

RUSSIAN ESOTERICISM OF THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY AND KABBALAH

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ABSTRACT

In the early twentieth century, after a long break caused by the governmental and church restrictions and persecution, there was an explosion of interest in esotericism in the Russian Empire. At that time, there was a number of occult groups of different schools and affiliations acting throughout Russia. The teachings, practices and rituals of these groups were syncretic and combined elements borrowed from European occultism, Freemasonry, Martinism and Rosicrucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufism, as well as from Jewish Kabbalah. The article discusses the place of Kabbalah – both Jewish and in its occult version – in Russian occultism of the early twentieth century. In the center of the analysis is the teaching of one of the leaders of the Russian esotericists and the most reputed occultist of the first third of the twentieth century Gregory Moebes (1868–1930/34), the head of the Russian branch of the Martinist Order and the leading figure of the Russian neo-Rosicrucianism. Since the heritage of Russian occultists of that time was not only not studied, but also not described, the author had to undertake a deep search in the archives. The article is partly based on the analysis of the manuscripts discovered by its author, their deciphering, as well as comparative historical and textual study. After discussing the place of Moebes in the history of Russian esotericism, special attention is paid to the interpretation of Kabbalah in his writings. As it turns out, some Kabbalistic concepts, borrowed mainly from the “Book of Creation” (“Sefer Yezirah”), the “Book of Splendour” (“Sefer ha-Zohar”) and the Lurian Kabbalah, played a crucial role in its interpretation of the Tarot arcane. As shown in the article, it was in the version of Moebes that Russian occultism of the early twentieth century became known outside Russia after the communist coup of 1917.

Keywords: Russia, occultism, Martinism, Kabbalah, Sefirot, Tarot, Mouni Sadhu

INTRODUCTION: REVIVAL OF ESOTERICISM IN RUSSIA AND KABBALAH

The esoteric movement in Russia was experiencing a period of rapid take-off in the early twentieth century. In two capitals, St. Petersburg and Moscow, as well as in many cities of the empire, groups and circles were formed, engaged in the study of secret knowledge and occult practices. Numerous periodicals were published on the study of occult knowledge and supernatural abilities and forces. Many Russian esoteric groups and schools considered Kabbalah in its occult version, along with magic and alchemy, one of the main parts of the perennial esoteric tradition and developed special courses on its study.

Some of these groups appreciated highly Kabbalah and its occult interpretations were ideologically and sometimes even directly connected with European esoteric institutions, like *Ordre Martiniste*, headed by Papus (Introvigne 2005; Serkov 2000, 67–84), *L'Ordre Kabbalistique de la Rose+Croix* (McIntosh 1998, 85–96), *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn* (Howe 1972; Gilbert 2005), etc. These, to say, kabbalistically inclined occultists grouped round the publishing house “Izida” (Isis, 1909–1916) and a monthly magazine of the same name, where many classical works of Christian and occult Kabbalah had been published, including Agrippa of Nettesheim, Heinrich Khunrath, Lenain, Saint-Yves d’Alveidre, Papus, and even Erich Bischoff, a popular German interpreter of Kabbalah (Antoshevsky 1911).

Probably the most significant group of esotericists, interested in Kabbalah, was formed around Gregory Moebes (1868–1934), the head of the Russian branch of *Ordre Martiniste* and one of the most authoritative Russian theorists of the occult doctrine. Moebes’ views and his work will be examined in detail below. Other important groups of that type were the “*Obshchestvo vozrozhdeniia chistogo znaniia*” [Society for the Revival of Pure Knowledge] (1916) and the “*Martinezist Order*” [a branch of the Martinist Order], both founded by Maria A. Nesterova (Erlanger, 1878 – after 1932), Moebes’s wife and close associate. A special group for intensive theoretical and practical training, “*Gruppa Prometeia*” [The Promethean Group], which was strictly closed to the uninitiated, was set up within the latter order. During the Civil War (1918–1922), Moebes and his col-

leagues gave a lecture course for their closest followers in the context of this group. The lectures concerned the doctrine of the Kabbala (Moebes), the history of religion (Nesterova) and the history of Freemasonry. The last course was taught by Boris Astromov-Kirichenko (1883 – after 1941), a lawyer, occultist, and freemason. Astromov was one of the leaders of several Russian esoteric organizations in the 1910–1920s and later actively collaborated with the Soviet secret services. Despite this, he was arrested and convicted three times (1926, 1928, 1940) and probably died in prison (Nikitin 2005, 16–30; Brachev 1991, 253–256; Brachev 2007, 10–72). In addition to theoretical lectures, the leaders of the group also held practical training sessions in telepathy and psychometrics, as well as collective meditations (Burmistrov 2011, 58).

Another important representative of Russian esotericism at the beginning of the twentieth century was Vladimir Shmakov (1887?–1929), a Russian intuitionist philosopher and creator of a sophisticated esoteric doctrine (“pneumatology”), leaning toward the new-Rosicrucian tradition. In his books, especially in the first one, “The Sacred Book of Thoth”, devoted to the interpretation of Tarot arcana, Shmakov offers a detailed interpretation of the occult ideas underlying the kabbalistic understanding of the Tarot (Egorow 2014). In the early 1920s, Shmakov participated in some underground esoteric organizations, but in 1924, under the threat of repression, he was forced to emigrate from Russia through Europe to Argentina. He did not create, like Moebes, his own organization for the study and practical realization of his ideas, but his books became one of the main sources of knowledge about the occult Kabbalah for the Russian audience.

Kabbalah played a less significant role in the teaching of several other esoteric organizations that had been active in St. Petersburg in the years preceding the Bolshevik revolution (1917) and remained operative for some time after the revolution. Among them was “Obshchestvo Sfinks” [Sphinx Society] (1916–1918) established by Georgy Osipovich Loboda (1876–?). Subsequently, he participated in the work of a commission for the study of psychological phenomena at the Brain Institute in Leningrad (1923–1924), but in 1926 was arrested and exiled. Among active members of “Sfinks” were Antonin Semiganovsky-Dienti (1888–?) and Aleksander Barchenko (1881–1938), who later became prominent representatives of the early Soviet occult underground. A. Semiganovsky, a member of the “Martinist Order” (he was excluded from the order in 1919), in 1920 founded the “Khristianskiy ezotericheskiy orden” [Christian

Esoteric Order], and in 1924 another secret organization, “Vnutrennyaya ezotericheskaya tserkov” [Inner Esoteric Church]. One of the most mysterious occultists of the early Soviet period, whose activities were closely connected with the OGPU, was a science fiction writer and scientist A. Barchenko, the leader of “Edinoe trudovoe bratstvo” [United Labour Brotherhood] (Brachev 2007, 199–226; Shishkin 2011). Another occult order “Orden rytsarey sviatogo Graalya” [Order of the Knights of the Holy Grail], founded by Aleksey Gaucheron de la Fosse (1888 – after 1930) in 1916, was destroyed by the OGPU in 1927 (Brachev 2007, 72–79). Among the occult organizations of this time, one can also mention the Russian branch of the French occult order of the “Philalethes” (Brachev 1993, 192). In all the groups we mentioned, there was a study of esoteric doctrines, including Kabbalah. Below we will dwell in greater detail on the views of Gregory Moebes as the most prominent representative of Russian esotericism, in whose teaching Kabbalah played a determining role.

GREGORY MOEBES: LIFE AND WORKS

Gregory (Grigoriy Ottonovich) Moebes was born in Riga (then the main city of the Governorate of Livonia in the Russian Empire) in 1868. In 1891, he graduated from the Physics and Mathematics Faculty of St. Petersburg University but later he abandoned academic career and devoted himself entirely to the study of “secret knowledge”. For the sake of earning, he taught physics and mathematics in secondary schools of the privileged royal residence Tsarskoe Selo and later gave lectures in mathematics in the Page Corps, the most prestigious military academy in Imperial Russia, which prepared sons of the nobility and of senior officers for military service, as well as in St. Nicholas Cadet Corps. After the revolution, he worked as a teacher of mathematics in a regular high school in Leningrad. Moebes was interested in occult knowledge and secret societies since the late nineteenth century, however, we have almost no information about the early period of his life. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, he was already a recognized expert in this field. In 1910 Moebes was appointed to Inspector General (secretary) of the St. Petersburg branch of the Ordre Martiniste headed by Papus (Introvigne 2005). Soon he established in St. Petersburg the first Russian Martinist lodge named after Apollonius of Tyana. Two years later, in August 1912 he provoked a confrontation with both the Moscow group and the Supreme Council of the Order in Paris and announced

the declaration of independence of the Russian Martinists. From that moment on, two groups of Martinists actually operated in Russia. One of them was led by Moebes. The second was associated with Czesław Norbert Czyński (pseud. Punar Bhava, 1858–1932), a member of the Supreme Council of the Martinist Order in Paris, who became the Sovereign Delegate for Russia and Poland in 1910 (he was also a high-ranking member of the Ordo Templi Orientis and the Eglise Catholique Gnostique). After the schism of 1912, the Moscow group of the Martinist Order under the leadership of Peter Kaznacheyev and his son Dmitry remained faithful to the Paris center and continued their activities until 1923 (Serkov 2009, 117–119).

Moebes established an independent Russian order under the name Autonomous Detachment of Martinism of the Russian rite (in 1916, it was transformed into a Martinist Order of the Eastern obedience). “Invisible Master” or Father of the Order was Moebes himself, whereas Ivan Antoshevsky (initiatory name Giatsintus) held the position of *Inspecteur général*. Moebes’ initiatory name was Butatar (Heb. בּוּטָטָר); according to the Nuctemeron of Apollonius of Tyana, as interpreted by Eliphaz Levi, Butatar is the genius of calculations (*génie des calculs*) (Levi 1904, 418). In the summer of 1917, when Antoshevsky was killed under unknown circumstances, he was replaced in this post by another disciple of Moebes, Vladimir Bogdanov. The chapter of the order consisted of seven persons (Serkov 2009, 117–126; Nikitin 2005, 155–159; Brachev 2007, 11–14). The official organ of Russian Martinists became a popular occult magazine “Isis” edited by Antoshevsky and (since 1911) by another renowned Russian occultist and astrologer Alexander Troyanovsky.

After the Bolshevik revolution Moebes did not leave Russia, as did many leaders of Russian esoteric groups (Burmistrov 2014, 78–83). He did not use the opportunity to immigrate to his home in Latvia, and for another ten years led underground Martinist and Rosicrucian groups in St. Petersburg. As already mentioned, during the Civil War Moebes and his wife established in St. Petersburg (in those years – Petrograd) a kind of esoteric academy and were told to read lectures on Kabbalah, the *Zohar* and the Minor Arcana of the Tarot (Brachev 2007, 14). Apart from the purely theoretical studies, practical work on the development of paranormal powers of psychics was conducted in the school. As it is known, they held practical training sessions in telepathy and psychometrics, as well as collective meditations. Though this esoteric school was clandestine, a number of known writers, poets and scholars attended it for some years, including military historian, colonel of the Russian Imperial Army

Georgy Gabaev (1877–1956) and poet Vladimir Piast (1886–1940). According to Russian emigrant occultist Alexander Aseev (1902/1903–1993), who was the editor of the most respected Russian occult magazine “Occultism and Yoga” (Belgrade, 1933–1936; Sofia, 1937–1938; Asuncion, 1952–1977), after the revolution, all the three main branches of the Russian initiatory movement – Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism and Martinism – existed as separate and independent organizations. However, they were guided by one and the same person – Gregory Moebes. All the three orders worked closely with each other and the same persons were often among their members (Aseev 1999, 431; Nikitin 2004, 93–94).

The Petersburg Martinist group continued its activities until 1926, when Moebes was betrayed by his former closest disciple, who became an agent of the security services. Moebes and dozens of other Russian esotericists were arrested. After interrogations Moebes was deported to the Solovetsky concentration camp on the White Sea (Nikitin 2005, 154–155, 193–194; Brachev 1991; Aseev 1934, 91–92). During interrogation, he declared himself the leader of the Martinist and Rosicrucian movement but refused to testify about his students (Nikitin 2005, 155–159). Some of his students apparently tried to keep in touch with Moebes even after his arrest and imprisonment (Nikitin 2004, 91). He died a few years later in exile (presumably in 1934 in Ust'-Sysol'sk, present. Syktyvkar), but we still are not aware of the year and the place of his death (Nikitin 2005, 154–155; Aseev 1999, 436–437). The richest archive of the Martinists group was confiscated (Nikitin 2005, 154, 188–189) and probably destroyed.

In 1911–1912, Moebes was giving a lecture course on the Major Arcana of the Tarot. In many aspects following Papus, he put together into a coherent system Kabbalah, astrology, alchemy, gnostic ideas, oriental cults, European occultism, and even some ariosophic concepts. These lectures enjoyed great popularity, as evidenced by dozens of memoirs and reviews. Soon afterwards these lectures were published in mimeograph under the title “A Course in the Encyclopedia of Occultism Given by G. O. M. in the Academic Year 1911–1912 in St Petersburg” (Moebes 1912; the book was reprinted by the Russian Occult Center in Shanghai in 1937–1938). The lectures were written down and edited by one of the closest disciples of Moebes, Ol'ga E. Nagornova (Ivanova; 1866 – after 1926) who became the Master of woman's Masonic lodge after 1917 (Aseev 1999, 432–33; Nikitin, 2005, 10 et al.).

The Moebes' book is structured as a detailed commentary on the twenty-two Great Arcana of the Tarot. Though Moebes frequently

used the well-known works by Papus, Stanislas de Guaita, Eliphas Levi and Etteilla, it is most certain that his book is an original composition, which is probably superior to all that has been written before by the depth of its analysis and by the range of ideas borrowed from different areas of occult knowledge. The second extant book written by Moebes miraculously survived. In the 1960s, this work, which was kept in the KGB archive, was illegally copied and remained in the Russian occult underground. This book is a course of lectures given by Moebes in 1921 for a narrow circle of disciples. It is a kind of addition to the “Encyclopedia of Occultism”, containing a more detailed analysis of the Major Arcana of the Tarot. It comprises, inter alia, an extensive analysis of the Hebrew and Aramaic grammar which is considered to be necessary for a better understanding of kabbalistic sources. Unfortunately, the text is cut off on the tenth lecture. The book was first published recently, in 2007 (Moebes 2007). Unfortunately, a number of works by Moebes were abolished or have not been found yet. According to Alexander Aseev, a lithograph edition of his lectures entitled “Padenie i reintegratsiya v svete khristianskogo illuminizma” [The Fall and Reintegration according to Christian Illuminism] was published in 1913; not a single copy of this book has been found yet. Among other writings, circulating in manuscript form among Moebes’ students, Aseev mentions a course of lectures about fifty-six Minor arcana of the Tarot; a kabbalistic analysis of the Apocalypse of John; a book on ceremonial magic (in five parts) (Aseev 1999, 432). I can add to this list a series of lectures on the Zohar, also distributed within the circle of Moebes’ students in handwritten or typewritten form.

KABBALAH IN MOEBES’ DOCTRINE

In the analysis of the surviving texts, unpublished documents and correspondence it becomes apparent that it was Kabbalah that underlay the interpretation of the arcana of the Tarot proposed by Gregory Moebes. As is known, as early as in the late eighteenth century Etteilla (Jean-Baptiste Alliette, 1738–1791) published his ideas of the correspondences between the Tarot, astrology, and the four classical elements and four humors. He was actually the first to issue a revised Tarot deck specifically designed for occult purposes. In his “Cours théorique et pratique du Livre du Thot” (Paris, 1790) Etteilla discussed the doctrine of the so-called Egyptian “Book of Thoth” and declared that this book contains an ancient version of the Tarot cards. Later, Eliphas Levi incorporated the Tarot cards into his magical

system, and as a result the Tarot became an important part of the agenda of Western occultism (Laurant 2005). In Moebes, however, Tarot cards are not just associated with twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, as it was already in Eliphas Levi. It is also known that Papus set up a correspondence between Major Arcana and astrological attributes using the Jewish esoteric book “Sefer Yetzirah”, in which the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet are correlated with three elements, seven planets and twelve signs of the Zodiac. This system, with some variations, was soon adopted by occultists in Germany, Russia and other countries. For Moebes, however, cosmological processes are directly associated with the action of the letters of the divine name – Tetragrammaton. Creation is thought of as a process of gradual unfolding and manifestation of the ineffable Name. Thus, he claims that there are active and passive principles in Tetragrammaton, represented by the Hebrew letters *Yod* and *He*, and their interaction gave rise to the third, androgynous principle, the *Vav* letter of the Tetragrammaton. And only after that, the process of emanation begins (Moebes 1912, 17). The kabbalistic system of Sefirot and their emanation is explained by Moebes in the commentary to the 10th Arcanum (“Wheel of Fortune, representing the tenth trump of the Major Arcana cards”), which corresponds to the letter *Yod* of Tetragrammaton. According to Moebes, the doctrine of Sefirot is the most important part of the tradition of the Great White Race. He describes the system of the ten Sefirot in accordance with the kabbalistic doctrine of Yitzhak Luria (1534–1572): the ten Sefirot constitute some kind of a family. The upper triad of Sefirot are corresponding to the Supreme Androgyne (or Macroprosopos), and the Father and Mother; then, the Child (or Microprosopus) comprises six lower Sefirot from Hesed to Yesod, and the last is the Wife or Bride (the 10th Sefirah, Malkhut) (Moebes 1912, 89). It is quite obvious that we are dealing here with *partzufim*, or Faces, that is reconfigured arrangements of the ten Sefirot into harmonized interactions in Creation, which are discussed in detail in Lurianic commentaries on the Zohar (Scholem 1974, 140–144; Burmistrov 2019, 106–107). So, in the diagrams in his book, Moebes demonstrates the relationship between the five faces/*partzufim* and the five levels of the human soul (Moebes 1912, 80–81). Although he never refers to the sources he used, the most likely source seems to be the translation of the “Idrot” (zoharic books of the Greater and Lesser Assembly) published by Christian Knorr von Rosenroth in his “Kabbala Denudata” (Knorr von Rosenroth 1684, 386–598; Schmidt-Biggemann 2013, 63–187; Burmistrov 2013, 183–184). This book appeared in the late seven-

teenth century, was the main source of his knowledge of Kabbalah, although it is still necessary to find out whether he used the original edition of “Kabbala Denudata” or a heavily abridged English translation published by Samuel L. MacGregor Mathers in 1887 (Mathers 1887).

Ein Sof, an absolutely incomprehensible divine essence, is situated above and beyond this family of *partzufim* (Scholem 1974, 88–96; Burmistrov 2018a), but Moebes almost does not say anything about it because it is not available for the mystic. According to Moebes,

The first cycle [of unfolding] of the Tetragrammaton should be written down as **יהוה** where the dot [over the letter *Yod*] corresponds to the Supreme Androgyne, the Ancient of Days, Macroprosopos, who emanates from himself the Father – *Yod*, and the Mother, [the letter] *Hé* who is added upon him. Their marriage brings to birth Microprosopus, [the letter] *Vav*. Microprosopus adopts the second *Hé* [of the Tetragrammaton] as his Spouse or Bride, and this is the sphere where all the family manifests itself. Whereas one should strive for and ascend to the Macroprosopos by the way of ecstasies, everyone can find Microprosopos in his heart. (Moebes 1912, 46)

Discussing the emanation of Sefirot, Moebes analyzes in detail the dynamic processes taking place in each of the four worlds of kabbalistic cosmogony (*Atzilut*, *Beriah*, *Yetzirah*, and *Asiyah*) and shows how different Sefirot can neutralize opposing and contradicting forces so that the whole system becomes harmonious. The process of expansion and circulation of energy in the world of Sefirot occurring through special channels (*tzinnorot*), Moebes calls “diabatic” using a term borrowed from thermodynamics. He describes it as a “difficult processes of transition [of energy] from one Sefirah to another by means of some intermediate Sefirot” (Moebes 1912, 81). These processes can be both descending and ascending. Moebes gives in his book few examples of descending and ascending diabatic processes, e.g., in his view, the formation of the universe is a top-down process, whereas the development and perfection of mystical knowledge is a bottom up process.

Moebes’ book at large is very concrete and specific. In this aspect it differs from many works of modern occultism. This is a kind of tutorial, it does not contain abstract reasoning, parables, etc. It is no coincidence, since its author was a professional mathematician. So, one can find in the book mathematical calculations, examples from physics and other natural sciences. According to Moebes, the

objective of studying Kabbalah and the main purpose of the use of Tarot is not producing predictions or gaining a state of prophecy, but the transformation of the very Self of the adept. People, who are not able to lead a conscious life, should help adepts to achieve their goals.

The task of rebuilding or restoration of personality is divided in two parts: 1) the conversion of an adept into the consciously volitional personality, 2) a proper reeducation of the impulsive man, he who acts in all areas reflexively, responding to certain perception with ready-made behavior [...]. Impulsive person should be brought up in such a way as to be a convenient tool for the will of a conscious man. It is necessary to strengthen some reflexes in his soul while also suppressing some others. (Moebes 1912, 33)

The Martinist school headed by Moebes paid primary attention to the ritual. Martinist “realizing work”, or “practice”, included collective meditations conducted according to a certain ritual, the so-called “commemorations” ceremonies. These were ceremonies simultaneously performed in different cities (St. Petersburg, Moscow, Vladimir, Tver’, etc.) and dedicated to the memory of some prominent characters of the Order’s history (e.g., Martines de Pasqually, Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, Eliphas Levi and etc.). During these ceremonies, collective meditations were made to establish a magical connection with these personalities.

Martinist practice, closely associated with magical actions and ideas, implied the need to study Kabbalah, including the system of Sefirot and divine and angelic names. This knowledge was used in ceremonies and meditations. Moebes emphasized the necessity of studying Kabbalah in his correspondence, preserved in the archives. Thus, in 1910, in a letter to Peter Kaznacheyev (1854–1931), who was the head of Martinist lodges in Vladimir and Moscow, and since 1915 the general delegate of the Order of Martinists in Russia (Serkov 2009, 110–126), Moebes discusses an incident that occurred in Moscow and which was witnessed by one of the most theoretically savvy brothers, Vladimir Serik (“Brother Zachet”):

[...] The case that you mentioned in Moscow was accidentally mentioned by Zachet himself in a conversation with me. The fact is that in the circle of young occultists the question of the Sefirot of the world Aziluth (Emanation) was debated, and in a tendency of the majority of members to reduce the question of Sefirot to a diabatic process and to study it purely mathemati-

cally Zachet saw disrespect for the Higher Sefirot and expressed it quite sharply. In my opinion, he was absolutely right. (Moebes 1910, ff. 51r–52r)

Moebes had in mind that, because of insufficient knowledge of Kabbalah, the young members of the Order were inclined to reduce metaphysics (i.e., kabbalistic doctrine of the Sefirot) to physics and mathematics. In connection with this case, Moebes stressed the need for more serious teaching of Kabbalah, and at the end of the same letter he announced a special course of lectures “primarily devoted to the questions of practical magic and practical Kabbalah” (Moebes 1910, f. 55).

The knowledge of practical Kabbalah and magic was also necessary because some members of the Order faced during their work the so-called “manifestations of otherworldly forces”. Available Order’s documents and Moebes’ letters mention various cases of this kind. Thus, mysterious “electrical phenomena” were observed from time to time during some ceremonies. In a document, dated June 1910, it is noted that

[...] during the ritual of the Initiation of Sister E., those present witnessed three times manifestations of the Invisible World. 1. While reading the Book of Initiation, when she [Sister E.] reached the words ‘Nature acts by the force of fate [...]’, the electric light that illuminated the Initiation Table suddenly died out. The light of the other light bulbs did not weaken at all and did not intensify [...]. (Moebes 1910, ff. 16r–16v)

Further, it is told that this lamp behaved very “consciously” and faded or lit up depending on the events that took place during the ceremony, and that this was observed repeatedly in other ceremonies.

In their practice, members of the order could also come across the activities of elemental spirits (the so-called *elementals*). This is what Moebes wrote in 1910 in one of his letters to Peter Kaznacheyev: “Over the past few days, I have been overcome by elementals playing with consecrated objects belonging to me, moving them quite unceremoniously either during my dream, or when I turn away in the other direction. I’m taking proper measures” (Moebes 1910, ff. 53v–54r).

Thus, as we see, Martinist practices required thorough knowledge of various aspects of “secret knowledge”, including Kabbalah which was considered one of the main parts (if not the basis) of the occult tradition as a whole. It can be assumed that the goals Moebes

set for himself were primarily practical. He seeks to teach his students to decompose or deconstruct any closed system for Sefirotic attributes and to use this practice for the sake of meditation. To show the effectiveness of working with the Sefirot, Moebes takes as an example the theurgy, i.e. the practice of operational impact on the divine powers by using certain magical formulas. Thus, he interprets the well-known Catholic Lord's Prayer "Pater noster, qui es in caelis" as a system of interactions between different Sefirot, demonstrating the theurgical mechanism of its effectiveness. According to Moebes, repeating nine "petitions" of the Lord's Prayer, the meditating one runs, as it were, through nine levels of Sefirotic Tree, from Keter to Yesod. The culmination of the prayer is the so-called closing doxology used in the Orthodox liturgy: "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever, Amen". As Moebes tries to show, these words symbolize the manifestation of the first Sefirah, Keter, in the tenth Sefirah, Malchut, i.e. the completion of the cycle of emanation (Moebes 1912, 83–85).

Moebes also explains how to apply the Sefirotic system to the lower levels of being: each Sefirah is to be associated with certain organ of the human body for the sake of activation of the corresponding sort of energy. This chapter of Moebes' book elaborates a kind of kabbalistic Yoga. In Moebes' view, the system of Sefirot can be used to explain any "closed system", from the lowest level associated with the physical body of man, to the level of theoretical thinking. Thus, Moebes shows as an example how it might be used to clarify the meaning of a sophisticated problem of ethics – an abstract concept of virtue (Moebes 1912, 87–88).

What does Moebes mean by Kabbalah? And how are we to understand the relationship between Kabbalah and Tarot? As for many other occultists, Kabbalah is for him an ancient tradition probably of Egyptian origin. The ultimate basis of Kabbalah is the sacred language. Kabbalah is an ancient teaching about the disclosure of the holy Name, Tetragrammaton, in the form of the sacred, initiatory alphabet. This is both a mirror that reflects everything that happens in the universe and at the same time an active force: a permutation of letters and words causes a change in the world. "If we deliberately operate with signs and formulas, with a full understanding of them, using Kabbalah, these operations are reflected in a certain way in the course of actual events, and bring about some changes in the astral patterns and even mental currents" (Moebes 1912, 105). It is not surprising that with such an understanding of Kabbalah, "Sefer Yetzirah" was especially important for Moebes, with its doctrine of

the creation of the world by means of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and its idea of the correspondence between the two-letter combinations and different elements of the universe. These topics are really essential for the Jewish mysticism, and Moebes discusses them extensively in his lectures, talking about 231 primordial Hebrew radices and different methods of combining and rearranging letters of the divine names (Moebes 1912, 109). Explaining in detail the meaning of different names and their relation to the Sefirot, he claims that ten holy names corresponding to ten Sefirot represent a single formula that includes “everything that has been produced, and all that can be produced. This is an overall reflection of the subjective understanding of the mysteries of the universe by mankind expressed by means of the initiatory alphabet and the sounds of the initiatory language [...]” (Moebes 1912, 113; cf. Moebes 2007, 225–234). He emphasized that “a solid knowledge of the Sefirotic names is necessary for every student [of occult doctrine] [...]. It gives him the opportunity to fasten his volitional impulses by the formulas linking him with the immortal Egregor of the Great Chain of holders and custodians of the Kabbalah of the White Race” (Moebes 1912, 113). (In modern occultism, the term “egregor” usually means a “thought-form”, or “collective group mind”, that is an autonomous psychic entity made up of the thoughts of a group of people and at the same time influencing them; in the books of Daniel and Enoch, egregors are guards or watchers, good and bad angels.)

Thus, the purpose of Kabbalah as an esoteric practical method is twofold:

- 1) it makes it possible not only to extract from ancient sources written in the ‘initiatory-hieroglyphic language’ the meaning read into the text by its author, but also to gain further and deeper understanding by means of occult abilities of the individual;
- 2) Kabbalah allows us also to make pentacles [i.e. an amulet used in magical evocation – K. B.] and mantras for concentration of willpower and magic activity. (Moebes 1912, 110)

According to Moebes, seventy-eight cards of the Tarot are to be understood as a symbolic exposition of the kabbalistic doctrine of universal transformations and transitions. They were entrusted both to profane (i.e. Gypsies) and to initiate adepts for preservation and transmission. Fifty-six minor arcana represent the manifestation of the Tetragrammaton in the world of the human race that had not fallen yet, that is before the Fall from grace, whereas Major Arcana are a set of notions and representations of the fallen man, who has

to purify himself by the sweat of his brow. Making numerous mistakes, he should strive to achieve first relative truths, and only then he would be able to ascend to the knowledge of the Absolute, i.e. Tetragrammaton. Minor Arcana are metaphysically cleaner than Major or Great Arcana. Besides, they are metaphysically separate and structurally perfect, whereas Major Arcana are largely uncertain, they generate each other according to some vague laws, they are adapted to the world of illusions. However, this is the only way for modern man, by which he can rise to the truth (Moebes 1912, 91). The so-called “Kabbalistic Code of the Western School”, discussed by Moebes, resembles similar Masonic lists of the allegedly kabbalistic works. Following Papus, Moebes mentions among the main sources of the Tradition (i.e. Kabbalah) “Sefer Yetzirah”, the Torah “as a part of the chain of transmission of the Lore of the White Race”, the Zohar, some parts of the Talmud, “Claviculae Salomonis” (a treatise on ceremonial magic), the New Testament (noting that Apocalypse and the Gospel of John contain descriptions of the Major Arcana) (Moebes 1912, 110–111). Thus, we can identify two main features of the doctrine proposed by Gregory Moebes: 1. The key to the knowledge of the truth, or the law of Tetragrammaton are the cards of Tarot and corresponding tradition based on Kabbalah; 2. Theoretical knowledge of the occult is considered something accessorial, supplementary, while the main task of Moebes’ school is its practical application on the different levels of existence.

MOEBES’ DOCTRINE AND ITS FAME

As it turned out, Moebes as a teacher of the esoteric doctrine has remained virtually unknown outside Russia and the Russian occultist groups in exile. This may be explained by the fact that he had never sought to publish his ideas. His main work, the “Encyclopedia of Occultism”, was printed as a manuscript (not for publication) for the students and – with only one exception – has never been translated and published in other languages, although there is evidence that Russian immigrants in South America translated it into Spanish in the 1930s. This book became, however, the most important source of knowledge about the secret sciences in Soviet Russia of the 1920–1930s (Nikitin 2004, 68, 91–92; Burmistrov 2011, 60–63). Moebes’ ideas formed the basis for the doctrine of the most effective and original group of Russian émigré occultists, the so-called “Russian occult center”, established in 1936 in Shanghai by a poet and journalist Kirill Baturin (1903–1971; in 1949 Baturin was forced to flee

to Brazil and later immigrated to the United States), and the reputed Harbin occultist Vyacheslav Piankovich (1881–1936), who composed his own course of lectures on occult matters largely based on Mebes' encyclopedia (Pyankovich 1924). Since 1915, Pyankovich was Mebes' favourite student in St. Petersburg. After the revolution, he lived in Irkutsk, and in 1919 moved to Harbin. He translated into Russian about fifteen books on esotericism, including the works of Eliphas Levy, Stanislas de Guaita, Fabre d'Olivet and Rudolf Steiner (Pyankovich 1937).

According to its leaders, the center had about one hundred members and two branches in Harbin and Berlin. The printed organ of the center was the magazine "Ogon'" [Fire: A collection of bulletins and articles reflecting the point of view of the Russian occult center on various issues] (in 1937–1939, six issues had been published), and the most important goal of its activity was the publication of occult literature (Burmistrov 2018b, 110–113). Members of the group re-published Mebes' "Course in the Encyclopedia of Occultism" and supplemented it with illustrations of Tarot cards made by the famous Russian artist Vasily Masyutin (1884–1955). The influence of the Mebes' school can also be found in the main work created by the members of this center – a two-volume guide to occult matters called "Istoki taynovedeniya: spravochnik po okkultizmu" [The Origins of Secret Science. Handbook of Occultism] (Istoki 1938/1939), which covers a variety of topics related to the ancient secret religions and cults, Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Kabbalah, Renaissance and modern occultism, Freemasonry etc.

In 1921, a complete Polish translation of his *magnum opus*, made by Karol Chobot (1886–1937), was published in Cieszyn, a small border-town in southern Poland (Chobot 1921). In contrast to the 1912 Russian edition, that does not contain the images of Tarot cards, the Polish translation was illustrated: three cards in it were borrowed from the Tarot of Oswald Wirth (1889), and the rest from Arthur Waite's Tarot. However, the actual popularity of this interpretation of Tarot in the West was the result of the activities of the famous writer and occultist Mouni Sadhu. As it is known, the real name of Mouni Sadhu (the pen name Mouni Sadhu (Sanskrit) means "Silent Holy man") was Dmitry (Mieczysław Demetriusz) Sudowski (1897–1971). He was born and got his education in Russia, took part in the Civil War on the side of the White Army, and then was living in Poland until the outbreak of World War II. As a soldier of the Polish Army he was imprisoned and spent about seven years in Soviet and German concentration camps. Later he went to Brazil

and eventually settled in Australia. He became known as an author of a number of books on Western and Eastern spirituality and occultism, including Hermeticism, and the Yoga tradition of India. In the 1920s and early 1930s, Sudowski belonged to a Rosicrucian group in Poland and in 1927–1928 published a number of articles on the Tarot and Hermetic philosophy in the occult magazine “Odrodzenie” [Renaissance] dealing with Esotericism and spirituality. Apparently, the Tarot continued to fascinate him in the following decades. In 1962, Sudowski published in English under the pseudonym Mouni Sadhu a bulky volume, “The Tarot: A Contemporary Course of the Quintessence of Hermetic Occultism” (Mouni Sadhu 1962). This book has been reprinted many times and translated into almost all European languages. In his introduction, Mouni Sadhu states that he wrote it as a means to expound on the Tarot as a “useful instrument of cognition” (as described by Eliphas Levi), as well as to provide a practical manual. He admits that his understanding is taken not only from classical Tarot works, but also from his personal study of Hermeticism, as well as from the book by Gregory Moebes:

As a basis for the lectures, I used, apart from the works of other competent exponents, the unique book by Prof. Gregory Ossipowitch [sic! should be – Ottonovich – K. B.] Moebes, a leading authority on Hermeticism in Russia prior to 1917. Actually, it was not even a proper book, but rather a series of lectures duplicated on very large sheets of thick paper (about 12” x 15”), with all the diagrams made by the author’s own experienced hand. It was never for sale on the open market as a book and only a few initiated circles of students were lucky enough to get a copy. We bought ours from a Russian refugee who brought the book with him in 1919, when fleeing from his country which had just fallen into Communist hands [...] to the present time there is no adequate and original work in English dealing with the Tarot, and the last major works in other languages are more than fifty years old. Only one of these, the previously mentioned encyclopedic course by Prof. G. O. Moebes, seems to satisfy – to a certain extent – what I would term a ‘practical exposition’ of the subject. (Mouni Sadhu 1962, 12–13)

Actually, the book by Mouni Sadhu is just a loose translation of the Moebes’ lectures with minimal permutations and additions. All the material in the book concerning Kabbalah was just taken from Moebes, along with charts and diagrams. It is unlikely that Sudowsky was personally acquainted with Moebes, although he certainly knew the aforementioned Polish translation of his book.

At the same time the fact that the teaching of Russian esotericist and Martinist Gregory Moebes became known in Europe thanks to the Poles did not seem strange. It is well known that the Poles played a significant role in the history of Russian Freemasonry and esotericism (Ryabinin 1915, 226–244). It is known that Sudowski was acquainted with Stefan Ossowiecki (1877–1944), a famous Polish clairvoyant who was born and lived in Moscow and St. Petersburg and possibly belonged to the circle of Russian esotericists associated with Moebes. The actual founder of the Russian branch of the Martinist Order was also a Pole Czeslaw (von) Chinski, a chiromancer and magnetiser, a man with a very confusing biography. Thanks to Dmitry Sudowski and his book, there are now many popular books and manuals on Tarot written in various languages that used the ideas of the Russian esoteric thinker Gregory Moebes – as a rule, without any reference to their real author.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Kabbalah had an essential, often decisive significance for the teachings and practices of a number of esoteric schools in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century. Certainly, we are not talking about the Jewish esoteric tradition, which is an integral part of Judaism, but about an “occult Kabbalah” (often called Cabala) that borrowed some ideas of the original Jewish lore, transformed them and mixed them with other ideas of the so-called “secret knowledge”. Being so important for some schools of western European occultism, the Cabala of Tarot, divine names and Sefirot became the foundation of the teachings of the most original trends of Russian esotericism of the first two decades of the twentieth century, virtually destroyed during the communist repressions of the late 1920s and 1930s. After the fall of the Soviet regime, the legacy of Russian esotericists of the early twentieth century served as the basis and starting point for a new revival of esotericism in Russia and former Soviet republics. Many works of Russian esoteric authors, including those who developed the ideas of the occult-Kabbalistic tradition, were republished (or even published for the first time). Nowadays, the works of Gregory Moebes and Vladimir Shmakov have become the classics of Russian esoteric thought and attract attention not only of the practitioners of secret wisdom, but also of academic scholars.

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