

The Book and a Russian-Jewish Autobiographical Self: Literature in the Dubnov/Erlich Memoirs

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Though we may expect a literary memoir to discuss how literature has helped to form the author's artistic personality, there remains a tension between the presumed task of the memoir—the non-fictional telling of the life story—and the very creative act of storytelling through which the life story must be brought into being. This tension is heightened in regard to memoirs like those of Russian Jews whose work and lives intersected the great upheavals of the 19th and 20th centuries: the reader feels a need for “testimony” and historicism that affirms the sensitive place in social consciousness that these historical events occupy. To what extent, though, does this expectation suppress the *literary* qualities of these memoirs? How do the memoirs themselves call our attention to the role of literature, storytelling, and the written word in the very formation of the autobiographers' literary identities? My paper explores this question by focusing on the role of the book in the childhood portions of three memoirs of the Dubnov-Erlich family: Russian-Jewish historian Semyon Dubnov's *The Book of My Life*, his daughter, the poet and biographer Sofya Dubnova-Erlich's *Bread and Matzoh*, and her own son, the late professor of Russian literature Victor Erlich's memoir *Child of a Turbulent Century*.