

# Introduction

The present work deals with the traces of cultural activity, taking chiefly the form of translation, of the pre-Ashkenazic Jews in Eastern Europe, and it is based on my forty years of research on translated texts produced in the Middle Ages in the Eastern European lands called Rus'. These lands, which adopted in the tenth century the Greek Orthodox variety of Christianity, are home to populations speaking various dialects and have repeatedly witnessed shifting political borders. The Slavic dialects spoken across them have in the long run produced three written languages—Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Russian.

With the Christianization of the Slavs in the Balkans from the ninth century onward, starting in Bulgaria, a multitude of originally Jewish texts was translated from Greek into Old Church Slavonic, the first written language of the Slavs, reflecting mainly Bulgarian dialects. Among the first texts to be translated were biblical ones such as the book of Psalms, which in both Jewish and Christian cultures is a major component of the liturgy, and extrabiblical literature, including apocryphal and pseudepigraphic texts, as, for example, “texts and fragments about Adam, Enoch, Noah, Jacob, Abraham, Moses, and other exalted patriarchs and prophets, that were often viewed as the lives of the protological saints and were incorporated in hagiographical collections” (Orlov 2009, 4). These texts were transferred in ever-growing numbers to Rus' after its Christianization in 988.

Indirect Jewish input in East and South Slavic culture can thus be observed mostly in texts that were translated in Bulgaria from Greek into Slavic between the tenth and twelfth centuries, and subsequently arrived in the ancient principality of Kyivan Rus', where they were copied, while simultaneously also being linguistically adapted to local particularities of pronunciation, grammar, and lexicon. It is possible (but not very likely), although some Russian scholars have claimed otherwise, that a few of these texts were not imported from Bulgaria but translated directly from Greek in the eleventh-twelfth centuries in the recently Christianized Rus'.

The identification of such instances of indirect input and the distinction between East Slavic copies of translations made in Bulgaria and translations made in Rus' requires a painstakingly detailed analysis of (a) variation in orthography reflecting phonetic variation in pronunciation, of (b) lexical variants reflecting semantic distinctions in the Slavic dialects, and finally and most importantly, of (c) textual differences reflecting distinct sources of the translations. It is this kind of analysis that I have been pursuing for the last four decades.

Direct Jewish input, on the other hand, involves Slavic texts translated from the Hebrew in Rus', such as portions of the tenth-century historical compilation known as the *Josippon*, as well as various Midrashic accounts of Moses and other Old Testament figures. In a second phase, direct Jewish input refers to a number of scientific and philosophical works translated from Arabic into Hebrew and then from Hebrew into the variety of East Slavic we will refer to as Ruthenian. This a convenient neutral designation in English for the language of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which is referred to by various names, some of them historically and politically charged, such as *prosta mova* or "simple speech," *Ruska mova* or "Russian speech" (Russian is a term coined by H. G. Lunt for the adjective derived from Rus'), as well as *staroukraïns'ka mova* or "Old Ukrainian speech" and *starabelaruskaja mova* or "Old Belarusian speech" in the writings of Ukrainian and Belarusian scholars, respectively; traditionally Russian and Soviet scholars, on the other hand, call this *zapadno-russkij* "West Russian." Among these translations we find al-Ghazālī's *Intentions of the Philosophers*, Maimonides's *Logical Terminology*, the pseudo-Aristotelian mirror of princes *Secret of Secrets*, and more.

The distinction between direct and indirect input is not in all cases clear-cut, and we discuss some cases of disagreement regarding both the place of translation and the language of origin of the Slavic text.

The questions to be asked about each text are manifold: Who were the translators? Where was the translation made? When was it made? From what language was the Slavic translated? Into what variety of Slavic was it made? For whom was the translation intended? Who were the actual readers? How were the translations received by the readers and by the religious authorities? And most important: Why and for what purpose were the translations made at all? The answers are not always obvious and much controversy remains.

We are thus facing a complex puzzle of multiple dimensions—philological, religious and cultural. Each of them has to be tackled in order to bring forth and analyze the textual evidence that serves as basis for all the historical conclusions that may be reached. The exposition of the evidence and of its textual and historical analyses is presented chronologically:

The first lecture (chapter 1) outlines what little we know, both from Jewish and Christian sources, about the history of the Jewish presence in Eastern Europe, and in particular in Kyivan Rus', in the period from the tenth to the thirteenth century. It sets forth the meager evidence regarding the level of education of

these early Jews, their linguistic situation, and the written traces they have left us—basically, in the form of translations. We focus on two such traces, one a translation of the biblical book of Esther that turns out to have been made from Judaeo-Greek, and the other an excerpt from the chronicle *Josippon*, made directly from Hebrew.

The second lecture (chapter 2) discusses the translations of Midrashic excerpts found in Russian compilations, translations made from Hebrew between the thirteenth and early fifteenth centuries by (converted?) Jews of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the heir of Rus' after the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century and following the destruction of Kyiv in 1241.

The third lecture (chapter 3), which is also the longest, consists of two sections. The first section deals with the textual findings and analyses of the translations of scientific and philosophical texts written originally in Arabic, such as al-Ghazālī's *Intentions of the Philosophers*, Maimonides' *Logical Terminology*, and pseudo-Aristotle's *Secret of Secrets*. These translations were made in the second half of the fifteenth century directly from Hebrew into Ruthenian, the written language of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, thus necessarily involving the participation of Jews from the Grand Duchy. The manuscripts containing these texts were preserved in various monastic and princely libraries in Muscovy, where they were copied, eventually Russified, and occasionally corrupted by the copyists who struggled to cope with the bizarre language and the unfamiliar contents. The second section of the lecture deals with the historical background and settings of these translations, demonstrating that they are linked to the movement known as "the Heresy of the Judaizers" that emerged in Novgorod and spread to Moscow in the 1470s.