 2020
PARIS, FRANCE

Portnova (Shteinberg, 2014). From the point of view of comparative studies (Wagner&Paris, 1981), the texts are of interest since they are fundamentally different in their style and, from the point of view of content, reflect completely different facts from one and the same period of S Mikhoels's life: there are mentioned different teachers (in A. Steinberg's memoirs, the image of Isaiah Hertz, the author of the Jewish grammar textbook, resembles Biblical images; in Khaim's memoirs, there is a comic image of an old teacher Citron, who taught basic skills and the Russian language), different friends, even different theatrical performances that later would influence the formation of S. Mikhoels as actor (Khaim describes in detail "Sins of Youth", A. Steinberg – "The Hasmoneans"). The facts described in the aforementioned memoirs were used as material for writing biographies of S. Mikhoels (a book by M. Geiser, "Mikhoels" (Geizer 2004), and "My father, Solomon Mikhoels. Memories of the life and death" by Natalia Mikhoels (Vovsi-Mihoels, 1984)). In the present study, the analysis of the memoirs is aimed at comprehending the uniqueness of the attempt to understand the phenomenon of S. Mikhoels (a public figure and actor) through his childhood.

2.

The memoirs by A. Steinberg reproduce only a few episodes from the life of S. Mikhoels, which can be roughly divided into two groups corresponding to two nominal periods, when S. Mikhoels and A. Steinberg got acquainted: childhood years spent in Dvinsk and their meeting in London during World War II in November 1943 (the meeting was connected with the activities of S. Mikhoels in the anti-fascist committee). The groups of events correspond to two time periods, and their remoteness in time is emphasized by A. Steinberg: "Exactly sixty years ago, on the banks of the Dvina, I met the twin brothers of the Rebbe Mikhail Vovsi – Khaim and Shloymke" ((Shteinberg, 2014: 171) (a distance of sixty years) and "forty years later, I met with Shloyme in London" (a distance of forty years). In each of these stages, A. Steinberg singles out some events he witnessed personally, which are important and significant from his point of view. For obvious reasons, this material lacks the mentioning of the actor's hypostasis of S. Mikhoels. By all means, all the facts mentioned are accompanied by a reference to his genius artistic heritage, but, at the same time, the roles that are not related to the history of the State Jewish Theatre (GOSET= Gosudarstvennyi Evreiskii Teat) are mentioned as S. Mikhoels's two main roles: the role of Judah Maccabee played in a school performance, when he was a child, and the role of the Soviet envoy to London. These are these two roles that create a kind of framework construction, which encloses the model of genius mastery. In each period-meeting, A. Steinberg singles out two defining events. In the childhood years, this is a participation in the creation of the handwritten magazine "Shushana" and the staging of an amateur performance based on a play written by Aaron Steinberg's elder brother Isaac, where S. Mikhoels played the main role. In the London meeting, two public speeches are singled out: a meeting with the British section of the Jewish World Congress and a meeting at the Association of Jewish Journalists and Writers.

Both texts of the memoirs are united by a common thematic mainline – the theme of twin brothers. It is the sign of Gemini=the Twins (the astrological and further additional meanings

5TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON NEW FINDINGS ON HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



20-22 NOVEMBER, 2020
PARIS, FRANCE

appear in it), under which S. Mikhoels was born. The sign becomes a kind of dominant, which allows A. Steinberg to speak about the essence of the phenomenon of S. Mikhoels. The existence and presence of a brother relates the author of the memories to his title character. A. Steinberg mentions the name of his own brother, Isaac Nahman, immediately after having introduced the brothers Vovsi. However, in the first part of the memoirs, “Dvinsk”, the elder brother is constantly mentioned with emphasis on his position of the leader: “my brother, who had been writing “dramas” from childhood, somehow received praises from his teachers and was very interested in the poet Vovsi.” This elder brother was the author of the drama “The Hasmoneans” in which S. Mikhoels made his debut. The brother initiated the establishment of the society “Revival of Our Language” (in other sources – “Society of Hebrew Language Lovers”), which published the magazine “Shushana”. At the same time, with all the parallels to be drawn between the two pairs of brothers – the pair of the twins Vovsi is significantly different from the one of the brothers Steinberg: this pair (twins) is indivisible, as Khaim and Shlomke are always together, they are a certain phenomenon of Dvinsk: “I imagined that real twins should be spliced, should be two in one person; or, if they are a pair indeed rather than one, then the two should always quarrel, like Esau and Jacob. Only then did it become clear that we have an extraordinary pair of brothers in Dvinsk. And I immediately realized that not knowing who and what they were I often saw them on the street and more than once looked at them in surprise. Undoubtedly, it must be them, those very same twin students of Gordon, Shlomo and Khaim Vovsi! Why have they always been a miracle in my eyes? As simple as that! In all Dvinsk, there were no more two other youths, who were always seen together, and never – one without the other; in addition, they had a special way of walking together: one walking a step ahead of the other. The one who was walking in front was not just walking, but jumping, and the one who was following him, as if were showing him, with his slow pace, the way back. They were very similar, as befits brothers, but the one who was hastier had his lower lip protruded strongly – as if he were about to stick out his tongue at someone, and the one who was slower had very noticeable eyebrows, as if he were angry with his younger mocker-brother ... It seems that the “younger” brother, among other things, was a bit shorter but with wider shoulders” (Shteinberg, 2014: 172). A. Steinberg builds his description according to the principle of ambivalence. The similarity stated at the very beginning turns out to be relative (as befits brothers), and the contrasts between them are brought to the forefront – the brothers are obviously not alike, and this is this thing that is so unique about them – they differ in appearance, they differ in character, moreover, their pair-duet violates any possible logic: they do not quarrel, and the leader in the pair turns out to be the one who is “younger”, Shlomke really leads Khaim.

In the memoirs by Khaim Vovsi, special attention is paid to the category of memory, and the absoluteness of memory is questioned. In Khaim’s text, there appears a rare for this genre structure: an accentuation of a weak position of memories as they are just a lead. Actually, the memories themselves begin with a statement of the weakness of the memories: “The first, earliest years of our childhood have almost completely disappeared from my memory”. And further on: “I have very faint impressions of these performances in my memory”. A lot “pops up” in the memories (“I recall that pupil named Falke”), thereby confirming the

5TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON NEW FINDINGS ON HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



20-22 NOVEMBER, 2020
PARIS, FRANCE

conventionality of the selection of material. The construction of the text is determined by the specifics of the selection of separate episodes by means of the memory mechanism. The structure of the memories is mosaic: on the one hand, it is an attempt to give a general description of the atmosphere (city, family, schools); on the other hand, memory isolates separate independent episodes. With the general impressionistic nature of the memories (the author himself calls them “memories of separate episodes from my childhood”), two episodes are presented in sufficient detail – a home performance “Sins of Youth”, written, staged and played by S. Mikhoels, and a clownery, played by Shlomo Vovsi and Khaimka Vaisman under the impression of the performance of the clowns Demash and Mosel seen in the circus-tent “Devinier”. The home performance, which later became legendary for all biographers, is perceived by Khaim as a unique phenomenon. And this is emphasized by the category of memory. Among the general statement of the relativity and disconnectedness of the memories, it is a description of the home performance that is put under the sign of memory: “I have remembered this episode for the rest of my life. And the best confirmation of the description of this episode from S. Mikhoels’s childhood is that it remains fresh in my memory, although many years have passed since then”.

Much attention is paid to the environment in which the brothers were brought up – first of all, their family and their childhood hometown. At the same time, in many respects, Khaim Vovsi deviates from the position stated in the first lines of his memoirs that it is not the environment itself, but rather some higher forces that determine the fate of a person: “Someone said that a person’s fate is determined long before his birth, i.e., the further development and life of a person after his birth do not always justify the developed personality, as they are determined by a number of other circumstances, in addition to seemingly obvious hereditary characteristics, (environment, ethnography, nature, meetings, social order, social moments, etc.). It seems that this has happened with my brother Solomon Mikhailovich Mikhoels /Vovsi/ and me, his twin brother”. Nevertheless, the memories of their parents, hometown, and childhood friends are also of great significance. The father and the mother appear as two opposites, which formed their unity precisely in S. Mikhoels: mother was “a woman of immediate sublime feelings”, father was rational; mother was fond of reading, mostly secular one (she was keen on Zola and Shomer), father was a deeply religious man, he was fond of cantorial singing; mother was beautiful, father “was rather ordinary looking and did not have regular features.” At the same time, S. Mikhoels inherits the features of both parents, but transforming them in his own manner: his father’s passion for cantorial music and Hasidic songs determined S. Mikhoels’s special musicality (which will be reflected in his future work), his mother’s appearance could be noticed in S. Mikhoels’s features (he looked like his mother, but at the same time he “was not handsome. Though his face radiated intelligence, it was charming and attractive”. It is significant that, in Khaim’s memoirs, the mother appears more frequently: in addition to the actual description of the family, her image appears in two more episodes of the narrative – walking to town and watching home performances. This can be explained by the subjective priorities of the author of the memoirs, who admits himself: “I was, on the contrary, more phlegmatic and clung to my mother all the time”. In fact, the indication of S. Mikhoels’s duality coincides with the

5TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON NEW FINDINGS ON HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



20-22 NOVEMBER, 2020
PARIS, FRANCE

main idea stated in A. Steinberg's memoirs about the phenomenon of twins, where duality was also marked as a feature that characterizes S. Mikhoels.

The description of the atmosphere of the town is also worth considering. In the text by A. Steinberg, the spatial identity of the meeting is extremely significant. It is as significant as the necessity to state the time and the place of all the events: "Exactly sixty years ago, on the banks of the Dvina, I met the twins of the Rebbe Mikhail Vovsi – Khaim and Shlomo." (Shteinberg, 2014: 171) For A. Steinberg, the Rebbe Mikhail Vovsi is not a concrete person: he is the head of the family, so everything is determined in relation to him, and this is the adherence to tradition. For Khaim Vovsi, the question of the atmosphere of the house (a view from the inside) becomes topical. Actually, describing his father's house, Khaim Vovsi enters into a polemic with the biographers that offer their own opinion about the atmosphere in the house of the Vovsis. The father's desire to give his children secular education is particularly emphasised: "Thus, the description of Mikhoels's family and the atmosphere that prevailed in the parents' house as a hotbed of musty religious obscurantism, Hasidism and Talmudism, which can be found in some biographical texts, is a deep lie. These figments were needed, obviously, in order to give more exoticism and asceticism to the image of Mikhoels". It is most likely that the traditionally quoted text-autobiography by S. Mikhoels himself is mentioned here: "The parental home is typically Jewish, patriarchal, saturated with deep fanaticism of father. I was raised at cheder, where I studied Jewish literacy, the Bible, the Talmud" (Mikhoels, 1981). Most likely, this is the reason why Khaim's memoirs provide a detailed description of the lifestyle of the Jews of Dinaburg – Dvinsk: the atmosphere in the house, the daily routine and the behaviour of pupils in the cheder, the bazaar and the signs above stores and shops, the circus-tent that had come for a tour. This atmosphere is the atmosphere of a lively city, the cultural space of which is certainly placed under the sign of childhood. And in this, there is a parallel with the text by A. Steinberg.

The name of the protagonist of the memoirs is an important semiotic sign. Khaim Vovsi's text has a fairly neutral title – "Memories of S. M. Mikhoels's Childhood and Youth". It is crucially important how the author names his brother: in the text, "Mikhoels" is used 27 times, while only one mention refers to the replica of the actor Vlasov's "Lear is a cameo suffering" – he said, "but Mikhoels has neither cameo nor suffering". There is one more mention in the context of the definition of "future": "Obviously, he has chosen the future Mikhoels as such a partner beforehand (about Haimka Weisman's plan to stage a clownery). All other mentions are just a frequent naming of his brother by Khaim, sometimes implying his really well-known historical status, when speaking about the theatrical activities of S. Mikhoels: "Mikhoels's musicality and his deep knowledge of Jewish song folklore were degraded by the moments described above". Yet another context can often be found as well – S. Mikhoels appears exactly as a hero of childhood memories: "He was a great inventor, hothead and sworn enemy of little Mikhoels". This reference demonstrates the specificity of the narrative of the memories – in the author's narrative, one can feel the influence of his position at the time of writing, rather than focusing on the position of the past: little Shlomo, not Mikhoels yet, and his acting, adult, pseudonym, actually has nothing to do with his childhood, but, for the author, the status of Mikhoels – a famous actor is the leading one.

5TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON NEW FINDINGS ON HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



20-22 NOVEMBER, 2020
PARIS, FRANCE

Finally, the frequent naming of the brother by his name and patronymic, Solomon Mikhailovich (10 times), deserves special attention. At the same time, the children's version of the name Shlemka (in this particular variant) appears four times in the text. Three times the name appears in the episode of preparation and staging of the clownery – the most vivid and boyishly mischievous childhood memory. The fourth time the use of the children's name "Shlemka" falls on the epic finale of the memories, which makes this mention accent: "There are very few of these people left. And yet, among these few, the image of Shlemka Vovsi, Solomon Mikhailovich Vovsi, a wonderful, inspired, deep and people's (in the truest sense of the word) artist is still alive and dear". Very unexpectedly, at the very end (that stylistically differs from the main text, since in the final sentence the author's "I" and personal impressions are replaced by a kind of collective thinking, in which the image of Mikhoels is saddened) the official "Mikhoels" is replaced by the personal "Shlemka"; moreover, regardless the emphasized belonging to the theatre, after his name and patronymic, the father's surname appears, just in the context where the surname Mikhoels would be more expected. Deriving a model of collective memory that emphasizes the greatness of his brother, Khaim reminds the reader that the great Mikhoels belongs to the Vovsi family.

The naming of Mikhoels in A. Steinberg's memoirs happens following a completely different model. The style of the title itself "My Dvinsk Friend: Shlomo Mikhoels" indicates a more explicit artistic direction of the text: it is more of an essay than memoirs. Actually, A. Steinberg from the very beginning artistically plays up the naming of the hero. "Mikhoels" is undoubtedly a more recognizable name in society, therefore its use in the presentation of a biographical fact turns out to be understandable: "It is no accident that I emphasize that Shlomo Mikhoels was born under the constellation of Gemini." The use of the phrase "Shlomo Vovsi" is also logical when it comes to the real signature under the verses, and, further, this name is purposefully used in the description of episodes from childhood. The use of the name "Mikhoels" is associated with a significant event – the preparation of the play "The Hasmoneans", which is interpreted by the author as the true birth of the actor Mikhoels: "But in 1920, in that same year, (5062_5063), a God-noted theatre artist appeared for all of us, dozing in the soul of Shlomo Mikhoels, back then, on Hanukkah (here it should be noted that in relation to the play "Sins of Youth" ((Shteinberg, 2014: 178), Khaim Vovsi marks Purim as the most significant Jewish holiday – a holiday that directly includes theatricalization as a ritual moment), he acted as the leading actor for the first time". In the text written in Yiddish by A. Steinberg, the Russian version of the name – "Shlomo Mikhoels (in Russian, professor Solomon Mikhailovich Vovsi)" is situationally introduced. This explanatory form is introduced in the episode describing Mikhoels's arrival in England in 1943. In this situation, the name "Mikhoels" becomes a kind of refrain through which the special unofficial relations between A. Steinberg and S. Mikhoels are emphasized: "Mikhoels was put on the right hand of Lady Reading. Lady Reading's brother, the second Lord Melchett, was also present. I was asked to take a seat next to Mikhoels, since it was already known that we were childhood friends. After refreshments, something like a conversation began – discussions, exchange of questions and answers, Mikhoels spoke his magnificent Yiddish" (Shteinberg, 2014: 181). But at the very end of A. Steinberg's essay, once again, as

5TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON NEW FINDINGS ON HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



20-22 NOVEMBER, 2020
PARIS, FRANCE

if defining the framework structure of the narrative, the image declared in the first lines arises: “It will not be an exaggeration if we agree that Shlomo, son of Mikhail Vovsi from Dvinsk, has become a true envoy of Russian Jewry”. This confirms the idea of a framework structure of the essay, where the place, the nomination of the protagonist in his relations with the kin (and this is an element of biblical style) are emphasized, only one thing changes – the characteristic features of the time. If the narration begins with a statement of a specific remote time interval (“Exactly sixty years ago”), then, in its final part, the statement of the past (“was”) refers only to a specific fact of the biography (he was an envoy – the activities of the anti-fascist committee), and the generalizing conclusions appeal to the category of eternity – “my Dvinsk friend lives and will live” (Shteinberg, 2014: 183) .

3. Conclusion

One of the components of ego-literature is the subjective nature of narrative and the focus of the narrative on the author’s point of view. The peculiarity of the two texts of memoirs under consideration is in their focusing on a famous historical and cultural personality, which shifts the narrator’s point of view in the direction of another object. This involves a combination of the individual and the collective in a recreated model of memories. Several monographs are devoted to the work and biography of Solomon Mikhoels: first of all, a book written by his daughter Natalia Mikhoels, and a biography published in the “Life of Remarkable People” series, compiled by one of the significant researchers of S. Mikhoels’s creative work, Matvey Glazer. The considered memoirs written by Khaim Vovsi and Aaron Steinberg are texts that are small in their volume, but it is in these texts that S. Mikhoels’s personality is revealed in a slightly different cultural and historical context. Both authors of the memoirs were with Mikhoels in the same chronological and cultural position; thus, their subjective views on events were synchronized with the ones of S. Mikhoels. The texts of memories are factually and stylistically different. Though they have several points of intersection and inclusion of the mechanism of shared collective memory. Actually, the “inclusion” of the collective memory is the unifying principle for the two texts: personal memories are a large part of the collective text called “Mikhoels”.

References

- Gejzer, M., (2004). *Mihoels* , Moskva: Molodaja gvardija.
- Mihoels, (1981). *Statji, besedi, rechi. Statji i vospominanija o Mihoelse*, Moskva: Iskusstvo.
- Shteinberg, A., (2014). *Proza filosafo*, Munchen: ImWerden Verlargo, pp. 171-184.
- Vovsi-Mihoels, N., (1984). *Moj otec Solomon Mihoels. Vospominanija o zhizni i gibeli*, Tel-Aviv.
- Vasiljeva, E., (2010). Mark Shagal i Solomon Mihoels: k voprosu o nacionalnoj tipologii. *Bjulleten Muzeja Marka Shagala*, vol. 18, pp. 32-35.

**5th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON NEW FINDINGS ON
HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**



**20-22 NOVEMBER, 2020
PARIS, FRANCE**

Wagner, D. A., Paris, S. G., (1981). "Problems and Prospects in Comparative Studies of Memory," *Human Development*, vol. 24, pp. 412-424.