GLOSSARY

Part I: Translations of Ukrainian and Russian Phrases

315/ Nu, zhidka, a shtsho, troshki lipshi? “Well, Jew, are you a little bit better?”

316/ Troshki tebi lipshi? “Do you feel a bit better?”

316/ Lipshi. “Better.”

316/ Ribi moi. Exclamation that is roughly equivalent to “Oh, my God.”

316/ Izvidko ti, zhidka? “Where are you from, Jew?”

316/ Ti iz Tuneyadevki? Kazhi-zhe shtsho ti vitarashtshil na meni otshi i glyanish yak shilani. Alye mozshe ti take i shilani. Trastse tvoi materi. “You’re from Tuneyadevka? Do tell me why you’re staring at me like a madman. Or maybe you are crazy. Damn it!”
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316/ Ya ub Tuneyadevka. “I’m from Tuneyadevka” [garbled].

316/ Tsharka vodka. A small glass of vodka.

316/ Zhidki hallah. “Jewish challah” [i.e., braided bread].

316/ Ti iz dobri zhidka. “You’re one of the good Jews.”

316/ Tshoyesh skilke khotshes za pivan? Za tsibili? “Listen, how much do you want for the rooster? For the onions?”

316/ Mozshe mayesh kartofli, yaytsi? “Maybe you have potatoes, eggs?”

334/ Dobry dyen! Kozhi no tshelovitsche kudi dorogi Eretz-Yisro’eyl? “Good afternoon. Can you tell me the way to the Land of Israel?”


334/ Nye, nye. “No, No.”

334/ Kudi dorogi Errrretz-Yisro’eyl. “What’s the way to the Laaaand of Israel?”

370/ Vin zahubleni zhidki vin pitaye? “Do you know of any lost Jews?”

370/ Zahublenikh zhidkov ya zna Leibko, Shmulko. “I know the Jews who were lost, Leib and Shmuel.”

370/ Ni Leibko, ni, nil “Not Leib, no, no!”

381/ Zhidovski banya. Jewish bathhouse.

381/ Yak-zhe, pani, teya zhidki . . . “Well, sir, those Jews . . .”

388/ Vasha blagarodya. “Your Honor.”
Afikoman: the matzo that is eaten at the end of the Passover seder.

Akdomes: Hymn recited by Ashkenazic Jews on the first day of Shavuos.

Bershad-wove “Four-corner” weskit: See Talis kotn.

Breviaries (tekhines): Women’s prayerbooks, written in Yiddish.

Bubba’s Book o’ Wives’ Tales (bobe mayses): Fairy tales, often confused with the sixteenth-century Yiddish Bovo bukh.

Challah: Braided bread traditionally prepared for Sabbath eve.

Crimean War: Fought chiefly in the Crimea, 1853–56; Britain, France, Turkey, and Sardinia defeated Russia.

Cymbal: Hammer dulcimer played in Jewish folk music.

Days of Awe: The period from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur.

East-wall representation (mizrach): Decorated wall-plaque or tapestry hung on the east wall of a house, inscribed with the Hebrew word mizrach.

Fastday lamentations (kinot): Lamenting elegies, read on the Ninth of Av (see Tisha b’Av), in addition to the Book of Lamentations, mourning the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Fast of Av: Fast on the Ninth of Av (see Tisha b’Av).
Fast of Tammuz: Fast on the seventeenth day of Tammuz, commemorating the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and beginning a somber three-week period prior to the Ninth of Av.

Feast of Tabernacles: See Sukkoth.

First Candle: See Hanukkah.

Feast of Weeks: See Shavuos.

Four Questions: The Four Questions asked early in the Passover seder.

Glupsk: Fictional place bearing a name that suggests it is a Town of Fools; based on the actual town of Berdichev, where Abramovitsh resided in the 1860s.

Golem: Artificial human being, created out of clay and magically brought to life.

Goniff: Thief.

Goodspells (heyelekh, kameyelekh): Amulets, charms.

Haggada: Narrative of the exodus from Egypt, read at home during the seder ceremony on Passover Eve.

Hanukkah: Holiday commemorating the victory of the Hasmoneans over the Greeks and the rededication of the Temple in 165 B.C.E.

Heder: Traditional Jewish school for young boys, prior to study at a yeshiva.

Hoshanna Rabbah: Seventh day of the holiday Sukkoth.

Jethro’s Portion: Exodus 18-20. The Torah portion read in the synagogue in the month of Shevat, corresponding to February.
Kabtsansk: Fictional place with a name that derives from the Hebrew word *kabtsan*, meaning “beggar”; hence, Town of Beggars or Paupersville.

Kaddish: Prayer recited at different points in synagogue service; traditionally spoken by sons in memory of deceased parents.

Kitl: Man’s white linen robe, traditionally worn on the Days of Awe, on Passover Eve, and on other occasions.

Kosher meat tax: Tax levied by a Jewish community to cover the cost of rabbinical supervision in the ritual slaughter of animals.

Mezuzah: Ritual container affixed to the doorposts of Jewish houses, containing the “Shema” prayer, “Hear, O Israel . . .”

Mikve (Yiddish) or mikveh (Hebrew): Ritual bath.

Month of Elul Penitences: Penitential prayers in anticipation of the Days of Awe during the following month.

Ninth of Av (Tisha b’Av): Fast day commemorating the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Parish Corporation (kahal): Jewish community, as guided by its leading citizens.

Penitential prayers (selichot): Verses based on biblical poetry that are recited on fast days, asking forgiveness for sins.


Phylacteries (tefillin): Small leather cases, containing a parchment inscribed with biblical verses, traditionally affixed to the forehead and left arm of men during weekday morning prayers.
Pievke: Fictional town's name resembling the Russian word for "leech."

Poser (kashia, Aramaic; kashe, Yiddish): A difficulty in a Talmudic passage; by extension, in Yiddish, a question.

Prayershawl (talis): Four-cornered garment traditionally worn by Jewish men during morning prayers.

Purim: Holiday that celebrates the rescue of the Jews from the Persian Haman.

Ram's horn (shofar): Horn that is sounded on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Rashi script: Hebrew typeface used in the printing of the biblical commentary by Rashi, Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (1040–1105).

Reb: Term conveying respect, similar to the English "Mr."

Rebbe: Hasidic leader, as distinguished from a non-Hasidic rabbi (rov); in other contexts, a teacher.

River Sambatyon: Mythical river that flows somewhere beyond the "Mountains of Darkness."

Scripboxes: Black leather boxes containing portions of the Pentateuch written on parchment. Fastened to leather straps, they are bound on the arm and the head during the morning prayer; on the Ninth Day of Av, during the afternoon prayer.

Shammes: Sexton; synagogue caretaker.

Shavuos (Yiddish) or shavuoth (Hebrew): Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, celebrating the wheat harvest. Traditionally associated with the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai.
Shema: Prayer that begins, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Declaration of God's unity and providence.

Sheol: Biblical phrase referring to the realm of the dead.

Shorabor: Legendary wild ox to be eaten by the righteous after the coming of the Messiah.

Shul: Synagogue.

Simchas Torah (Simhath torah, Hebrew, or simkhes toyre, Yiddish): Holiday after Sukkoth, celebrating the completion of the annual cycle of Torah readings.

Standing benediction (amidah): Eighteen blessings recited silently at each of the daily synagogue services.

Sukkah: A booth in which Jews are traditionally expected to dwell and eat their meals during the week of Sukkoth.

Sukkoth: Festival of Booths, commemorating the tabernacles inhabited by the Israelites in the wilderness, after the Exodus.

Talis: Prayer shawl, with knotted fringes on the four corners, traditionally worn by Jewish men during morning prayers.

Talis kotn ("small talis"): A rectangular cloth traditionally worn by Jewish men under the shirt, with knotted fringes on the four corners.

Tekhines: Women's prayerbooks, written in Yiddish.

Third Feast (shaleshudes, Yiddish): Late-afternoon meal on the Sabbath.
Tisha b'Av: Fast day commemorating the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Tsviyachich: Fictional town bearing a name that suggests it is a place of hypocrisy.

Tu b'Shevat: Festival of trees on the fifteenth day in the month of Shevat, six weeks after Hanukkah.

Tuneyadevka (from Russian tuneyadetz, "parasite"): Abramovitsh's fictional Town of Idlers, Parasitesville.

Yosifon's history: Popular chronicle of Jewish history ascribed to Joseph Ben Gurion, thought to have been compiled in the 8th century. Based on Josephus, it traces Jewish history from the return from the Babylonian exile to the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE.
S. Y. ABRAMOVITSH (1836–1917), better known by his pen name, "Mendele Moykher Sforim," was the first major writer of modern fiction in Hebrew and Yiddish. He lived in Odessa.

DAN MIRON is William Kay Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at Columbia University and Professor of Hebrew Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He is the author of A Traveler Disguised.

KEN FRIEDEN is B. G. Rudolph Professor of Judaic Studies at Syracuse University. He is the author of Classic Yiddish Fiction.

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