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### THOSE JEWISH INITIALS IN “EASTER RAIN”

“Easter Rain” was published in the Berlin weekly *Russkoe ekho* on April 12, 1925 (Polsky 151).<sup>1</sup> In this story, which takes place in Lausanne, Joséphine, a Swiss woman who served for many years as a governess to a Russian aristocratic family in St. Petersburg decides on the eve of Orthodox Easter to visit the Platonovs, her Russian acquaintances. She wishes to walk with them down memory lane and to sob about forlorn Russia. Joséphine does not understand that her memories and those of the Platonovs have little in common. She is unversant with the Russian language and is ignorant of the country’s history and culture.<sup>2</sup> Joséphine was a foreigner in Russia, whereas the Platonovs were native Russians.<sup>3</sup> Joséphine left Russia at the outbreak of World War One and returned to Switzerland, which maintained a state of armed neutrality. Accordingly, she did not experience the immense suffering caused by the war and the ensuing turbulent events that culminated in the Bolshevik seizure of power and the Civil War—the events that every contemporary Russian, including the Platonovs, painfully endured.

As is customary on Easter, Joséphine presents the Platonovs with painted eggs. On one of the eggs, she has attempted to write «XB», a Cyrillic abbreviation for «Христос Воскресе!» (“Christ Has Risen!”). She remembered the first letter but could not quite recall the second one, and instead of the Cyrillic «B», she drew “an absurd, crooked ‘Я’” (*Stories*

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<sup>1</sup> That year, the Western Easter Sunday fell on April 12 and the Orthodox Easter Sunday on April 6 (19).

<sup>2</sup> Curiously, the Platonovs share their last name with a distinguished historian, Sergei Platonov (1860–1933), known, among other things, for his *Uchebnik russkoi istorii* (1909) [*Textbook of Russian History*], which went through ten editions, and for his *Polnyi kurs lektsii po russkoi istorii* (1917) [*Full Course of Lectures on Russian History*], with both of which, in all likelihood, Nabokov was familiar.

<sup>3</sup> The Platonovs were probably rather well-to-do prior to the emigration, as evidenced by their residing in St. Petersburg on Pochtamtkaia Street, which runs parallel side by side with Bol’shaia Morskaia—the location of the Nabokov family mansion.

645). At first glance, this is puzzling because the Cyrillic «Б» looks identical to the Roman “B.” The only plausible explanation for this oversight is that Joséphine remembered the letter inscribed in a stylized fashion, indeed somewhat resembling a crooked «Я» (Fig. 1; Zanozina 52).<sup>4</sup> When accepting the egg, Platonov laughs and remarks to his wife in Russian, “Whatever made her stick on those Jewish initials?” (*Stories* 645). Instead of appreciating Joséphine’s kind gesture, Platonov pokes fun at her poor command of the Russian language. What is more, he does it in Russian so that Joséphine does not understand the reason for his laughter.

So, what did Platonov have in mind when speaking of “those Jewish initials”? His derisive remark regarding Joséphine’s egg inscription most likely implies “Khaim Iankel” («Хаим Янкель»)<sup>5</sup> It was considered a typical Jewish male name combination, somewhat comparable to the derogatory modern American “Joe Schmo(e).”<sup>6</sup> It was not uncommon for anti-Semites to use it as a disparaging moniker. For example, a certain Mordekhai Shtein remembers his Gentile classmates addressing him by this name combination, which they meant as an anti-Semitic slur.

Incidentally, Platonov, the historian with whom the story character shares his surname, was known for his less-than-philosemitic views. Thus, he did not discount the possibility of ritualistic killings by Jews, thereby implicitly supporting the blood libel charge.<sup>7</sup> Although Shimon Dubnov, an imminent Jewish historian, relates Platonov’s Judeophobic utterances during his encounters with him in Petrograd in 1920 in his memoir published only in the mid-1930s, Nabokov could have learnt about Platonov’s bias from his father who, in all likelihood, was acquainted with the historian in the imperial St. Petersburg and was familiar with his prejudicial opinions.

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<sup>4</sup> The caption reads: “The mistress of the estate at the table set for Easter (the Novgorod Province). 1902.”

<sup>5</sup> For a different interpretation of the initials, see Shroyer.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/Joe+Schmo>. Leo Rosten gives two definitions of the Yiddish appellation “Chaim Yankel”: 1. a nonentity, a nobody, any “poor Joe”; 2. a colloquial, somewhat condescending way of addressing a Jew whose name you do not know—just as “Joe” or “Mac” is used in English. See Rosten xviii, 61, and 197.

<sup>7</sup> See Dubnov 439 and 444.



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