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| Der Nister (1884-1950) |
| Pinhas Kahanovitch |
| Der Nister (‘The Hidden One’) wasborn in 1884 under the name Pinhas Kahanovitch in Berdychiv, Ukraine; he died in a Soviet military hospital under Stalin. Little else is known about the details of his biography, but Der Nister witnessed—and, in some measure, participated in—the great upheavals of the early twentieth century in Eastern Europe. His early writings have a mystical bent; later works engage, obliquely, with social issues. |
| Der Nister (‘The Hidden One’) wasborn in 1884 under the name Pinhas Kahanovitch in Berdychiv, Ukraine; he died in a Soviet military hospital under Stalin. Little else is known about the details of his biography, but Der Nister witnessed—and, in some measure, participated in—the great upheavals of the early twentieth century in Eastern Europe. His early writings have a mystical bent; later works engage, obliquely, with social issues.  File: Der Nister.jpg  Der Nister  Source: black and white photograph of De Nister. Unsure of copyright; image can be found at <http://narodknigi.ru/images/Der_Nister.jpg>  Der Nister’s best-known work is an unfinished novel, *Di Mishpokhe Mashber* (*The Family Mashber*) (1939). This account of the lives of three brothers in nineteenth-century Ukraine also offers the portrait of an age—the conflicts and threats facing Jewish civilization from within and without. At first blush, the lengthy narrative (which was conceived as part of a longer work) seems to abide by the rules of socialist realism, the literary form officially endorsed by the Soviet state. Attention to the novel’s style, however, reveals that the events depicted are just as opaque and riddling as anything from the pen of more famous high modernists. *The Family Mashber* portrays its subjects with sympathy, yet it also depicts their misadventures in an ironic light. The result is a chronicle that is, at once, personal and detached, warm-hearted and sceptical—a perspective that bows neither to the pieties of tradition nor to the secular dogmas of Marxist-Leninism.    During the Second World War, Der Nister wrote a remarkable series of medium-length narratives devoted to Jewish responses to the Nazi invasion of Eastern Europe and program of extermination. These tales, which were not published in the Soviet Union for over two decades (they finally appeared under the title *Regrowth*), place contemporary disaster in the context of events in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and offer complex portraits of a people facing events that defy understanding. Accordingly, characters’ reactions—and, in many cases, inaction—differ greatly. Members of the Jewish Councils—decision-making bodies that suffered much ill fame for cooperating with the Nazis—are shown in a favorable light, quiet scholars become bent on revenge, pious daughters join the ranks of the partisans, and the underground milieu is shown to harbour double agents. Here as elsewhere, Der Nister is intent on confounding easy interpretations and summary moral judgments. Cannily, the author reintroduces characters and figures from earlier tales, creating a complex web of correspondences between present and past events. As always, biblical and religious references colour the picture as well.  Der Nister’s *oeuvre* represents a sustained engagement with the question of what it means to be Jewish in a time of upheaval and change, when things could easily turn from better to worse—or from worse to outright catastrophe. Der Nister’s exploration of estrangement from tradition, the often-illusory promises of progress, and the fate of outsiders (whether individuals or collectives) lend his writings a universal scope. Unfortunately, most of his works have not been reprinted since their initial publication and still await translation. List of Key Works *Di Mishpokhe Mashber* (1939, *The Family Mashber* 1987)  *Vidervuks* (1969, *Regrowth* 2010) |
| Further reading:  (Bechtel)  (Caplan) |