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Fantasy and Dissimulation in the Memoirs of Getzel Zelikovits (1855-1926)

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Abstract

The Yiddish-language memoirs of the journalist Getzel Zelikovits (1855-1926), published in New York in 1919-1920, present a version of his life that deviates considerably from the version one might glean from other contemporary testimony, such as newspaper articles and institutional records. This paper examines how Zelikovits constructed a counterfactual narrative in which he seeks to present his readership with his life as it should have been. As well as Zelikovits's sense of injustice at how he had been treated by European and American academia, and by the British and French establishments, another reason for his deviation from the truth is that he was guilty of a number of serious offences: academic fraud, false accusation of murder, and likely sexual assault. I conclude by exploring what is at stake for a biographer, from an ethical and scholarly standpoint, in exposing Zelikovits's misdeeds and untruths.

Keywords

Yiddish literature; Getzel Zelikovits; Sudan; autobiography; fraud; academia; British army.

Introduction

For an autobiographer to fabricate some elements of their life story is hardly unusual, nor is it uncommon for writers of their own lives to veer still further into the realms of complete fantasy. The subject of this article, journalist Getzel Zelikovits[1] (1855-1926), systematically set out to create an alternative narrative of his life that corrected – as he saw it – injustices that he had suffered, and that elevated his own achievements, principally scholarly, to a higher level. Zelikovits lies both by omission in his autobiographical writings, and by outright fabrication. His obvious deviations from the truth, ironically, serve to diminish his achievements rather than magnify them.

Zelikovits's most extensive set of autobiographical writings were serialised in the New York paper the *Yidishes Tageblat* (also known as *The Jewish Daily News*), in Yiddish, between 2 Dec 1919 and 29 June 1920, under the title 'Meyne Erinerungen' ('My Memories'; Figure 1). These articles have recently been collected and republished in French translation by Paul B. Fenton as *Mémoires d'un aventurier juif. Du Shtetl de Lituanie au Soudan du Mahdi* (Fenton 2021). I would like to start, however, by quoting the more concise summary of his own life that Zelikovits offered some years earlier, in the introduction to his travel writings:

> I was born in the small town of Riteva in the region of Kovno. My father was the owner of a leather works and known as a distinguished merchant and scholar. Of course, my father's object was that I should eventually become a rabbi in Israel; and so it was that I first set the Talmud and the Torah on my knees as subjects of study. … [In 1877/78, using a small inheritance from his grandfather,] I came with a little money and a lot of hope to Paris. After a lot of hard work I managed to enter a high house of learning, and I learned the languages of the ancient world in the Sorbonne. I also heard lessons from

[1] I use the standard YIVO transcription of Zelikovits's name as he spells it himself in Yiddish (זעליקאָוויץ). He appears in other, contemporary and later, sources under variations such as Sélikovitsch, Selikovitch and Zelikovitz.

the greatest professors: Ernest Renan, Joseph Derenbourg, Joseph Halevy, Julius Oppert, Defrémery and more. In the year 5645 [= 1884/85] I came to Egypt as an interpreter of the Arabic and English languages for the British army relieving General Gordon, who had been captured at Khartoum. After my arrival in the clerks' battalion, I found favour in the eyes of Lord Wolseley, Sir Evelyn Wood and the Minister of War Kitchener, and I was given the honorary title 'Honorary Lieutenant' [written in Roman script]. When I returned to the capital of France, I devoted my time and my pen to literature and I added to my learning, especially in Hieroglyphs. And in those days I wrote in ha-Melitz and ha-Megid about my travels, drawings, scientific articles and poetry. I set off to Constantinople, Smyrna, Athens, Naples and Rome, after I was expelled from Paris, the Garden of Wisdom. I came to the United States that year [1886]. First I visited Philadelphia. I became Professor of Hieroglyphs at the University of Pennsylvania. Due to an impure event in my new family and the prevailing sprit of my life I moved to New York. In this city I tried for the first time to write in our mother tongue [i.e. Hebrew] under various pseudonyms. I was appointed to the National Republican Committee as a foreign language speaker for President McKinley. Then I was employed in the western American cities, and I delivered speeches in French, German, Italian, Arabic and Syrian. I acquired my first education in life from my mother, who taught me to write Hebrew, German and Russian. She has passed away, and her memory remains in my heart. I will not write any more words, because they were written only at the request of the publishers and not of my own volition. ... Now I live by my pen.

(Zelikovits 1910, 3-4; my translation, with some renderings from Simon 2009.)

This short autobiography, written when Zelikovits was sixty-five years old and living in the United States,[2] has the superficial appearance of a humble account of an accomplished life, but it misrepresents and omits a great deal. Zelikovits is a vexing biographical subject (Goldberg 2003/2004). In his own, copious, writings, it can be almost impossible to disentangle fact from fiction. He lied about the most fundamental things, including his age – he was born in 1855, not 1863 as he claimed in everything from his travel writings, quoted above, to US Census returns. As we shall see, to say that he 'found favour in the eyes of Kitchener' is also very far from the truth. He was an accomplished linguist, but he also exaggerated his own intellectual accomplishments, by claiming a doctorate and a professorship (which he did not hold) and taking almost a decade off his age to make himself appear a child prodigy. His autobiographical sketch, above, takes him to Paris and Oriental Studies as a precocious teenager. In fact, he was already in his early twenties, and had spent several years working as a clerk in French North Africa, which is where he first learnt Arabic. Zelikovits's oblique references to his expulsion from the 'Garden of Wisdom' and to 'an impure event in my new family' gloss over two public scandals; a third scandal is not even mentioned. The first scandal, the 'Olivier Pain Affair', in which Zelikovits publicly accused the British Army of murdering a French journalist in Sudan, caused Zelikovits to leave Paris, and is recounted from his perspective in 'Meyne Erinerungen'. The matter to which he refers only obliquely (in the passage quoted above) is his arrest for the sexual assault of a young girl named Rebecca Schwartz, whom he later married, in Philadelphia. This is not described at all in 'Meyne Erinerungen', which ends chronologically with his departure from Paris. The third scandal – which, like the previous two, was widely reported in the press – was his detention by Rebecca Schwartz's attorney for non-payment of alimony.

[2] The book was published in Warsaw, but the 1910 United States Census finds Zelikovits (under the name George S. Selikovitsch) and his family living at 365 East 171st Street in the Bronx.

This article sets out to do two things. First, using a range of historical sources complementary to Zelikovits's own writings, I point out where he deviates from the demonstrable truth of events. Secondly, I aim to show that there is more at stake in exposing Zelikovits than mere historical pedantry. Establishing errors of fact reveals the greater pattern across Zelikovits's autobiographical writings, and shows them to be a systematic attempt to replace a narrative that had already been constructed in the press with his own alternative narrative, even though he rarely refutes other sources of information explicitly. Beyond this, Zelikovits's falsification of events confronts us very directly with important ethical questions in life writing: to what extent do we have a duty to expose past acts of wrongdoing by our subjects?

Linguist and Scholar

By the time he wrote 'Meyne Erinerungen' in 1919-1920, Zelikovits was an established journalist in the United States, writing mostly for Jewish publications in Yiddish and Hebrew. His readership in the *Yidishes Tageblat* were immigrant Ashkenazi Jews from Europe, many of them highly educated and familiar with Jewish intellectual circles in the United States and in Europe. Zelikovits writes directly to this audience, giving them nostalgic recollections of his youth in the Russian Empire, and recounting his meetings and friendships with famous Jewish scholars of yesteryear in Paris. Some of these meetings actually happened and some did not. Language and (Jewish and non-Jewish) intellectual life feature prominently in 'Meyne Erinerungen'.

Like many a memoirist, Zelikovits begins by justifying his hubris in writing an account of his own life:

> ‘Write your memoirs, Sélikovitch!’ people have often said to me lately. ‘You’ve had so many adventures: Lord Kitchener’s appointed Arabic interpreter in Egypt and Sudan; emissary to the Mahdi, the false prophet of Khartoum in Africa; heroic fighter against the French antisemite Drumont, who insulted you in his books; peace-broker between France and England; correspondent for Henri Rochefort’s Parisian newspaper, pupil of Ernest Renan, assistant to Professor Joseph Derenbourg when he was half blind; daily companion of Ga’on Rabbi Israël Salanter during his six-month stay in Paris, for a long time the most popular journalist for [the paper] Ha-Meliz of St. Petersburg, directed by the immortal J. L. Gordon. You have so much to tell us – so write your memoirs!’ (Fenton 2021, 31-32.[3])

Zelikovits (ventriloquising his friends) presents himself as multilingual, widely-travelled, a scholar, someone who has experienced antisemitism, and an accomplished journalist. All of these things are true, but not in quite the way Zelikovits represents them. Zelikovits goes on to accept the challenge of writing his memoirs, but on one condition: that in the case of the important international events in which he was caught up, he will state ‘only proven facts, confirmed by French or English official documents.’ This, too, bends the truth.

In the following sections, I will look at how Zelikovits manipulated the stories of his involvement in the 1884-1885 Nile Expedition and his relations with Rebecca Schwartz in the latter part of the same decade. Fundamental to his whole self-presentation throughout his autobiographical writings, however, are the questions of language and scholarship, which I address first. They are also the subjects on which he was most frequently caught out.

[3] The text given throughout this article is for the most part my English rendering of Fenton’s French translation of ‘Meyne Erinerungen’. I have occasionally referred directly to the Yiddish original to clarify individual points.

Zelikovits's mother tongue was Yiddish, and he studied Hebrew from a young age. He also knew German and Russian from childhood, and acquired several ancient and modern languages, including Arabic, during his studies in Paris and his travels. Where evidence exists of Zelikovits using any of these languages, it bears out his claims to competence in them. 'Meyne Erinerungen' claims that he left for Paris at the age of sixteen in 1879. In 1879 he was in fact twenty-four, and had already long left his home town of Riteva in Lithuania; this collapsed chronology makes it difficult for Zelikovits to keep his story of the 1870s and 1880s straight. He admits that at that time he left Riteva his French was still meagre, but he improved by taking lodgings in Paris where he would only hear French spoken, away from other Yiddish speakers (Fenton 2021, 42). The standard of his written French by the mid-1880s (in the newspaper articles discussed below) is native-level. In English, likewise, Zelikovits, recognised where he needed to improve and put in the work to do so. He describes his English accent at the time he was living in Paris as 'dreadful', and so one of his motivations in visiting London was to improve it (Fenton 2021, 99). By 1887, the published version of a lecture he gave in Philadelphia, allowing for editorial revisions, shows excellent English (Sélikovitsch 1887). When he first arrived in Algeria, Zelikovits describes his attempts at pronouncing Arabic as 'like a goy speaking Yiddish' and how he struggled with pronunciation (Fenton 2021, 51). Although Zelikovits's command of colloquial Egyptian and Sudanese Arabic was criticised by British observers in the 1880s (see below), in 1918 he published an Arabic-Yiddish phrasebook for Jewish soldiers in the British army in Palestine, which has perfectly good Arabic (Zelikovits 1918). Fellow New York journalists the Arbeely brothers praised him in their Arabic-language paper *Kawkab Amīrka* as 'a very good Arabic scholar' (13 January 1892). In ancient languages as well as modern ones, Zelikovits's claims to proficiency withstand scrutiny. His Philadelphia lecture on 'The Dawn of Egyptian Civilization' shows

up-to-date Egyptological knowledge for the period: he has read widely, and he cites and translates the ancient Egyptian language accurately.

Most significant from a linguistic point of view, however, was Zelikovits's role in the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language. In Paris in 1879, Zelikovits met Eliezar Ben-Yehuda, who wrote of him:

> There [at the home of Baer Goldberg in Paris] I also met a youth from Russia, G. Selikovitch, whom the hand of time had taken from the city of his birth in Russian Lithuania to Africa, where he had spent a few months among the Jews of Tunisia and Morocco. He then came to Paris, lived for some time with Goldberg, and became well known in the political world at the time of the great clash between France and England over the seizure of Fashoda [Ben-Yehuda remembers incorrectly: Selikovitch was involved in the Gordon Relief Expedition, not the Fashoda Incident, which did not happen until 1898]. Afterwards, Selikovitch became a famous writer in the Yiddish newspapers in the New World. From the lips of this young man I heard, for the first time in my life, Hebrew words in the Sephardi pronunciation, which he had learnt during his wanderings among the Jews of Africa. And it was not just the Sephardi pronunciation that I heard from him for the first time, but also natural, simple conversation in Hebrew. … When I met the young Selikovitch and heard from him about his travels among the oriental Jews, I asked him how he had spoken to them. He told me that until he had learned to speak their language, i.e., Arabic, he had talked to them in the holy tongue. I began to speak Hebrew to him in the style of Ammon and Tamar and was delighted to hear him answering with simple words, in natural speech! I felt as if a heavy burden had fallen from me, and from then on we spoke regularly in Hebrew, and the problem of the

> revival of the spoken language was solved for me at a stroke. Selikovitch is perhaps not aware of the part he played in the revival of spoken Hebrew.
>
> (Ben-Yehuda 1993, 33-34.)

Although Zelikovits may not initially have been aware of the influence he had on Ben-Yehuda and his project for the revival of Hebrew, he did read Ben-Yehuda's memoir when it was serialised in the New York Hebrew paper *ha-Toren* in 1917-1918, because he quotes directly from it in his own memoir in the *Yidishes Tageblat*; indeed, Ben-Yehuda's serialised memoirs may have inspired his own. While Zelikovits is naturally keen to claim credit for his part in inspiring Ben-Yehuda, it causes him some problems. By Zelikovits's chronology in 'Meyne Erinerungen' this meeting (in 1879) would have to have been shortly after his arrival in Paris, and he would have been sixteen years old. Ben-Yehuda shows that Zelikovits had already been in Paris for some time, and had also already spent time in North Africa. Zelikovits states that at the time of the meeting he was 'barely twenty' years old (Fenton 2021, 40). He quotes directly from Ben-Yehuda on their meeting, but is forced to omit some crucial content in order to protect the chronology of his own narrative. This leaves him unable to account for how he was actually able to speak natural Hebrew with Ben Yehuda, which ironically weakens his claim to this very real place in history.

Zelikovits's attempts to depict himself as a child prodigy likewise actually detract from his account. Where he also falls down is in his attempts to give himself scholarly status. In particular, he seeks to represent himself as a gentleman-scholar, a person of leisure, who travels in order to undertake scholarly research, not because he needs paid employment. This is how Zelikovits presents his studies in Paris, and attempts to overcome discrepancies in the academic titles he used:

> I obtained two diplomas simultaneously: one in Semitic languages (Chaldean, Arabic, Syriac, Ethiopian) and the other in Egyptology (ancient Egyptian language, in Hieroglyphic writing). These diplomas made me a double *docteur ès lettres*, but I never used this title in France, since, as I have already said, this was not customary in the country where I completed my studies. It was only three months later, during my first stay in London, when I realised the importance that an academic title could have in many circles. (Fenton 2021, 98-99.)

Most of the courses that Zelikovits attended in Paris were open to the public, especially at the College de France, an institution that is open to all, and does not grant degrees. Anyone with the time could attend lectures by many of the prominent scholarly figures whom Zelikovits name drops. Any 'diplomas' that Zelikovits claimed to have earned were not formal academic qualifications, and certainly did not entitle him to a doctoral degree. The degree of *docteur ès lettres* was in fact not very frequently awarded in the nineteenth century, and Zelikovits does not appear in any published or archival record of those granted it.

Zelikovits's desire to present his youthful intellectual endeavours and passing acquaintances with eminent scholars as a more substantial academic career might be understandable in an old man writing his memoirs, but he also claimed fraudulent scholarly credentials in the 1880s. In 1887, Zelikovits applied for an academic position in Egyptology at the University of Pennsylvania. Since 'Meyne Erinerungen' ends before his emigration to the United States, this episode is not covered in it, but it seems that Zelikovits used the same narrative of his time in Egypt in his application to the University of Pennsylvania that he would later in 'Meyne Erinerungen'. The academics at Penn were able to establish that it was untrue. Zelikovits was employed by the British Army as an Arabic interpreter on the Nile Expedition of 1884-1885. His own version of how he came to be in Egypt in the first place, however, is

completely divorced from reality. Zelikovits states that he was specially selected by Gaston Maspero to travel to Egypt and help establish a new French archaeological institute (presumably referring to the establishment of the Institut français d'archéologie orientale in Cairo in 1880). Seeing an advertisement in an Egyptian newspaper for interpreters on an expedition up the Nile, he applied on a whim, hoping that this would give him an opportunity to study ancient monuments there. Unfortunately for Zelikovits, Hermann Hilprecht of Penn fact-checked this story with colleagues in Europe, and the resulting paper trail allows us to add to Zelikovits's life story (on academic documents and life writing, see Ortiz-Vilarelle 2020). Maspero wrote that Zelikovits had never been his student, but only that of his assistant, Eugène Grébaut. Maspero had only seen Zelikovits once in his life, and that was in Cairo (Fenton 2021, 16, quoting a letter of 21 March 1887 from the archives of the University of Pennsylvania). Grébaut, who did know Zelikovits, remembered him as 'a strange-looking guy with a stormy demeanour.' Zelikovits's application was therefore rejected, but this did not stop him falsely presenting himself as a 'Professor of Hieroglyphs at the University of Pennsylvania' in his travelogue on Sudan (Zelikovits 1910; quoted above) and in his personal and professional life. I shall return to Zelikovits's falsified academic career in the section below on his relationship with Rebecca Schwartz.

Zelikovits may come slightly closer to the truth in his depiction of another academic rejection, at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, although his explanation of the reasons behind this rejection is suspect:

> To be honest, I should say that the professors and the Muslim students of Al Azhar alike were very cold to me. Although I had proven to them that I knew something of Arabic literature, they didn't show me the least friendship and regarded me with a great deal of suspicion – for the three following reasons:

1. When they saw a European, usually a Christian, who studied and knew their languages, they took him for a missionary from England or another Christian country.

2. I was very fair-haired, and any fair-haired man in their eyes was English, a people whom they detested, for the most part justly, since England had bombarded Alexandria and put an end to the Arab revolt led by the famous hero the great ‘Urābi Pasha, against the Egyptian Khedive (Ottoman ruler). The Arabs of Al Azhar all sympathised with ‘Urābi Pasha.

3. A European who knew how to write, read and speak Arabic was automatically suspected of being an English spy, of whom they needed to be wary. (Fenton 2021, 111-112.)

While the authorities at Al-Azhar in the mid-1880s did indeed have good reason to be suspicious of Europeans, it is probable that Zelikovits also did not have the necessary knowledge of Classical Arabic and of the Qur’ān to participate in intellectual life there.

The Nile Expedition and the Olivier Pain Affair

The Nile Expedition of 1884-1885 is also known as the Gordon Relief Expedition, and its goal was to rescue the besieged Egyptian-British garrison at Khartoum under General Gordon from the armies of the Mahdi, a messianic Sudanese Islamist leader. The expedition was a failure, and the British abandoned Sudan until renewed campaigns in the 1890s. Zelikovits appears in the Medal Rolls of the Nile Expedition, but his entry has been crossed out (UK National Archives, WO 100/67: War Office: Campaign Medal and Award Rolls; Mounted Infantry, Signallers, Corps and Departments, Malta Artillery: Figure 2). Someone has written below the expunged record, in a different hand to the original entry, ‘This is the man who made false

statements as to the death of Olivier Pain.' Pain died while travelling with the Mahdi (who seems to have regarded him as a British spy) in November 1884, and the furore over his death is the reason why Zelikovits left Paris and emigrated to the United States.

As we have already seen, Zelikovits did not initially go to Egypt with a French scholarly mission, as he later claimed both to the University of Pennsylvania and in 'Meyne Erinerungen'. Although the precise circumstances are unknown, it seems probable that – like his earlier sojourn in Algeria – he went as the employee of some French commercial enterprise, in 1884 or a little earlier. He then found work as an interpreter on the Nile Expedition, during which he wrote a few reports on the campaign for Hebrew-language newspapers in Europe. Many of Zelikovits's deviations from the truth in his account of his time on the Nile in 'Meyne Erinerungen' are easy to pick up for an historian, although they will not have been so transparent to his contemporary readership. He claims that he was among only three out of ten candidates who passed an interview for interpreter, and that Major Kitchener and Captain Burnaby interviewed him personally (Fenton 2021, 115-116). Both later became famous (Burnaby for his death on the Nile Expedition, Kitchener for campaigns in Sudan and South Africa, and his position in the First World War), and will have been impressive names to his 1919-1920 readership. The labour market in Cairo at the time of Zelikovits's recruitment as interpreter was actually balanced in favour of the applicant, and it seems unlikely that the British army could have afforded to be so selective, or to have spared two prominent officers (who just happened to have become famous) to conduct it. A journalist in Cairo in October 1884, just after the main force had left, and looking for a servant and guide to accompany him upriver, found the city almost entirely emptied of able-bodied men who spoke any English: 'every Arab who had ever been employed as a servant, and had a smattering of English, demanded fifteen pounds a month, whereas in other times a third of the amount would perhaps be all he could get' (Macdonald 1887, 28). Zelikovits, who spoke Arabic and several European

languages, would have been hired much more easily than he suggests. Zelikovits also claimed that he was staying at Shepheard's Hotel at the time, but this was not only packed with British officers in mid-1884, but also certainly beyond his financial means. But Shepheard's was a well-known name, and will have added to the image he wished to cultivate with his later readership, as a gentleman-scholar.

Timing is, as ever, a problem for Zelikovits in trying to keep his story straight. He claims that he landed in Alexandria in February 1885 (Fenton 2021, 110), which does not fit either with his story of being hand-picked by Maspero for the newly-established (in 1880) IFAO or with the fact that the Nile Expedition left Cairo in the autumn of 1884. It is necessary, however, in order for him to cram his earlier stay in North Africa into the narrative. Zelikovits also tries to work in significant personalities and events. He states that he was present at the battle where Burnaby was killed (Fenton 2021, 145). This was the Battle of Abu Klea, along a route followed by only part of the expedition force, through the desert away from the river. Zelikovits does not mention the gruelling (and memorable) march the force faced across the desert, and in the British Army's Medal Rolls he is not recorded as entitled to the clasp for Abu Klea. Zelikovits also works in a significant meeting with Olivier Pain. He claims that he was in Luxor examining an obelisk, en route to Sudan, when he ran into his 'old friend' Pain (Fenton 2021, 125). In Zelikovits's account they spent several hours together, talking about Pain's journalistic mission and going on a hunting trip. There is no evidence that Zelikovits knew Pain personally, and the meeting in Luxor cannot have happened since Pain was already in Sudan by August 1884, before Zelikovits left Cairo according to either the true chronology or his own fabricated one.

The reason Zelikovits had to work a meeting with Pain into his narrative is because the 'Olivier Pain Affair' came to dominate his later life. It caused his exile from Europe, and features prominently in 'Meyne Erinerungen'. Zelikovits needed to justify to his readership –

and possibly also to himself – how he had come to be embroiled in the matter. In fact, it seems that Zelikovits had no actual involvement in the matters surrounding the death of Pain until *after* he returned from Sudan and Egypt, when he waded into the controversy, claiming to be an eye witness. Like most of Zelikovits's creations, his story about the Pain affair is not completely divorced from the truth. The British did not like Pain, he was suspected of spying, there may well have been an informal price on his head – and the notion that he was killed on British orders was not beyond the realms of possibility. But Zelikovits had no actual evidence to prove that Pain was murdered, and he himself had no role in the matters that took place concerning him in Sudan.

In July 1885, the French newspaper *L'Intransigéant* reported rumours that Pain had been murdered by the British, supposedly because he possessed information about the fall of Khartoum that contradicted British official reports. The paper's editor, Henri Rochefort, was an old friend of Pain, who had written a lengthy biography of him (Pain 1879). Both had been exiled to New Caledonia for participating in the Paris Commune of 1871, and escaped in dramatic style three years later by swimming out to a a whaling ship. On 17 August 1885, *L'Intransigéant* published a front-page letter from Zelikovits under the headline 'The Assassination of Olivier Pain. Letter from a witness.' Rochefort provided a short introduction, vaunting Zelikovits's scholarly qualifications, describing him as 'a distinguished Orientalist, whose desire to conduct research on the Nubian dialect and on Hieroglyphs led him to follow the General Staff of the English army in Sudan an a translator-interpreter.'

Zelikovits's letter was inflammatory, in both content and rhetoric. Rochefort used it to stoke public anti-British sentiment, a situation which the French and British governments worked hard to calm. Rather than the political ramifications of Zelikovits's letter – and the specific details of his report, which were pored over and their accuracy assessed in the French and British press - I would like to focus on the role which claims to linguistic expertise played

in the affair, and the light this sheds on Zelikovits's subsequent career. I quote the letter in its entirety because it is not readily accessible, and because it is so revealing of Zelikovits's personality:

> Sir,
>
> The Foreign Office has just declared, in an official letter, that it has no knowledge of the fate of Olivier Pain. This is one more lie to be chalked up to the British government, just as the death of your compatriot is one more stain on the honour of England. I affirm that Mr Olivier Pain was assassinated on the order of the General Staff of the English army of Egypt; I affirm that [Prime] Minister Gladstone authorised the crime, and knew everything that happened before and after its execution. And I shall prove it, by giving names, dates and places. This will be easy for me, since I was witness to this event over which the English are trying to draw a veil. In my capacity as interpreter-translator attached to the English General Staff in Sudan, I had the dual role of interrogating prisoners or travellers coming from Khartoum, and of transmitting to the Arab emissaries bribed by the English the instructions which the Chief of Staff, Sir Owen Lanyon, had himself received from General Evelyn Wood, to whom the Commander-in-Chief, Lord Wolseley of Cairo, had sent them directly.
>
> Let us get down to the facts:
>
> On 15 April, two spies came to the camp at Debbeh, where I was at that time, to say that they had met a *Franghi* (European) six miles from the camp who, even though he was dressed as a native, had a great deal of trouble to make himself understood in Arabic. When these spies had given a description of the traveller and made known his mysterious appearance, Major Kitchner [sic], to whom I was translating the account of the two Sudanese, cried out: 'The [sic] is the famous Pain' and vanished like a flash to go and

triumphantly bring the news to General Wood, who on that day had fallen prey to a violent attack of rheumatism. All at once, staff officers were on the go and the telegraph was running back and forth between Debbeh, Cairo and London. A dozen Bachi-Bouzouks on horseback were sent out in all directions to hunt down the 'bloody Frenchman' to use the courteous expression which Major Kitchner was accustomed to use when speaking of Olivier Pain. This Kitchner – a sinister scoundrel fed on Psalms and drenched in whisky – was the first to have the idea to put a price on the head of the man he called 'the French spy.' Raised at a single bound from the rank of simple Lieutenant to that of Major, for the exceptional services that he had rendered as a military informer, Kitchner was keen to justify this rapid advancement and to get a second one by a brilliant deed like the capture of a defenceless lone traveller, hunted down by a whole corps of the English army. The following day, 16 April, Kitchner sent for Shaykh Khalil, a kind of dervish whom the English paid for all kinds of tasks, and gave him the order to circulate the following notice, in colloquial Arabic: '*Za kan wahad igib lan al Françawi hai aou mat imsek khamsine liré inglizi.*' Which, word-for-word, means: 'If anyone brings us the Frenchman ALIVE OR DEAD he will receive 50 English pounds.' Around two o'clock in the afternoon, on the same day, the 16th, a dispatch was sent from Debbeh to London. The bearer of the telegram, a man named Fini, an orderly of Sir Owen Lanyon, met me near the telegram office and accosted me, laughing, and said in his frightful Irish accent: 'Do you want to earn fifty pounds sterling?' Then he showed me the hastily-written dispatch, with letters that resembled veritable hieroglyphs. They were in such a rush, and had taken so few precautions, that the dispatch entrusted to the orderly had not even been put in an envelope. So it was that I was able to read with amazement this document putting a price on the head of Olivier Pain, which the general staff at Debbeh was sending officially to London. On 17 April, a telegram arrived at the camp

from Abou-Dom, the station next to Korti. The arrival of this dispatch caused a great uproar at headquarters. But soon an order from the General was sent to Captain Colborne, local commander at Debbeh, ordering him not to communicate the mysterious dispatch. '*Not to be circulated*' said the order transmitted by Colonel Sir Owen Lanyon. These were measures to do with Olivier Pain. Officers and soldiers whispered it to each other. I ran at once to see Shaykh Khalil in his tent to find out what was going on. The latter, with groans and tears, before I could even ask him a single question, asked me to write a petition for him in English. He wanted to protest, he explained to me, against the injustice being done to him by making him share the fifty pounds 'earned honestly by him alone' with these vagabond Bachi-Bazouks who had nothing to do with the matter. 'Come on,' I said to him, 'What is this about?' 'Don't you know that I captured this *Franghi* that Wolseley wants to kill yesterday – you know the great Pasha Wolsely who has so many guineas!' 'Where is this *Franghi*?' 'At Abou-Dom.' 'Has Kitchner Bey seen the French prisoner?' 'Oh! Yes, yesterday.' 'And what did he do with him?' 'Oh! You well know "*inadmouhou bourka*" he's going to be executed.' Literally: *he's going to be destroyed tomorrow*. At that moment, a black man named Youssouf, a servant of Kitchner, came to send for the poor dervish on the behalf of his master, and the conversation was interrupted. But I knew enough, and I had no more to learn. It was on 18 April that Olivier Pain was shot in the desert, near Abou-Dom, by two Bachi-Bazouks, before the eyes of Major Kitchner, who was charged with this terrible task. No-one in the camp at Debbeh was ignorant of these details. Is it necessary to add that this murdered was celebrated with a party and that the Bachi-Bazouks gave a *fantastia* for the English general staff to thank them for having so generously paid the blood price.

G. Sélikovitsch,

Former interpreter for the English army in Soudan.

(My translation.)

Zelikovits invokes his linguistic expertise to bolster his authority and credibility as a witness, but he is not entirely successful in this. He reinforces Rochefort's presentation of him as a 'distinguished Orientalist' by comparing a hastily-scribbled letter to 'hieroglyphs'. His position as interpreter gives him access to all parties involved, whether British or Arab, and to confidential information. He quotes speakers in English and Arabic to give his account realism and assert his position of authority and access to information. Unfortunately, he undermines his own position by making basic mistakes in English – 'The is the famous Pain' – and spelling 'Kitchener' incorrectly (if these are his mistakes and not those of the editor or typesetter for the paper). This is despite mocking Fini (= Feeney?) for his 'frightful Irish accent': another attempt at demonstrating his linguistic superiority. Allowing for difficulties of transcription, on the other hand, Zelikovits's Arabic is quite accurate. It has distinctive Egyptian features, such as *bukra* for 'tomorrow', *gāb* (*yigīb*) for 'bring', realisation of *dhāl* as *z* and the future tense in *ha-* (I interpret *inadmouhou* as *hanu'dimuhu*, with the initial aspirate dropped, as commonly in French).

Over the following days, Rochefort continued to push the murder of Pain on the front page of *L'Intransigéant* under headlines such as 'VENGEANCE!', accusing deniers in the French and British press of indulging in ad hominem attacks and failing to address the substance of Zelikovits's specific allegations. The British Embassy in Paris conveyed to the French foreign minister, Charles de Freycinet, a telegram from Kitchener in which he flatly denied Zelikovits's allegations. The French government, in turn, expressed its regret for personal attacks in *L'Intransigéant* on Queen Victoria, the Prince of Wales and Lord Lyons. If Rochefort had intended to stir up a diplomatic incident, it was not working. It was widely reported in the papers that Zelikovits had been dismissed from British service for bad conduct.

Meanwhile Zelikovits, probably wisely, made himself scarce. He refused interviews, claiming illness. On 22 August, the British intelligence chief in Cairo, Sir John Ardagh, sent a report on Zelikovits to Lord Salisbury, the Prime Minister:

> G. Selikovitch.
>
> Jew, born in Littau-Russia of Polish descent, came from Paris to Egypt in service of an Egyptian, and to represent a Nihilist society. He obtained an Egyptian Teskeré [identity card] through the head of the Israelite community.
>
> Being in poor circumstances was assisted by the 'Société de Bienfaisance Israélite' at Alexandria and also at Cairo. Subsequently gave instruction in languages to the son of Pini Bey,[4] and through him was employed in same capacity by several natives of good position. Soon took to gambling and drinking and lost his employment.
>
> Was then taken on as interpreter with Sir O. Lanyon; went with him to Cairo. Was afterwards employed at Boulack Arsenal for a short time but being found to be lazy and unpunctual was dismissed 7 July.
>
> Has written an article about battle of Abou Klea in the Hebrew journal; 'Hamagid' published at Lick in Prussia, in number of 23rd July.
>
> Has not a good reputation.
>
> Selikovitch's address is: 46, Boulevard St. Germain, Paris.
>
> (FO 78/3807, copy of a memorandum by J. C. Ardagh of 22 August 1885: quoted in Landau 1969, 227-228.)

[4] The Pini family were of Venetian origin and had long been resident in Egypt. Zelikovits's employer was probably the architect Filipo Pini Bey, a legal adviser to the Khedive who was the grandson of Giovanni Pini, whose service to Napoleon's Expédition d'Égypte led to the family fleeing to Italy for a period (Balboni 1906, 215-221).

This information seems to have been shared with the French government: on 23 August, the police 'paid a domiciliary visit' to 46 Boulevard St. Germain, but did not find Zelikovits there (see e.g. *The Morning News*, Belfast, 24 August 1885, 5). The address was widely published in the papers. At some point in the week that followed, Zelikovits applied to the Russian Embassy for protection, fearing reprisals from British residents in Paris (see e.g. *The Morning News*, Belfast, 2 September 1885, 8).

On 24 August, *L'Intransigéant* published a second letter by Zelikovits, dated two days previously; it did not reveal his location. Zelikovits accused the English press of 'playing the man, not the ball':

> For the past eight days the English newspapers have been speaking without actually saying a thing. In the letter published by the *Intransigéant*, I affirmed that a proclamation putting a price on the head of Olivier Pain had been made to the Arabs; and the English press responded: 'It has not been proven that Mr Sélikovitsch is a distinguished Orientalist.' (My translation.)

He countered claims that he had been dismissed for bad character by providing a letter of recommendation which he had received from Sir Owen Lanyon on 13 August, only days before his original letter in *L'Intransigéant*. He stated that the original English letter was now in the possession of the paper's editor.

> Mr Sélikovitsch remained my personal interpreter during the campaign in Sudan from 24 February to 23 April. After this date, he performed similar functions for the intelligence department, until the beginning of June. During his period on my staff, Mr. Sélikovitsch was an employee who was as zealous as he was capable.

Owen Lanyon

Former Colonel of the General Staff in Egypt. (My translation.)

As it happens, this is not the only letter of recommendation for an interpreter on the Nile Expedition to have survived, and comparison allows us to see that Lanyon's letter for Zelikovits is in fact lukewarm. Solomon Negima, a Palestinian who went on to a long and successful career as a tourist guide, received two such letters from British officers in Cairo in July 1885.[5] Lanyon's letter restricts itself to stating the duration and nature of Zelikovits's employment, with only a brief and potentially equivocal statement that he is 'as zealous as he is capable'. Lanyon, significantly, worked with Zelikovits earlier in 1885 and was not in a position to provide any information on his later time with the army and the circumstances of his dismissal from the Būlāq Arsenal in July. The letters for Negima, while also brief and formulaic, include addition details about his personal attributes and qualifications (Mairs 2016, 16-17). Captain H. P. Leach wrote that Negima 'speaks English well and can read and write Arabic. I have found him an intelligent well informed man and strictly honest – rather a rare quality in an interpreter.' Captain Edward Teale also noted that 'he can read and write Arabic, and can speak English fairly well, and would make a very fair interpreter. He has worked well and given every satisfaction.' In this context, Lanyon's silence on Zelikovits's linguistic talents, or any specifics of his service, is telling.

Kitchener was interviewed by *Le Matin* on 30 August. As in Zelikovits's original letter, language plays a key role, but here Kitchener positions himself as the linguistic expert. In his representation of the affair, it is Zelikovits who is at a linguistic disadvantage, and an uncredible witness for that reason:

[5] Negima kept a scrapbook of testimonials from clients, including letters from his military service in Sudan: Mairs 2016. He was not officially employed as an interpreter on the Nile Expedition, but as a headman, and found himself co-opted into the role because of his knowledge of languages.

‘What do you know of M. Selikovitch?’

‘I rather dislike replying to that question, for it would be degrading to enter into a discussion with that personage, and to follow him in the abuse and bad temper which he has been for some reason led to indulge in. But not to be disagreeable to you, I may say that he was one of the interpreters whom I had under my orders. I have not spoken to him very frequently. At first, he had a very imperfect acquaintance with Arabic; but I had no occasion to expect any service from him in this respect, for I know Arabic much better than he does. The greatest fault I had to find with him was that I have caught him several times discussing politics with Egyptian soldiers, to whom he spoke in a way which was not in conformity with this duty, or with the place which he had accepted in my service.’

‘They say you were rather severe with interpreters.’

‘Well, I had an enormous responsibility. The army trusted me to protect it from an unexpected attack, and among the people I had to do with affability was somewhat out of place.’

(*Le Matin*, 31 August 1885, 1. I give here the English translation which appeared in *The Times*, 1 September 1885, 3. It is unclear whether the original interview took place in French or English.)

In the immediate aftermath of the Olivier Pain affair, few commentators considered Zelikovits’s possible motivations in writing his letter, other than hinting that he lacked moral fibre and was bitter at having been dismissed. The London correspondent of *Le Matin* suggests that Zelikovits and other interpreters were badly treated, which Kitchener excuses, but does not deny. Many publications focussed on Rochefort’s attempts to escalate the affair into an

international incident, and seem to have regarded him, rather than Zelikovits, as the principle agitator. A more careful and compelling analysis is provided by the author of a letter to the Editor of the *Times*, who signed himself only 'An Egyptian':

> I knew M. Selikovitch in Egypt, and I am quite surprised to find him assuming the attitude he has taken which does not correspond with the impression he made upon me when I saw him. M. Selikovitch was in Africa what was called an interpreter of the third class, with a salary of £10 sterling a month [in 'Meyne Erinerungen', Zelikovits repeatedly states that he was a first-class interpreter]. He had the reputation of neither being well acquainted with the English language nor with that of the environs of Debbeh, and I admit that I have often been told that he was not always treated with the deference due to a man whom love of science had drawn into these distant regions. But in the Soudan he was believed to be simply an interpreter. By trade or profession, and that he was employed there just as he might have been elsewhere. M. Selikovitch made a mistake in not making it known that he was a scholar who took to the business of an interpreter in order to learn Nubian. He would then certainly have been treated better than he was. [The writer describes the spelling mistakes and inconsistencies in Zelikovits's letters, which he finds strange.] They lead me to suppose than M. Selikovitch, who is mistaken in various points, has experienced, like many of those whose nervous system has suffered in the Soudan, weakness of memory and fits of sickly irritability. … What surprises me most – me, who knew Major Kitchener – is that M. Selikovitch should have translated to him the story told by the two Soudanese. Major Kitchener knows the languages and the dialects of the Soudan and the Egypto-Soudanese provinces better than any of us who speak them as those of the country to which we belong. I venture to say, without wishing to annoy M. Selikovitch, that he knows them at least twenty times better than the man

> who says he translated to him the story of the two Soudanese. … [Kitchener] came most in contact with him during the long months of fatigue and torture he endured under a broiling sun and exposed to constant dangers. His character as a scholar or man of science was not known, and the treatment he received was that accorded to those holding his position in the service. He felt humiliated and irritated. His pride took offence and he worked himself into a state of excitement, and it was on Major Kitchener that he visited his displeasure.
>
> (*The Times*, 26 August, 1885, 5.)

The 'Egyptian' again puts linguistic competence at the core of his arguments. He questions Zelikovits's self-positioning as an expert interpreter, mediating between Kitchener and his Sudanese informants, by offering his own testimony - as a native speaker who knew both men - that Kitchener had a much stronger command of spoken Arabic than Zelikovits, and moreover than Zelikovits's English was weak. In 'Meyne Erinerungen', in contrast, Zelikovits states that Kitchener's accent made his Arabic incomprehensible, and that he could only read printed text, not Arabic handwriting. He also claims that he gave Kitchener Hebrew lessons (Fenton 2021, 115, 135-136). Zelikovits's mistakes in English mark him as a unreliable witness to the 'Egyptian', but are also interpreted as symptomatic of a disordered mind. According to the 'Egyptian', Zelikovits was led to make his allegations about the death of Olivier Pain because of wounded pride, as a scholar of Oriental languages treated like a 'mere' interpreter.

In late August and early September 1885, Zelikovits's name and reputation were dragged through the mud by newspapers in France, Britain and as far afield as North America. Eye-witness reports confirmed the unromantic truth of Pain's death, weakened by dysentery and a fall from a camel (*The Guardian*, 3 September 1885, 7). By mid-September, the press had largely lost interest in the story, but the repercussions for Zelikovits were long lasting.

Although his Jewishness and origins in the Russian Empire were mostly left out of the initial public debate, he was later subject to anti-Semitic abuse (for example, by Drumont 1886, 57-58; he mentions Drumont's anti-Semitic attacks in 'Meyne Erinerungen'). It is difficult to tell whether or not he later regretted making his public allegations about the death of Olivier Pain; in 'Meyne Erinerungen' he doubled down on the truth of them. His 1910 account of his time in Sudan is pitched to his readership as a wartime adventure; he refers to it all feeling 'like a lifetime ago' (Zelikovits 1910, 9; on Zelikovits's later representation of and perspective on events, see Goldberg 2004). In this reimagination of his time in Sudan, he 'found favour' with Kitchener.

Rebecca Schwartz

'Meyne Erinerungen' ends with Zelikovits's departure from Paris. He admits that his actions in the Olivier Pain affair were excessive, but blames the episode on youthful ardour (he was in his early thirties, but his 'alternative' chronology puts him in his mid-twenties) and on Rochefort for having stirred it up and come up with the worst of the anti-British rhetoric. Rather than fleeing France in disgrace, he claims that he was summoned to a secret meeting with a French politician and sent on a mission to Constantinople in order to help him get out of the scandal. Needless to say, these are almost certainly not the circumstances under which he undertook any trip to Constantinople before he arrived in the United States in late 1886.

Zelikovits's controversial career continued in the Americas. Although we no longer have his account in 'Meyne Erinerungen' to follow, we can still trace his representation of events in autobiographical sketches in his other works. In his own words: 'First I visited Philadelphia. I became Professor of Hieroglyphs at the University of Pennsylvania. Due to an impure event in my new family and the prevailing spirit of my life I moved to New York' (Zelikovits 1910,

3-4). Like his account of the Nile Expedition, this too is a blatant misrepresentation of the facts. Zelikovits continued to claim false academic credentials. He never held any position at the University of Pennsylvania, as we have seen, but he did give a lecture at the Franklin Institute, where he was received as:

> A distinguished though young Egyptologist, who is now sojourning as a stranger among us. Dr. George Selikovitsch completed his university studies in Russia, and afterwards went to Paris, where he plunged deep into Oriental lore. With a natural talent for languages and love of the beautiful in the teachings of history and art, he soon won the eminence among Orientalists in Paris which determined the directors of the Bibliotheque Nationale to place him at the head of its Oriental department. He afterwards accompanied the English army to the Soudan for the purpose of visiting localities in Upper Egypt which would be inaccessible on ordinary occasions. Dr. Selikovitsch's knowledge of Arabic and Syriac, as well as of Hebrew and of the Egyptian hieroglyphs, is profound. (*The Philadelphia Enquirer*, 2 March 1887, 2.)

Zelikovits had indeed been employed at the Bibliothèque Nationale, but his story has grown in the telling. As Fenton has established, he was employed to catalogue works in Arabic, Coptic and Hebrew from November 1881 to July 1882 (Fenton 2021, 12, fn8). He applied again for employment some time later, but was not rehired (Fenton 2021, 15). Zelikovits's lecture was subsequently published in the *Journal of the Franklin Institute* (Sélikovitsch 1887). As befits a lecture for a general audience, it is not a particularly innovative piece of scholarship. It is wide ranging, and contains a great deal of purple prose ('extraordinary mysteries of ancient Egypt', 'the ancient soil of the Pharaohs'), which for someone who had only been studying English for a few years is forgivable. Although Zelikovits had grossly misrepresented his

career in Paris and Sudan to his hosts in Philadelphia, the lecture reveals him as a competent Egyptologist.[6]

The 'impure event in my new family' to which Zelikovits cryptically alludes is the sexual assault of fifteen-year-old Rebecca Schwartz, for which he was arrested in August 1887:

> A Russian Professor Alleged to Have Assaulted a Young Woman
>
> Magistrate Smith yesterday held George Cellegowitch, a Russian, in $1,500 bail to answer at court the charge of criminally assaulting Miss Rebecca Swartz, a pretty Jewess, 15 years old, who lives with her parents at 321 South Sixth street.
>
> The girl's story was the Cellegowitch came to this country about six months ago. He secured rooms at 1103 Walnut street and frequently took his meals at her father's boarding house at 321 South Sixth street. He saw a great deal of Miss Swartz, to whom he was quite attentive. About four months ago he asked Mr. Swartz for the hand of his daughter. He asserted that he was a professor at the University and had a yearly income of $3,000. Mr. Swartz assented to the match.
>
> Several weeks ago, the girl says, he assaulted her. Her father heard of it and had him arrested. At the hearing Cellegowitch admitted being engaged to the girl. He wanted to produce his papers to prove that he weas lecturing at the University, but the Magistrate would not see them. He denied the charges.
>
> (*The Times*, Philadelphia, 19 August 1887, 1.)

The trustees of the University of Pennsylvania immediately distanced themselves from Zelikovits, refuting his claims to have been a professor or lecturer there (*The Philadelphia*

[6] I have not been able to find a copy of Selikovitch's earlier Egyptological work 'Le Schéol des Hébreux et le Sest des Égyptiens', published in the *Bulletin de l'Athénée Oriental* in 1881.

Inquirer, 18 August 1887, 3). Zelikovits was charged with 'criminally assaulting' Schwartz (the words also used by *St. Joseph Gazette-Herald*, 20 August 1887, 8). The phrase is used frequently in American newspapers of the period in contexts where the crime was demonstrably sexual in nature. One paper took the incident of 'improper relations' as demonstration 'that masculine dignity and learning are not proof against the temptations offered by feminine youth and beauty' (*Chicago Tribune*, 21 August 1887, 20). Zelikovits was set bail of $1,500, and went to prison for a few days because he could not pay it. He was released under unknown circumstances (had the charges been dropped?) and left town.

In March of 1888, Zelikovits returned to Philadelphia and married Rebecca Schwartz.[7] Although one newspaper referred to this as a 'Romantic Sequel to a Suit for Seduction' (*St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 12 April 1888, 3), it was evident to others that the marriage was designed for Zelikovits to evade criminal prosecution for rape (*The Times*, Philadelphia, 31 December 1888). Although her perspective is never mentioned, Schwartz may have gone along with the marriage because of the public damage to her reputation, as a victim of sexual assault. Zelikovits announced the marriage on stage during a performance at the Thalia Theatre on 10 April 1888. The couple had been married in March by a magistrate in Camden, New Jersey, followed by a Jewish religious ceremony back in Philadelphia. Some Philadelphians still believed Zelikovits's claims about his career and qualifications. His former landlady, for example, found him 'a quiet, intelligent gentleman, who had always behaved himself and paid his way' and thought that the Schwartzes 'wanted to inveigle her former top-floor lodger into a mesalliance' (*St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 12 April 1888, 3). The Schwartz family certainly seem initially to have approved of the relationship, but their views were changed both by the

[7] The *New Jersey, Marriage Records, 1670-1965* online database (available via Ancestry.com) gives the date of the marriage in Camden City between 'Geo. Selikovitsch' and 'Rebeca Schwartz' as 13 March 1887. This must be an error for 1888, unless there was an earlier, secret, marriage between the two, which does not fit with the other evidence. The date and location of the marriage may have had something to do with Rebecca Schwartz's age.

assault and by the discovery that Zelikovits had been dishonest about his career and financial circumstances. Most people who encountered him in Philadelphia also seem to have been thoroughly disillusioned:

‘Professor’ Selikovitch

An Adventurer Well Known in This City Turns Up in New York

‘Professor’ Selikovitch, a Russian adventurer, who gained a great deal of notoriety in this city about a year ago, has turned up in New York, where he has been posing as a former Professor of Egyptology of the University of Pennsylvania, and related to a reporter an account of his alleged adventures in the spring of 1885 in and around Khartoum.

When in this city he became acquainted with several of the faculty of the University and was introduced about town as a profound Oriental scholar and a great traveler. He claimed to have discovered the key to Egyptian hieroglyphics and issued a pamphlet, in which he pretended that anybody, by careful study, could solve the enigmatical signs of the dark ages. He was invited to deliver a lecture at the University, but immediately afterward he got in trouble with a woman in this city and was arrested and kept in jail for two or three days, when he compromised by marrying the woman. The eminent men who had received him with open arms dropped him like a hot potato and he left town.

Certain descriptions as to dates in the relation of his alleged adventures led to an investigation, and Dr. Pepper, provost of the University, who was telegraphed to from New York, sent back word that Selikovitch had never been a professor in the University and had never had any official connection with the institution.

It has also transpired that at the time he claims to have been the bosom friend of the Mahdi and to have been in the Soudan he was engaged at the headquarters of the British Nile expeditionary force at Dongola and Debbeh, many hundreds of miles away. His

> visit to Khartoum and his interviews with the Mahdi turn out to exist only in his very vivid and altogether unreliable imagination. Early in August, 1885, he created a sensation in Paris by alleging in the *Intransigeant* that the French journalist, Olivier Pain, had been shot in cold blood at Debbeh by order of Colonel Kitchener, who had dismissed Selikovitch from the British service in June, 1885, on account of his bad character. It transpired that the story of Pain's murder was false. After his dismissal Selikovitch made his way to Alexandria and from there to Paris.
>
> (*The Times*, Philadelphia, 31 December 1888.)

Zelikovits and Schwartz divorced not long afterwards in New York. In 1892, he married Bertha Bermann; the Arbeely brothers congratulated the couple in *Kawkab Amīrka*.[8] On 3 November 1894, he was naturalised as a US citizen; he was living in Boston at the time, and gives his date of birth as May 1868, which it was not.[9] I have not been able to trace what became of Rebecca Schwartz, unless she is the divorced mother-of-one of that name, born around 1872, who was working as a cook for a family in New York City at the time of the 1910 Census.

I shall return in the following section to discuss the significance of revealing Zelikovits's arrest for the assault of Rebecca Schwartz, an event that does not seem to have been known to previous scholars who have worked on him. Naturally, with only newspaper accounts and official paperwork to go on, it is impossible to say what truly happened between the two, and how Rebecca Schwartz herself regarded the incident. The sexual encounter seems to have been regarded as illicit on two grounds: as non-consensual and as extramarital. What made it worse from the point of view of the Schwartz family was the discovery that Zelikovits, who had

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[8] *New Jersey, Marriage Records, 1670-1965* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2016.

[9] National Archives at Boston; Waltham, Massachusetts; ARC Title: *Copies of Petitions and Records of Naturalization in New England Courts, 1939 - ca. 1942*; NAI Number: *4752894*; Record Group Title: *Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1787-2004*; Record Group Number: *RG 85*.

represented himself as a good marriage prospect, was not even that. The fact that Zelikovits's response to his arrest was to try to demonstrate his respectable credentials by showing his academic qualifications speaks to his attempt, furthermore, to devalue the testimony of Rebecca Schwartz and her family by using the same tactics he had employed in previous tricky situations.

In the 1890s and early 1900s Zelikovits followed a chequered career as a journalist, public speaker and short-story writer, mostly in the Jewish press. His published works include a collection of Bar Mitzvah speeches (Zelikovits 1909). A collection of his Yiddish works were published in 1913 (Zelikovits 1913). He was charged with libel in 1890, against two doctors who had refused to advertise in the paper of which he was editor (*The Plain Speaker*, Hazleton, Pennsylvania, 31 March 1890, 1). Still using the title 'Professor', he undertook a Hebrew-language lecture tour in 1896 in support of William McKinley's presidential campaign (*The Inter Ocean*, Chicago, 12 September 1896, 3; *Lincoln Evening Call*, Lincoln Nebraska, 12 September 1896, 1; *Lincoln Journal Star*, 14 September 1896, 5; *Des Moines Register*, 24 September 1896, 3; *The Daily Times*, Davenport Iowa, 1 October 1896, 2). He was also still spinning tall tales about his time in Africa: 'Prof. Selikovitsch accompanied Emin Pasha on his African exploring expedition and afterwards became a member of Lord Wolseley's company which also explored the jungles of interior Africa' (*Detroit Free Press*, 7 November 1896, 5). In 1898, Zelikovits was back in the Philadelphia papers when an attorney working for Rebecca Schwartz tried to forcibly extradite him to New York to face charges for non-payment of alimony (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 16 November 1898, 7). Zelikovits, in turn, brought charges for assault and abduction (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 18 December 1898, 2, and 19 December 1898, 3). The journalists of Philadelphia seem to have had short memories (as well as a poor knowledge of Egyptian geography), because it was reported in coverage of this new scandal that Zelikovits had served 'as head interpreter for an exploring party which was to

proceed into the interior in order to study the pyramids' (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 18 December 1898, 2).

Zelikovits turned back towards his Orientalist training in his later years. In 1922, he published a Hebrew translation of Buddhist scriptures, in the introduction to which he reflects on the problems of translating terms such as 'nirvana' and 'dharma' from Sanskrit into Hebrew. Translation, in his view, 'has become an art, shaking off that tenacious delusion that a prose translation need be only painstaking paraphrase' (Zelikovits 1922, vii); a creative approach that might well be applied to his own writings. After the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun in 1922, Zelikovits gained further publicity for claiming that Tutankhamun was the Biblical Joseph (*Danville Morning News*, Danville Pennsylvania, 16 December 1924, 5; *Quad-City Times*, Davenport Iowa, 23 December 1924, 16; *The Times*, Shreveport Louisiana, 24 December 1924, 15; *The Jewish Press*, Omaha Nebraska, 26 November 1925, 1). He died in 1926.

Editing an Unreliable Narrator

Zelikovits's autobiographical writings, both his serialised memoir 'Meyne Erinerungen' and his shorter accounts of his life in other works, pose certain dilemmas to an editor and translator. To what extent does exposing a subject's untruths detract from their personal or literary achievements, which an editor may wish to celebrate? Editors of unreliable memoirs have tackled this challenge in different ways. Pamela Pfau and Kenneth S. Marx, for example, embrace the flagrant inaccuracies in actress Marion Davies' memoirs of her life with William Randolph Hearst, *The Times We Had*. Davies recorded her recollections on tape in 1951, but they were not written up and published until after her death. Pfau and Marx choose to present Davies' narration with footnotes to indicate where she deviates demonstrably from the truth.

The very first sentence – 'I was born in 1905' – is immediately footnoted 'Marion was born at six in the morning Sunday, January 3, 1897' (Davies 1975, 1). A dialogue is quickly established between Davies' witty, charismatic, and in no way trustworthy, authorial voice, and Pfau and Marx's occasional wry interjections in the footnotes. Since Davies was a gifted comedienne, this editorial approach complements her memoirs: they are laughing *with* her. Zelikovits is a different prospect altogether. He writes, I think, in earnest, in the expectation that he will be believed and that he has the right to have his version of events believed. Davies, too, had suffered public humiliation, especially over her (alleged) depiction in Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* as the failed opera singer Susan Alexander. (Welles later atoned by writing an introduction to *The Times We Had* in which he praised Davies' abilities as a comic actress.) Davies leans into this and brazens it out. Zelikovits, in contrast, is eager to correct the record as he sees it, to rewrite the history of controversial episodes in which he was involved. An edition of Zelikovits's autobiographical writings that footnoted every deviation from the truth would therefore set a different tone. Although Zelikovits is far less intrinsically likeable as a biographical subject than Davies, it would still be hard, as an editor, to summon up the kind of cruelty that correcting his every untruth would require.

Paul Fenton maintains a respectfulness towards his subject, in his translation and edition of Zelikovits 'Meyne Erinerungen'. Errors of fact are not relentlessly footnoted, although some are addressed head-on in the introduction. Fenton is more generous in his interpretation of Zelikovits's errors than others might have been. He refers to them as 'mistakes', or in one case as a 'misprint'. Fenton is also generous in providing multiple options for the 'truth' behind a story, and leaving the reader to make up their own mind. A different approach is taken by Zeev Goldberg in his articles on Zelikovits.[10] Goldberg engages very directly with Zelikovits's

[10] Unfortunately I have not been able to access Goldberg's 1995 dissertation, on which his subsequent articles are based.

many frustrations as a biographical subject. He compares researching Zelikovits's biography to the work of a mediaeval historian, trying to find a grain of historical truth in a popular myth (Goldberg 2003/2004, 31). In response, he writes a imaginary dialogue between himself and Zelikovits, in which he confronts him with the numerous inconsistencies in his writings. Goldberg imagines Zelikovits defending himself: who doesn't want to be a little younger? Doesn't a man who knew so many languages deserve the title of Professor? In the end, 'Zelikovits' throws up his hands and confesses: he made up stories to present himself 'as much bigger and more important than I really was' (Goldberg 2003/2004, 34). 'I didn't mean to hurt anyone, but I hurt myself and others.' Goldberg consoles and seems to forgive him, because in the end he created an entertaining work of literature: 'The story turned out really well, very literary and dramatic, not a boring piece of history.'

Goldberg's analysis is crucial in pointing out that 'Meyne Erinerungen' as a whole is a carefully-constructed work of fantasy and must be approached as such. Zelikovits is creating a version of what might – in his eyes, should – have been: a young man who received early recognition for his scholarly achievements from the highest authorities; a gentleman scholar who was able to travel for knowledge rather than merely to support himself; above all, a wronged crusader for justice, who was thwarted at every turn by discrimination and innuendo. It should be reiterated that Zelikovits did face anti-Semitic prejudice, but he was not the wholesale martyr that he presents himself to be.

The merits of considering 'Meyne Erinerungen' first and foremost as revisionist fantasy are that it also absolves us from having to take seriously, or attempt to rationalise, some of the most unrealistic elements. These include a sub-plot about a Sudanese woman named Aziza, daughter of a chief, who becomes Zelikovits's ally and helper on the Nile Expedition. Aziza's tale within a tale is another life-writing project for Zelikovits, but all her actions are constructed to serve the frame narrative of his own life. Aziza helps Zelikovits escape from British agents

disguised as a Muslim woman. She displays far more liberty and agency than a high-ranking Sudanese Muslim woman of the time ever could have, in moving freely and associating with foreign men without apparent censure or loss of status. Later in the story (when Zelikovits has upgraded her title to 'princess') he rescues her from a 'harem' in Istanbul. In the end, she returns to Egypt, marries a Jewish merchant and converts to Judaism. The story of Aziza is completely implausible in every respect. It conforms to European stereotypes of Muslim women and of Africa and the Middle East, but with an (also stereotypical) plucky heroine from an adventure story.

Zelikovits was not just a benign fantasist, an old man writing adventure stories and re-writing the mistakes of his youth. His narrative doubles down on cases where he was clearly in the wrong, and where other people were hurt as well as him. Indulging him and letting him be the narrator of his own version of events, uncorrected, is not a morally neutral act. Much scholarly discussion of the ethics of life writing naturally focuses on the rights and wrongs of revealing unpalatable information that was private at the time, or on the importance of fact-checking potentially harmful information (see, for example Manis 1994, Couser 2004). When Zelikovits lied about a murder, committed academic fraud and sexual assault, and defaulted on alimony, however, it was not private. All of these events were well documented in the press at the time, even if his transcontinental journeys enabled him to conceal the truth of events to audiences in the United States, at least temporarily. One of the principal reasons that 'Meyne Erinerungen' stops after Zelikovits left Paris may precisely be because it would have been more difficult to conceal the truth of events that happened on American soil from an American audience. Although the life story of Rebecca Schwartz has, to the best of my knowledge, gone unrecorded in print since the 1890s, making this once again public is not comparable to 'outing' a biographical subject for something that had never been widely known.

Zelikovits's construction of counterfactual narratives in his autobiographical writings is entirely consistent with his behaviour throughout his life. He seeks to rewrite the truth in retrospect, in a manner more favourable to himself, but he also constantly rewrote the truth throughout his adult life. The sexual assault of Rebecca Schwartz was not an aberration: it forms part of a pattern of self-gratifying and self-aggrandising behaviour on Zelikovits's part, in which he constantly bent the truth about himself in order to achieve what he wanted and thought he deserved. This may seem a very harsh judgement, but Zelikovits's constant – perhaps even pathological – inclination to lie was central to who he was. Recognising this allows us to recognise the nature and worth of his work from a literary perspective and also – to a very limited extent – to restore some some amount of agency and recognition to the lives that he misrepresented as he rewrote his own.

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Figures

Figure 1: Heading of 'Meyne Erinerungen' in the *Yidishes Tageblat*.

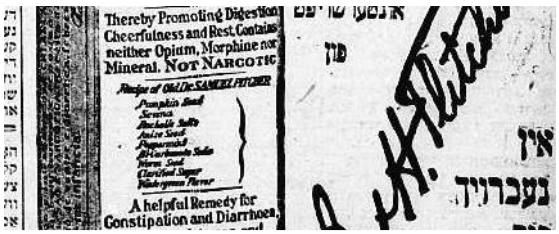

Figure 2: Zelikovits in the Medal Rolls of the Nile Expedition.

APPENDIX TO G.O. 97.

_____ Regiment.

ROLL of Officers, Warrant Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers, and men entitled to the War Medal, Clasp, or Clasps for the operations up the river Nile, and in the vicinity of Suakin, 1884–5.

Station _____

Date _____

Regimental Number.	Rank.	Name.	Whether in possession of Egypt (1882), or Suakin (1884) Medal, and what clasps.	Whether at Suakin between 26th March, 1884, and 28th February, 1885.	Whether entitled to clasps inscribed.					Whether serving with regiment or depot, dead, discharged, deserted, &c.	To be left blank.
At the time the decoration was earned.					Nile, 1884-5	Abu Klea.	Kirbekan.	Suakin, 1885.	Tofrek.		
394	Interpreter	Sayegh, Abdullah	no	no	yes	no	no	no	no	discharged	✱ ✓
~~284~~	"	~~Schikovitch, G.~~ (This is the man who made false statements as to the death of Oliver Paine)	~~no~~	~~no~~	~~yes~~	~~no~~	~~no~~	~~no~~	~~no~~	~~discharged~~	See 68 Egypt 1202
358	"	Shakeen. Alexander	no	no	yes	no	no	no	no	-do-	✱ ✓
23	"	Shakir-El. Koury	yes	no	yes	no	no	no	no	C. Paymaster	✱
78	"	Shedoudy, Nasif	no	no	yes	no	no	no	no	discharged	✱ ✓
418	"	Shehady Tannous	no	no	yes	no	no	no	no	discharged	✱ ✓
162	"	Shehanich. J.	no 1882	no	yes 93	no	no	no	no	dead	✱ ✓ continued

411