

“The Conspiracy, or The Roots of the Disintegration of European Society.” Danilo Kiš’s Fictionalization of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*

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Keywords

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Conspiracies have probably been a part of life ever since societies started to become more complex and at a time when those in power developed conflicting interests. The basic, literal meaning of the verb *conspire* (from the Latin *conspirare* and its derivative, *conspiratio*, “agreement, union, unanimity”) is “to breathe together,” whereby breathing together was taken to mean “to agree, to concur to one end,” whether that purpose be good or evil (e.g. *Genesis* 37,18; “They conspired against [Joseph] to slay him”). Since the middle of the fourteenth century *conspiracy* has been used in English to mean, first and foremost, “a plotting of evil, unlawful design; a combination of persons for an evil purpose.” The word *conspire* has, thus, assumed primarily negative connotations: “to secretly plot or make plans together, often with the intention to bring bad or illegal results.”¹

Most conspiracy theories are generated in times of crisis. They occupy the space between political constellations and psychological mechanisms. They have much in common with paranoia: the loss of one’s ability to put things into perspective, a static perception, the narrowed outlook of an extremely egocentric or

1 See “conspire” in *Wiktionary, the free dictionary*. <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/conspire>

group-driven point of view.² One of the conspiracy theories that has been most relevant in building an enemy stereotype is based on anti-Semitism, which supplied the greatest impetus for the persecution of Jews and legitimated the use of violence against them. Johannes von Frankfurt published his *Malleus Iudaeorum* (*Hammer of the Jews*) in 1420, in which he elaborates upon the pejorative figure of thought portraying the Jew as a corrosive force striving for domination.³ This attitude was adopted in later writings, such as the *Judenspiegel* (*A Mirror of the Jews*) by Hartwig von Hundt-Radowsky (1821). The term “anti-Semitism” became popular for a hatred of the Jews based on race in the territory of the German Empire, founded in 1871; it was sparked by historian Heinrich von Treitschke’s polemical works and pamphlets by the journalist Wilhelm Marr such as *Der Sieg des Judenthums über das Germanenthum* (*The Victory of Judaism over Teutonism*, 1879). After the First World War, Germany was flooded with anti-Semitic pamphlets. During the Weimar Republic, the ‘völkisch’ or populist organizations mounted campaigns aimed at defaming the first democratic state on German soil as a “Jewish Republic.” Anti-Semitic works started to appear, such as Arthur Dinter’s best-selling novel *Die Sünde wider das Blut* (*The Sin Against the Blood*, 1917) or Paul Bang’s *Judas Schuldbuch* (*The Deft Register of Judah*) published in 1919 under the pseudonym Wilhelm Meister, or the first non-Russian edition of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, published by Gottfried zur Beek and titled *Die Geheimnisse der Weisen von Zion* (*The Secrets of the Wise Men of Zion*). The second edition in German was published in 1920 by Theodor Fritsch’s anti-Semitic publishing house in Leipzig, the “Hammer-Verlag,”⁴ entitled *Die Zionistischen Protokolle: Das Programm der internationalen Geheimregierung*. (*The Zionist Protocols: Program of the Secret International Government*). Walther Rathenau, a German Jew and Foreign Minister of Weimar Germany, was targeted by anti-Semitic terrorists. He was murdered in 1922 by right-wing radicals who saw him as one of the “Elders of Zion,” a conspiratorial group they believed really existed. By the time the Nazis seized power in 1933, 33 editions of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* had been published in Germany. Starting in 1920, translated versions of the *Protocols* were also circulated in

2 Cf. Jaworski 2001: 22.

3 Cf. Schreckenberg 1994: 502.

4 The völkisch Hammer-Verlag, the publishing house Theodor Fritsch founded in 1902 (the name alluding to the inflammatory anti-Semitic *Malleus iudaeorum*/*Judenhammer* (*Hammer of the Jews*) also produced a magazine called *Der Hammer: Blätter für deutschen Sinn* (*The Hammer: The Paper for German Essence*) for which Fritsch personally penned the lead articles.

France, Great Britain, other European countries, and in the USA (funded by Henry Ford).⁵

The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and Their Fateful Propagandist Success

The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is the most widely read anti-Semitic publication. One major reason why the conspiracy tale was, and continues to prove so successful, is because it presents a simple explanation of the world owing to the fact that all manner of unpopular phenomena (e.g. the trappings of modernization) may be blamed upon on a single scapegoat, the Jews. The *Protocols* first appeared in the early 20th century—the first Russian edition was published in 1903 in Tsarist times: the anti-Semitic journalist and member of the Duma, Pavel A. Krushevan, published the work under the title *Programa* (sic!) *zavoevan'ia mira evreiami* (*Programme for the Conquest of the World by the Jews*) in August/September 1903 in the St. Petersburg newspaper *Znamia* (*Banner*) no. 190–200 (10 September 1903–20 September 1903). In 1905, Sergei Nilus, an impoverished landowner turned mystic, published *Protokoly sobranii Sionskikh mudretsov* (*Protocols of the Meetings of the Elders of Zion*), an expanded version of Krushevan's text, in the appendix to the second edition of his apocalyptic work *Velikoe v malom i Antikhrisť, kak blizkaia politicheskaia vozmožnost'* (*The Great within the Small and Antichrist as an Imminent Political Possibility*) in Tsarskoe Selo. Another edition was printed in Moscow in 1911.

At the heart of this text is a secret Jewish association whose alleged aim is to corrode Christian peoples through materialism and atheism, and to wear them down by revolution and anarchy in order to attain world dominion. The final stage would be reached when all peoples submit to a Jewish king from the Davidic line who would then rule over a perfectly controlled, but contented, world as a benevolent dictator.

The text is divided into 24 “meetings,” each chapter purporting to be the minutes of a speech given before the “Elders of Zion.” Presenting the text as minutes, or “protocols,” is intended to make the content more credible. Nevertheless, doubts were soon voiced about the veracity of the text. As early as 1921, Philip Graves wrote a series of articles in *The Times* in which he revealed the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to be forgeries. Between 1933 and 1935, the document was examined by a Swiss court which concluded that the text was to be

5 Cf. Abbott 2004: 129–31.

classed as “pulp fiction” and was a plagiarism. The authors of the *Protocols* had plagiarized and changed the intention of works such as the satire by Maurice Joly *Dialogue aux enfers entre Montesquieu et Machiavel* (*Dialogue in Hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu*) published in 1864 and directed at the authoritarian policies of Napoleon III. They also probably borrowed from Herzl, Sauvages, Barruel, Sue and Dumas.⁶ Crucially, the narrative setting is taken from one of Ottomar Friedrich Goedsche’s novels, who used the pseudonym Sir John Retcliffe and worked for the Prussian secret service. The scene is found in his novel *Biarritz* (1868) which is set in the Jewish cemetery in Prague. Every hundred years, according to the novel, representatives of the twelve tribes of Israel meet there to discuss progress towards global conquest. The author attributes the key political and economic developments of the second half of the nineteenth century to conspiratorial activities on the part of the Jewish minority. He thus provided a reference text on which other authors could base their writings. From 1881 onwards, this particular scene was published separately as *Rede eines Oberrabbiners in geheimer Versammlung* (*The Speech by a Chief Rabbi at a Secret Meeting*) and was translated into numerous languages. To this day, the location, the means by which the *Protocols* were written, and how they were disseminated remain unknown; however, fabrications and false assertions abound on the topic. Therefore, they are surrounded by “an aura, which is both stigmatizing and fascinating.”⁷

Even though the *Protocols* had been shown to be forgeries and a plagiarized fabrication in 1921, with the help of Mikhail Raslovlev, the text nevertheless continued to be widely read. In terms of the propaganda effects of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, however, whether they are genuine or not is of secondary importance. Evidence that the *Protocols* were fake was dismissed (by Hitler and others) as lies spread by Jewish media moguls, and this phantasm itself became part of the legend disseminated.

In the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* one reads of an alleged Jewish global conspiracy, a concept also anchored in the thought structures behind Nazi anti-Semitism. Leading National Socialists repeatedly referred to the *Protocols* in their own speeches and writings, e.g., Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf* (1925) or when talking to close companions. Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg devoted numerous articles in the party newspaper to this topic and also wrote a book on the subject, *Die Protokolle der Weisen von Zion und die jüdische Weltpolitik* (*The Protocols of the Elders of Zion and Jewish Global Policy*) which was re-

6 Cf. Horn 2012: 9–10.

7 Hagemester/Horn 2012: VIII.

printed many times from 1923 onwards. The *Protocols* were printed as a popular edition by the NSDAP party publishing house and were required reading in schools, and the Nazi propaganda machine distributed the book as far afield as Japan and South America. After the end of the Second World War, right-wing extremist groups in Europe and the USA cited the *Protocols* to support Nazi genocide. The work was, in some cases still is, used by governments in Arabia and Eastern Europe as a propaganda instrument in the struggle against the state of Israel, founded in 1948, and the alleged center of a Zionist conspiracy.

Conspiracy theories are expressed in texts that are passed on orally or in writing. The question is, where do they fit into narrational, fictional systems, and in particular, what place does a forgery such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* occupy? In his book, *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre (The Fictive and the Imaginary)*, Wolfgang Iser replaces the simplifying dyad reality/fiction with a triadic model of the real, the fictive and the imaginary:

- The “real should be understood as referring to the empirical world, which is a ‘given’ for the literary text and generally provides the text’s multiple fields of reference.”⁸
- The fictive, that which is made up or shaped as fiction yet possesses object reference, i.e., relates to the extra-textual world.⁹
- The imaginary, that which is dreamt up, imagined, possessing no object reference, that manifests in seemingly arbitrary conditions or as a stream of decontextualized associations.¹⁰

The real or factual claims to be something true or genuine, whereas the fictive and the imaginary do not. If one subsumes a forgery (akin to the fantastical) into the “imaginary” category, because it possesses no object reference and given that it is purely a product of fantasy, then it represents a kind of counter-fiction: unlike the fictive and the fantastical, it does indeed claim to be both true *and* genuine.

The word *Protocol* is deliberately chosen in the title *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* because it signals writing that is authentic. Authentic protocols can take the form of minutes that record the proceedings of a meeting or an interrogation and are presented as an objective rendering of the attested truth of the facts. An authentic protocol, thus, categorically precludes all elements of the

8 Iser 1993: 305 (note to p. 2).

9 Cf. *ibid.*: 2.

10 Cf. *ibid.*: 3.

symbolical, metaphorical, or imaginary. Two types of protocols (or minutes) may be found in literature; the fictive, with no claim to be true such as Albert Drach's *Das große Protokoll gegen Zwetschkenbaum* (*The Grand Protocol against Zwetschkenbaum*) (1939/1964), and pseudo-protocols (from the Greek *pseudos* "lie, falsehood"), which claim to be true and genuine; the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* belong in this category.

Faction and Thanatopoetics: Danilo Kiš and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*

The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* have entered literature by being taken as the basis for an artistic text by authors including the Serbian Jew Danilo Kiš.¹¹

As Kiš writes in the "Post Scriptum" to the last of his books published during his lifetime, *Enciklopedija mrtvih* (*The Encyclopaedia of the Dead*, 1983), it had been his intention in the early 1980s to write an essay about the genesis of the *Protocols* and their publisher and commentator Sergei Nilus. However, he then decided to complement, from his imagination, the story with parts that the historiography had left open:

My intention was to summarize the true and fantastic, "unbelievably fantastic," story of how *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* came into existence ... The intended essay on the *Protocols* fell apart the moment I tried to supplement it by imagining the parts of the book's history which have to this day remained obscure and will probably never be clarified ... and I started imagining the events as they might have happened.¹²

11 Danilo Kiš (born in Subotica 1935, died in Paris 1989) was the son of a Montenegrin mother and Hungarian Jewish father. He grew up speaking Serbian and Hungarian. After laws were passed in Hungary in 1938 and 1939 to drastically curtail the rights of Jews, Danilo Kiš's parents had their son baptized in order to protect him. In January 1942, the family was living in Novi Sad when a massacre of the Jews and Serbs began; it lasted several days but Kiš's father survived and the family moved to Hungary. In 1944, during the German occupation, Kiš's father was deported to the death camp at Auschwitz where he and most of his relatives were killed. After the war, Danilo and his mother and sister were repatriated to Yugoslavia.

12 Kiš 1991b: 196–97. "Namera mi je bila da izložim ukratko istinitu fantastičnu, 'do neverovatnosti fantastičnu', povest nastanka *Protokola Sionskih mudraca* ... Taj zamišljeni esej o *Protokolima* raspao se sam od sebe onog časa kada sam pokušao da dopunim, da domislim, one delove te mutne povesti koji su do dana današnjeg ostali u

When facts or documents are mixed with fiction a hybrid text emerges, namely “faction,” in which the imagined material enters into a correspondence with the historical material. This is the case in “Knjiga kraljeva i budala” (“The Book of Kings and Fools”), the eighth of nine tales published in the compilation *Enciklopedija mrtvih*. Kiš explains the isotopy, i.e., “death,” underlying all nine tales and the reason for the title of the *Encyclopedia of the Dead* in the self-referential “Post Scriptum”:

All the stories in this book, to a greater or lesser extent, come under the sign of a theme I would call metaphysical: ever since the Gilgamesh epic, death has been one of the obsessive themes of literature.¹³

Kiš's poetics, focusing on the metaphysical phenomenon of death, is thanatopoetics *par excellence*. In “Knjiga kraljeva i budala” (hereafter abbreviated to KKB), it manifests itself in the framework into which the tale is inserted. In the beginning (framework section I) therefore, there is a reference to A. P. Krushevan, who incited the pogrom at Kishinev (with fifty fatalities) and was the first publisher of the *Protocols*, which—and of this the narrator is convinced—were responsible for Nazi crimes 40 years later:

The crime not to be perpetrated until some forty years later, was prefigured in a Petersburg newspaper in August 1906. The articles appeared serially and were signed by the paper's editor-in-chief, a certain Krushevan, A. P. Krushevan, who, as the instigator of the Kishinev pogroms, had a good fifty murders on his conscience.¹⁴

Thanatopoetics also colors the end of the tale in its cyclical framework, because KKB is constructed according to the principles of cause and effect. The circle closes (framework section II) with a description of the scene in a death camp

senci i koji, po svoj prilici, neće nikad biti razjašnjeni ... i kada sam počeo da zamišljam događaje onako kako su se mogli dogoditi” – Kiš 1999b: 244–45.

13 Kiš 1991b: 191. “Sve priče u ovoj knjizi u većoj ili manjoj meri u znaku su jedne teme koju bih nazvao metafizičkom; od speva o Gilgamešu, pitanje smrti jedna je od opsesivnih tema literature” – Kis 1999b: 237.

14 Kiš 1991a: 135. “Zločin koji će se dogoditi nekih četrdeset godine kasnije bio je nagovešten u jednom peterburškom listu avgusta hiljadu devetsto šeste godine. Članci su izlazili u nastavcima a potpisivao ih je glavni urednik tih novina izvesni Kruševan, A. P. Kruševan, koji je kao podstrekivač pogroma u Kišinjevu imao na duši pedesetak ubistava.” – Kiš 1999a: 165.

(Bełzec is meant) in 1942 and of Captain Wirth, the man responsible for stage-managing the deaths, and who carries a talisman¹⁵ in his breast pocket—a leather-bound version of the *Protocols*:

In the middle of it all stands Captain Wirth. And in the upper left-hand pocket of his tunic is a leather-bound copy of *The Conspiracy* published by Der Hammer in 1933. He had read somewhere that the book saved the life of a young non-commissioned officer at the Russian front: a bullet fired from a sniper's rifle lodged in the pages, just above his heart. The book makes him feel secure.¹⁶

The first word in the story KKB, covering some 40 pages and divided into 20 parts, is “zločin” (crime), and the last is “sigurnost” (security). Looking at these two words together, there are two interpretations: The first is that Kruševan's publication of the *Protocols* was undoubtedly a crime, because, in the narrator's view, it led to the extermination of Jews by Nazis like Wirth. The second focuses on the irony of fate: one of the main perpetrators of the crime, such as camp commandant Christian Wirth, gives himself a false sense of security. The “astute reader”¹⁷ challenged by the “appellate structure”¹⁸ of the open ending, easily picks up the information that Wirth was shot and killed in 1944 fighting Yugoslavian partisans, and that the bullet hit him in the back.

The story's two thanatopoetic framework sections (I and II) are complemented by scenes of violence: there is initially an imagined horror scene in section I: “Throughout the darkened rooms, mutilated bodies lie in pools of blood and raped girls stare wild-eyed into the void from behind heavy, rent curtains.”¹⁹

15 The motif of an apotropaic object that protects its bearer from stab or gun wounds or works as a lucky charm, is common in literature, cf. Conrad Ferdinand Meyer's novel *Das Amulett* (*The Amulet*, 1873), Johann Nestroy's musical farce *Der Talisman* (*Talisman*, 1840) et al.

16 Kiš 1991a: 174. “Na sred kruga stoji kapetan Virt. U gornjem džepu vojničke bluže, na levoj strani, drži primerak *Zavere* u kožnom povezu, izdanje *Der Hammera* iz godine 1933. Negde je pročitao da je ta knjiga spasla na ruskom frontu mladog podoficira: metak ispaljen iz snajperske puške zaustavio se između stranica, tik iznad srca. Ta mu knjiga uliva sigurnost” – Kiš 1999a: 217.

17 Kiš 1991b: 198.

18 Cf. Iser 1970.

19 Kiš 1991a: 135. “Po polumračnim odajama leže u lokvama krvi unakažena tela muškaraca, a silovane devojčice izbezumljenih očiju zure u prazno iza teških pokidanih zavesa” – Kiš 1999a: 165.

This is followed by a verbatim excerpt (marked by quotation marks) taken from a text (an article published in the *New York Times* of 7 December 1903, cf. Zipperstein 2018: 10): “Pieces of furniture, broken mirrors and lamps, linen, clothing, mattresses, and slashed quilts are strewn about the streets. The roads are deep in snow; eiderdown feathers everywhere; even the trees are covered with them.”²⁰

In section II, prior to the last scene with camp commandant Wirth, there is an extract from an authentic document (which Kiš names in the “Post Scriptum”). The text in question is a report²¹ about Kurt Gerstein, the “tragic hero of the German resistance”²² and eyewitness of the mass murder of the Jews in the gas chamber of the Bełżec camp in 1942, “thirty-six years after Krushevan’s articles first appeared”.²³

“They remain standing”, the unfortunate Kurt Gerstein wrote, “like basalt pillars; they have no place to fall or lean. Even in death, one can make out families holding hands. It is hard to separate them when the room must be cleaned for the next load, blue bodies tossed out, soaked with sweat and urine, legs stained with excrement and menstrual blood. Two dozen workers check the mouths, prying them open with iron levers; others check the anus and genitals, looking for money, diamonds, gold. In the middle of it all stands Captain Wirth...”²⁴

Semantically, the two scenes are heightened by a kind of refrain that closes the ring, in which the explicit insistence that the corpses are actual facts offers thanatopoetic reinforcement:

20 Kiš 1991a: 135. “Po ulicama, razbacani komadi nameštaja, ogledala, razbijenih lampi, rublje i odeća, madraci, razvaljeni perine. Ulice su pokrivene snegom: svuda je popadalo perje, pa i po drveću” – Kiš 1999a: 165.

21 Cf. Poliakov/Wulf 1955: 107–08.

22 Kiš 1991b: 198.

23 Kiš 1991a: 173.

24 Kiš 1991a: 174. “‘Kao bazaltni stubovi’ – zapisuje nesrećni Kurt Gerštajn – ‘Ljudi još stoje uspravno, nemajući ni najmanjeg mesta da bi se srušili ili nagnuli. Čak i u smrti, još se mogu prepoznati porodice, po stisku ruku. S mukom ih rastavljaju, kako bi ispraznili prostoriju za nov tovar. Onda bacaju modra tela, vlažna od znojia i mokraće, nogu uprljanih izmetom i menstrualnom krvi. Dvadesetak radnika proveravaju usta, otvarajući pomoću gvozdениh poluga. Drugi proveravaju anus i genitalne organe, tražeći novac, dijamante, zlato. Zubari čupaju kleštima inleje, mostove, krunice. Na sred kruga stoji kapetan Virt...’” – Kiš 1999a: 216–17.

- in part 1 of the KKB: “The scene is real enough, as real as the corpses”²⁵
- in part 20 of the KKB: “But the stage is real, as real as the corpses”²⁶

Within this framework formed by parts 1 and 20, the genesis, passing down, and use of the *Protocols* is recounted. First and foremost, the poetic method chosen by Danilo Kiš is that of *defamiliarization*, and this estrangement of facts and names acts to fictionalize his KKB. For example, the name of the actual historical figure Pavel A. Krushevan becomes A. P. Kruševan; he in fact published the *Protocols* in August/September 1903, not in August 1906, and the first pogrom in Kishinev took place at Easter, namely from 19 to 20 April 1903.²⁷ Presumably Kiš chose the year 1906 in “summary,” because around 650 pogroms were launched in the Russian empire between 1903 and 1906, claiming thousands of victims.²⁸ As further defamiliarization, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are not given their usual title in the story KKB.²⁹ The unnamed narrator figure of the KKB speaks instead of a “book” to which he gives the fictitious, but meaningful, title of *The Conspiracy, or The Roots of the Disintegration of*

25 Kiš 1991a: 135. – “Prizor je, međjutim, stvaran, kao što su stvarni i leševi” – Kiš 1999a: 165.

26 Kiš 1991a: 174. – “Scena je međjutim stvarna, kao što su stvarni i leševi” – Kiš 1999a: 216.

27 Steven Zipperstein argues that the vehement global reaction to the pogrom, which was in most cases also directed against the Tsarist regime and conservative practices in Russia, bolstered the anti-Semitic attitudes of the Russian nationalist forces and contributed to the spread of anti-Jewish conspiracy beliefs: “Kishinev, as they saw it, was an ideal launching pad for Jewish designs on world domination” (2018: xix). To support his arguments, Zipperstein takes a closer look at the role played by Pavel Krushevan. The latter is, according to Zipperstein, a crucial link between the pogrom and the *Protocols*. Despite the fact that he was the publisher of Kishinev’s daily newspaper *Besarabets* (The Bessarabian), in which numerous anti-Semitic articles appeared claiming that a Christian boy had been the victim of a ritual murder, Krushevan denied any responsibility for the pogrom. Instead he believed that a Jewish conspiracy was behind the media discourse in which articles were directed against Russian conservatism in general and against Krushevan personally.

28 Cf. Grill 2017: 471.

29 In his KKB, Kiš avoids words such as “Zion” or “Jew/ish” because he does not want to be labelled a “Jewish author” but seeks recognition as a European writer.

European Society.³⁰ The change in designation from “protocol” to “book” signals the fictionalization of a factual text on the one hand. On the other hand, though, “book” is a word with a special aura, above all when it refers to an enigmatic or unique book such as *Conspiracy (Zavera)*, which is compared several times, in ironic manner, with the Bible and whose origins and propagation remain largely in the dark. Thus, the well-known saying by Terentianus Maurus “Habent sua fata libelli” (Books have their own destinies) is very pertinent to the origins and fateful effects of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Moreover, the book *Conspiracy (Zavera)* proves the opposite of “the commonly accepted notion that books serve only good causes.” Both religious and political fanatics have always claimed *one* book as their authority: “Books in quantity are not dangerous; a single book is.”³¹ Finally, it is significant that the story “Knjiga kraljeva i budala” places the lexeme *knjiga* (book) at the beginning of the title, i.e., of the first paratext. “Post Scriptum,” i.e., “Addition to a text/book,” is the title of the second paratext, which is an explanatory metatextual supplement to the book *Knjiga kraljeva i budala* and ensures that the recipient’s attention is repeatedly drawn to the transformation of the factual into literature.³²

So, in Kiš’s story a key topic is the relationship between a person and a book, whereby the person may be the author, compiler, translator, someone reading to himself or to an audience, the buyer or the seller. The opening protagonist in KKB is Sergei Nilus, author of the apocalyptic piece *Antikhrisť* to which the *Protocols*, taken from Krushevan, formed the appendix. Here Nilus refers to himself as a reader and a “holy fool,” i.e., as one able to reveal the truth: “Wherever he went, he studied the lives of saints and holy fools, and discovered in them analogies to his own spiritual life.”³³ The fictionalization of historical figures extends to the Tsarina; after her death at the hands of the Bolsheviks it is alleged that a copy of *Conspiracy (Zavera)* marked with “a swastika, symbol of happiness and divine grace”³⁴ was found among her personal effects. Likewise fictionalized is an officer in Denikin’s forces, who incites his soldiers to launch pogroms by reading to them from the book. Above all, the figure of the unknown person X is fictionalized. A figure who in Constantinople in August 1921 buys a

30 Kiš 1991a: 136. “Zavera ili Gde su koreni rasula evropskog društva” – Kiš 1999a: 166.

31 Kiš 1991b: 197.

32 Cf. Petzer 2008: 115.

33 Kiš 1991a: 138. “Izučavajući po lavrama životopise svetaca i jurodivih, otkriva u njima analogije sa svojim sopstvenim duhovim životom.” – Kiš 1999a: 168.

34 Kiš 1991a: 144.

leather suitcase full of books from a Russian émigré called Arkadii Ipolitovich Belogorcev. There is a long list of the book titles in part 9 of KKB, which serves to characterize the owner. Among the books thus acquired is a copy of Maurice Joly's book. When the nameless X discovers remarkable similarities between *Conspiracy (Zavera)*, with which he is familiar, and Joly's *Dialogue aux enfers (Dialogue in Hell)* he contacts the Istanbul correspondent of *The Times* who then writes a "sensational" series of articles in August 1921 proving that the *Conspiracy* is a forgery. In Kiš's story, the mysterious Mr. X—actually the poet and translator Mikhail Raslovlev, a Russian nobleman and monarchist who died in 1987 in exile in France—becomes a figure whose thought processes and memories are known. For example, he remembers the cavalry colonel Dragomirov, who read aloud from his softcover copy of *Conspiracy* and thereby provoked the pogrom in Odessa.³⁵ Because it is such a significant aspect of the conspiracy theme, this description is set exactly half-way through KKB, in part 10, and the description of the Kishinev pogrom in part 1 is repeated in paraphrases. Here too, poetic use is made of snow, the leitmotif running through the text and a symbol for Russia. Mr. X's hopes are dashed now that the book compiled by "the talented and ill-fated"³⁶ Petr Rachkovskii,³⁷ head of the Russian secret service in Paris, has been exposed as a forgery; the book will cease to have any effect and even serve to exonerate the alleged conspirators. The spread and malevolent effects of *Conspiracy (Zavera)* continue unabated. Even Hitler and Stalin, the representatives of evil, not mentioned by name, but instead described as, "the amateur painter who wrote the infamous *Mein Kampf*" and the "anonymous Georgian seminary student who was *yet to be heard from*,"³⁸ are influenced by the book. Part 19 of KKB thus closes, in order to emphasize the authenticity of the document, with five consecutive verbatim examples from *Conspiracy (Zavera)*, chosen because "they will demonstrate why the text has had so fateful an

35 To the "informed reader," to whom the narrator of KKB refers repeatedly, "Odessa" means the great pogrom of 1905 in which more than 400 were killed, innumerable women and girls raped and 1,600 homes destroyed.

36 Kiš 1991a: 163.

37 With this version of how the *Protocols* originated in France, Kiš is referring to the book by Norman Cohn written in 1967, which is mentioned in the "Post Scriptum." Most recent research (De Michelis, Hagemester) has, however, shown that the *Protocols* were probably written in the Russian Empire. A number of Ukrainianisms in the text could serve as proof.

38 Kiš 1991a: 171–72.

impact”:³⁹ “Men with evil instincts outnumber men with good instincts. Governing by violence and terror therefore yields better results than governing by academic argument.”⁴⁰ Or “Our right lies in might,” and “our duty is to spread discord, strife and animosity throughout Europe and then to other continents” because “politics has nothing in common with morality. ... We shall therefore punish mercilessly any armed opposition to our power.”⁴¹

As mentioned previously, Kiš wrote in his “Post Scriptum” about why, in relation to the topic of death, the collection was called *Enciklopedija mrtvih*. However, he offers no explanation for the title of the eighth story, “Knjiga kraljeva i budala” (“The Book of Kings and Fools”). As far as I am aware, those who study Kiš have skirted around this topic. The title is so ambiguous that a number of interpretations are possible. Firstly, the title “The Book of Kings and Fools” is evocative of the Old Testament “Book of Kings,” which is divided into two parts concerning the lives of King David, his son Salomon and his successors and recounts the history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. That Kiš’s reference to the Old Testament “Book of Kings” (“Knjiga kraljeva”) stands for Judaism is apparent in the ninth story of the *Enciklopedija mrtvih*, in which he speaks of “royal blood” (with reference to the Jewish-Russian poet Osip Mandel’shtam).⁴²

The Fools in the title of KKB refer, *inter alia*, to the numerous passages in the Bible in which fools are contrasted with wise men, e.g., “The wise in heart will receive commandments: but a prating fool shall fall.”⁴³ Or, “wise men lay

39 Kiš 1991a: 172. “Svedoče o sudbonosnom uticaju te lektire” – Kiš 1999a: 214.

40 Kiš 1991a: 172. “Treba primetiti da je više ljudi sa zlim nego sa dobrim instinktima; stoga se u vladanju s njima postižu bolji rezultati nasiljem i strahovladom nego akademskim raspravama ...” – Kiš 1999a: 214.

41 Kiš 1991a: 172–73. “Naše je pravo u sili ... Naša je dužnost da u celoj Evropi, a posredstvom nje i na drugim kontinentima, izazovemo nemire, razdore i neprijateljstva Politika nema ničeg zajedničkog sa moralom. ... Stoga ćemo nemilosrdno kažnjavati sve one koji se našoj vlasti suprotstave s oružjem u ruci” – Kiš 1999a: 215–16. It would seem that Kiš used a Croatian translation of the *Protocols* published in 1929 in Split by M. Tomić, although in KKB this reference has been defamiliarized and given the title “Prave osnove” (“The True Foundations”) written by a certain “A. Tomić” – Kiš 1999a: 211. The narrator quotes from this with page references 216, 218, 235 and 268. In my copy of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* by J. Sammons, these quotations may be found in the first, seventh, fifteenth, and nineteenth meetings, pages 29, 31–32, 77–78, and 95–96.

42 Kiš 1991c: 188; “carska krv” – Kiš 1999c: 233. See also Delić 1995: 332.

43 Proverbs 10:8 (Twenty-First Century King James Version).

up knowledge, but the mouth of the foolish is near destruction.”⁴⁴ By the end of the Middle Ages, a “Literature of Fools” had become popular with works such as Sebastian Brant’s *Narrenschiff* (*Ship of Fools*, 1494) or Erasmus’s *Encomium moriae* (*In Praise of Folly*, 1509) in which human follies are caricatured and satirized.

A crucial role in Kiš’s choice of title was most probably played by the (identical) *Psalms* 14:1 and 53:2, in which the fool is not only stupid, but, above all, a disbeliever, someone evil who denies the existence of God: “The fool hath said in his heart, ‘There is no God’. They are corrupt and have done abominable iniquity; there is none that doeth good.”⁴⁵ Illustrations for *Psalms* 53 in Mediaeval *psalters* (L. “Dixit insipiens in corde suo: Non est Deus”) show a figure standing opposite a king. This figure is the fool, the unwise man (L. *insipiens*) mocking King David, the wise man (L. *sapiens*) who stands for faith.

Since God created Man in his likeness, according to *Gen.* 1:27, such an imperfect, perverse creature as the fool could not possibly be in the likeness of God. Therefore, the fool, being distanced from God, became a negative figure more akin to the Devil, considered the origin of all foolishness. Opposition to the wise king (David) on the part of the fool (the atheist) is really about the struggle between the forces of order/orthodoxy against those of disorder/heterodoxy and it is this aspect that Kiš addresses by taking the symbolic antithesis kings/fools as the title of his story. Describing the (alleged) creators of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as “wise” is to be seen as irony against the backdrop of the discourse on fools, and this bitter irony is what characterizes the subtext in Kiš’s KKB.

The combination of secular kings and fools also alludes to the king-fool duopoly that has existed since antiquity: as part of the king’s retinue, it is the fool’s job, through his own imperfections, to remind the king that power and fame (Lat. *vanitas*) are transient. He is the wise fool, the only person allowed to tell the ruler the truth to his face without having to fear punishment, the “fool in Christ” (Russ. *iurodivyi*). In this sense of the fool’s license not only Nilus, who sees himself as a “holy fool,” gives *his* version of the truth but also the author by presenting historians and readers with *his* truth, namely *poetic veritas*.

44 Proverbs 10:14.

45 *Psalms* 14:1 and 53:2.

The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as Integral Element of the Discourse about the Shoah

The phantasm of the *Protocols* and their fateful effect does not stand in isolation in Danilo Kiš's works but is an integral element of how he deals with the Shoah (Holocaust). In 1971, he wrote a letter to the magazine *Ovdje (Here)* in which he called the *Protocols* a "knjiga-ubica," a "murderous book" because in his view it—together with the *Malleus Iudaeorum (Hammer of the Jews)* and Hitler's *Mein Kampf* or Céline's *Bagatelles pour un massacre*⁴⁶—was partly responsible for the Shoah.

This discourse about the Shoah was manifest in his first prose work the *Psalam 44 (Psalm 44)*⁴⁷ that was published in 1963. It is especially pronounced in the last part of his trilogy, ironically termed a "Family Circus," in the 1972 text *Peščanik (Hour-Glass)* about the life and fate of his father, whose real name was Eduard Kohn (later Kiš), but in Danilo Kiš's books is called Eduard Sam or E.S. In *Peščanik*, roof beams and tiles come crashing down when Eduard Sam's house in Novi Sad collapses and he narrowly misses the fate of the "senior physician Dr. Freud," whose brains spilled out of his smashed skull onto the street in the massacre of 1942. He compares these scenes to the ice pick brought down on the head of Leo Bronstein, alias Leon Trotsky. It is the hammer of a "vengeful fate" or, in other words, the *Malleus Iudaeorum*, that smashes Jewish skulls: "The roof beams and tiles would have crashed onto his head (like the ice pick onto the head of Lev Davidovich Bronstein), onto the clearly visible tonsure in his ash-gray hair, a tonsure pre-destinated, as it were, to receive the ice pick of a vengeful fate: *malleus Iudaeorum*."⁴⁸ Naming in *Peščanik* the book *Malleus Iudaeorum*, in the same context as roof beams and an ice pick, serves to identify it as a likewise potentially lethal instrument. Moreover, the name of the book evokes associations with the Hammer publishing house that issued the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. As the protagonist E.S. in *Peščanik* explains to a Jesuit during a train journey, this *Protokol (sic!) sionskih mudraca*, is a fabrication, an

46 Cf. Petzer 2003: 335.

47 As a code name for Auschwitz, the title *Psalam 44* points above all to verses 9 and 11: "But thou hast cast off, and put us to shame"; "Thou hast given us like sheep appointed for meat."

48 My translation, D. B. of: "Grede i cigle srušile bi se na njegovu glavu (kao pijuk na glavu Lava Davidoviča Bronštajna), na tek označenu tonzuru njegove pepeljaste kose, tonzuru koja kao da beše predodređjena za pijuk osvetničke sudbine: *malleus iudeorum*" – Kiš 1983: 116.

evil pastiche of a Utopian text that appeared in 1864 in Brussels entitled *Dialogue aux enfers entre Montesquieu et Machiavel*, written by Maurice Joly.⁴⁹

Umberto Eco has also worked the *Protocols* into his literary output, e.g., into the 1988 novel *Il pendolo di Foucault* (*Foucault's Pendulum*) and again in 2010 in the novel *Il cimitero di Praga* (*The Prague Cemetery*); as well as in the sixth of his Harvard lectures *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (1994) about narrative theory including the attempt to reconstruct a “genealogy” of the *Protocols*. Whereas Eco, the Italian semiotician and novelist, is primarily interested in conspiracy texts as a phenomenon of intertextuality, their ramifications and interpretation, Danilo Kiš sees them as a “a parable of evil”⁵⁰ and real historical threat. As people marked by their Jewish destiny, Kiš’s “characters cannot afford the playful and ambiguous repertoire of Eco’s computer games.”⁵¹ The immediate effect and personal impact of the edition of *Conspiracy* (*Zavera*), i.e., of the *Protocols*, that was published in 1944 in Hungary is treated in an autoreferential pointer by the first-person narrator of KKB, behind whom the author Danilo Kiš and his own biography remain hidden. The boy (nine at the time) personally experiences—literally “in his own skin” (“moje kože”)—an anti-Semitic attack when someone fires a rifle into his parents’ home:

The editorials provoked by the Hungarian edition (1944), which includes the woolly wisdom of a certain László Ernő,⁵² were directly responsible for a hunting rifle’s being fired at the windows of our house. (So, one might say, the *Conspiracy* affair closely concerns me, too.⁵³

49 Cf. *ibid.*: 106.

50 Kiš 1991b: 197. “parabola u zlu” – Kiš 1999b: 244.

51 Boym 1999: 114.

52 Shortly before World War II broke out László Endre, whose name Kiš alters to László Ernő, an anti-Semitic propagandist, published a book arguing in defense of the *Protocols* as a genuine record. In 1944 he became Secretary of State in occupied Hungary and Adolf Eichmann’s right-hand man who ordered the deportation of Hungarian Jews. Endre organized the deportations which began on 15 May 1944 and within six weeks 450,000 Jews had been transported to Auschwitz, including Kiš’s father.

53 Kiš 1991a: 171. “Novinski komentari, koje izazvalo mađjarsko izdanje (1944), popraćeno mudrovanjem nekog Lasla Ernea, imali su neposredan odjek: hitac ispaljen iz lovačke puške u prozore naše kuće. (Tako bi se, dakle, moglo reći da se stvar *Zavere* tiče i moje kože)” – Kiš 1999a: 213. – I (D. B.) believe the English translation “closely concerns me, too” to be too unspecific, because it does not give any weight to the elementary, bodily witnessing of the deed.

Just as the historical experience of the persecution of the Jews was written on the skin of the witness (*testis*) and left deep scars (*testimonium*), so too have the *Protocols* left significant tracks in Kiš's works. Whereas Umberto Eco's work is based on mythopoetics, Danilo Kiš is dedicated to a thanatopoetic process, which leads him to inscribe the victims of pogroms and death camps onto mankind's cultural memory. In his narratives, starting with *Psalam 44*, progressing to *Grobница Borisa Davidoviča* (*A Tomb for Boris Davidovič*) and thereafter in "Knjiga kraljeva i budala," he erects a cenotaph to these victims, to save them from being forgotten: it is literary remembrance performed as an ethical act with poetic means—"po-ethics," as Kiš termed it.

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Abstract

Danilo Kiš wrote from memory and for our collective memory—in the tradition in which the written and spoken word is set against the backdrop of death and decay. But there is also a horrific and intimate connection between his memories and death, from which his specific thanatopoetics emerged. A book title such as *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* indicates that the contents concern an age when an unparalleled descent from civilization to barbarity turned half of Europe into a slaughterhouse. Kiš's elaborate poetic language neither embellishes nor takes anything away from his account and has few peers in the post-Auschwitz age. Taking the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as his example, Kiš shows in his short story "Book of Kings and Fools" how the belief in a *conspiracy* can so manipulate people's thoughts and actions that it paves the way to violent pogroms and death camps.

