

## FROM FACT TO FICTION: BERNARD MALAMUD'S *THE FIXER* (1966) AS FICTIONALIZATION OF THE BEILISS CASE (1911-4)

MARTÍN URDIALES  
Universidad de Oviedo

In his book *Blood Accusation. The Strange History of the Beiliss Case*, Maurice Samuel begins a chapter on Mendel Beiliss venturing that,

Possibly the genius of Sholom Aleichem could have turned Beiliss into a «character»; if so, it would have had to be in a non-Sholom Aleichem genre. For Beiliss the Russian Jew did not belong to the world of Sholom Aleichem, except perhaps as a peripheral figure; there was little of the folk coloration in him. (Samuel:55)

But Beiliss did belong, and fully, to the world and genre of Bernard Malamud, and it is a striking coincidence that the same year these words appeared in print -1966- Malamud's fourth novel, *The Fixer*, a historical fictionalization of the Beiliss case, should also see the light, thus quieting the critical voices who had accused Malamud of not being socially and politically involved in his earlier works.

The fact that both *Blood Accusation* and *The Fixer* appeared in the same year, evidently indicates that both Malamud and Samuel had been commonly researching on earlier material concerning the Beiliss case (Kiev, 1911-4) and thus neither Malamud's novel nor Samuel's historical account could have been based on one another, even if there might have been contact between the two authors. Bearing in mind the fact that Malamud and Samuel independently made use of previously existing material on the Beiliss case, the aim of this paper will be to discuss Malamud's fictionalization of the Beiliss case in *The Fixer*, in the light of Samuel's historical narrative *Blood Accusation*, and remark how «on the whole, Malamud has altered very few of the basic facts of the case» (Alter:37).

Although on reading the two books there is an essential difference in terms of focus, since *The Fixer* is a novel whose narrative perspective, exclusively the victim's, is fractional and subjective, whereas *Blood Accusation* conveys various objective external perspectives on all the characters involved, the correspondence between certain historical characters –in particular the officials, lawyers and public persons in general who act as conspirators against Beiliss- and Bok's oppressors in the novel is clearly defined: all the anti-Semites who played active parts in the development of the conspiracy against Beiliss are faithfully reflected by Malamud in the novel. Yakov Bok himself is also an accurate reflection of Mendel Beiliss as he is portrayed by Samuel in *Blood Accusation*. The aspect of the Beiliss case which Malamud transformed most is related to his defendants.

Yakov's indifference towards Jewishness in cultural, political and religious terms is one of the significant aspects of *The Fixer*, a fact which fully agrees with Samuel's statement quoted above, that Beiliss had «little of the folk coloration in him» to be a Sholom Aleichem character (Samuel:55). In Malamud's novel, Yakov is portrayed as an ordinary handyman, a «fixer» whose skill lies in the use of his tools and who has no political or religious involvement of any kind. His abandonment of the shtetl and the risks he accepts by living in a non-Jewish quarter of Kiev, reveal his indifference to a Jewish tradition which he finds constrictive. During the questioning following his arrest, Yakov honestly asserts, «I've never belonged to a political party or any secret organizations...» (84), and regarding his attitude to Jewish traditions, he later claims «... I'm not a religious man.» (85), and «I have nothing against those who want to follow the customary ways, but for myself I'm interested in what's new in the world» (86).

Yakov Bok is thus portrayed in very similar terms to his historical source, Mendel Beiliss. In relation to Beiliss's Jewishness, Maurice Samuel writes in *Blood Accusation*:

Beiliss, too, had fallen away from his father's religious standards, and for Jewish learning he had never shown any aptitude...

It was a striking aspect of the Beiliss case that none of the Jews accused...of complicity in a crime of religious fanaticism was particularly religious or particularly versed in the tradition. The principal figure was an ordinary working man whose life was taken up with tugging at ends that could barely be made to meet. (57-58)

And regarding the absurdity of the accusation in view of what was known of Beiliss's character and personality in general, he continues:

The role that the prosecution tried to thrust on Beiliss, that of the fanatical killer of Christian children and drinker of their blood, had something ludicrous about it in the midst of its obscenity. Had it at least been some picturesque exalté – but nash Mendel! ... Martyr he was, perhaps the more so because he was precisely a simple, good-hearted, worried, bewildered workingman who struck no poses and made no speeches. (59)

The two principal pawns of the conspiracy against Yakov –Father Anastasy, in religious terms, and Prosecuting Attorney Grubeshov, in judicial terms– were also closely inspired by historical figures. Father Anastasy is a «...defrocked Catholic priest» (143) and a firm believer in the infamous Blood Accusation. Anastasy is inspired very literally by Father Pranaitis, a historical figure who played an active role in the Beiliss case, and who is ironically introduced by Samuel in the following terms:

For its showpiece expert the administration finally had to content itself with an obscure Catholic priest, Father Justin Pranaitis, whom it discovered in, of all strange places, Tashkent. This man had a curious history. In 1893, living at that time in St. Petersburg, he had written a pamphlet, *The Christians in the Jewish Talmud, or The Secrets of the Teachings of the Rabbis about Christians*, to prove that the practice of ritual murder was advocated by the Jewish religion. The pamphlet attracted a modicum of contemptuous attention at the time and was then forgotten. (87)

In *The Fixer*, Yakov eventually learns from the Investigating Magistrate Bibikov, that

Father Anastasy is a charlatan. He has written a stupid anti-Semitic brochure in Latin which brought him to the attention of the United Nobility, who have urged him to testify against you. (143)

Anastasy's detailed exposition of the Blood Accusation (during three pages of *The Fixer*, 110-112, too long to quote here) as a vast potpourri of magical, salubrious and pseudoreligious applications for Christian blood supposedly attributed to Jews, is evidently based on one of Father Pranaitis' tirades at the Beiliss trial, which Samuel partly describes and partly quotes:

Pranaitis opened his discourse by quoting at some length from a book purportedly written in Rumania at the beginning of the nineteenth century... Nothing was known about the author, who wrote under the pseudonym «Neophyte» and represented himself as a converted Jew with special access to the secret practices of the Jews...

The list of uses to which Jews are supposed to put Christian blood seems almost endless. Thus wrote «Neophyte»:

Four times a year there appears from the air a sort of blood on the Jews' food, and if any Jew tastes of this food he dies... The Rabbis smear a fork with the blood of a martyred Christian and put it on top of their food, so that the blood mentioned above does not fall on their food.... When Jews marry, the Rabbi gives the bride and bridegroom a boiled egg sprinkled with the ash of a rag that

has been first soaked in Christian blood. When the Jews weep over Jerusalem, they smear their heads with the above-mentioned ash. At Passover they bake a special dish in which they include the blood of a martyred Christian. When an infant boy is circumcised, the Rabbi takes a beaker of wine into which he puts a drop of the blood from the circumcision. When these are well mixed, the Rabbi puts a finger into the beaker and then into the mouth of the infant.

...Leaving «Neophyte,» Pranaitis took off on his own into the realm of the Blood Accusation. He said he had found a text in the Talmud that sanctified the ritual murder of a Christian on that doubly holy of days, a Day of Atonement falling on the Sabbath. He spoke of the distribution of Christian blood in special bottles and of the cabbalistic signs made over the bleeding victim... He went on in this strain for some eleven hours... (Samuel: 212-4)

The other main pawn of the conspiracy against Yakov is Prosecuting Attorney Grubeshov. Initially the most hostile character against Yakov, his task it is to elicit a confession from the fixer at all costs, to which end he resorts to every possible argument, pressure and coercion, including the attempt to bribe Yakov into admitting that «... the Jewish Nation put [him] up to this crime[?]» (*The Fixer* 117) and his later offer of freedom if Yakov agrees «...to sign a confession saying [he] committed the murder unwillingly, under the influence of [his] religious cohorts.» (*The Fixer* 184). In spite of being perfectly aware of Yakov's innocence, Grubeshov's behaviour in *The Fixer* is thus presented as responding to two equally strong reasons: his selfish political aspirations and his anti-Semitism. In both respects, but specially in the former, the main historical source for Grubeshov is the state prosecutor of the Kiev appellate court, Chaplinsky, described by Samuel in these terms:

Chaplinsky was known as a careerist *pur sang* and a time-server; to the extent that he could afford a principle, he was anti-Semitic, and he was ardently so when principle coincided with prospects of promotion... It was what the Germans are fond of calling a *Konjunktur* – anti-Semitism and self-interest were «in phase». (Samuel:21)

But the radicalness of Grubeshov's anti-Semitism, which reveals itself in the scene in which he shows Yakov a notebook of «Jewish Noses» claiming that «With a Jew it is the nose that burns and reveals the criminal he is» (*The Fixer* 118), clearly points to a secondary source for this character in the figure of attorney Shmakov, one of the private prosecutors at the Beiliss trial and a very eccentric figure, thus described by Samuel:

The other private prosecutor, Shmakov, the collector of pictures of Jewish noses, had only one value – his furious anti-Semitism... Anti-semitism was a way of life with him and it had unhinged him; he was an avid student of queer anti-Semitic books and pamphlets... (Samuel:179)

Another –less relevant– character involved in Yakov's oppression is Bodyansky, the Colonel who is present at Yakov's interrogation as an intimidator (77-89). There are two sources for this character in the Beiliss case: Lieutenant Colonel Pavel Ivanov and Colonel Kuliabko. The latter's involvement in the Beiliss case is practically limited to Beiliss's arrest, a scene which Malamud reproduces almost exactly in *The Fixer*:

...Colonel I. P. Bodyansky, the red-mustached head of the Secret Police in Kiev, with several other officials, fifteen gendarmes..., a detachment of police, several plainclothes detectives, and two representatives of the Office of the Chief Prosecuting Attorney of the District Superior Court, about thirty in all, rushed up the stairs with drawn pistols and swords, confronting the fleeing Yakov. (62)

The manner of Beiliss's arrest was, to say the least, unusual (....) (...); to bring in Beiliss it was thought necessary to mobilize in the dead of night a small expeditionary force of fifteen gendarmes headed by the local chief of the *okhrana*, Colonel Kuliabko. (Samuel:61)

Although as far as the arrest is concerned, Kuliabko seems the counterpart of Bodyansky in the novel, Malamud's description of Bodyansky as head of the secret police corresponds more with Ivanov's post than with Kuliabko's; furthermore, it was Ivanov who played an important role in the Beiliss case, not Kuliabko. Ivanov is related to another event which Malamud reproduces in *The Fixer*: in the Beiliss case, Colonel Ivanov was responsible for planting a spy, Kozachenko, in Beiliss's cell: the prosecution had conceived the machiavellian plan that by establishing the friendship between Kozachenko and Beiliss –factually proven by Beiliss's trusting Kozachenko with a letter to his wife– Kozachenko's subsequent deposition regarding Beiliss had to be true. His deposition –which he later admitted before Ivanov «to having made...up from beginning to end» (Samuel:79)– ran as follows:

Beiliss had a talk with me, without witnesses. He asked me to see the factory manager and one of the owners. These people were supposed to collect money among the Jews, enough to pay me for poisoning two witnesses... Beiliss said I could give them some vodka with strychnine. I consented, but of course I did not want to do it. (Samuel:78)

This episode of the Beiliss case was incorporated to *The Fixer* with certain transformations. Kozachenko's alter ego in the novel is not a Russian spy, but a fellow Jewish prisoner, Gronfein, who is coaxed into incriminating Yakov in exchange for his freedom. Like Kozachenko, Gronfein also smuggles out two letters written by Yakov, although in this case it is only to hand them over to the prison warden, who can then accuse Yakov of breaking prison regulations (134). Apart from these differences, Malamud reproduces the event quite literally:

«What's more,» said the Deputy Warden, «we have it in writing that you [Yakov] also tried to bribe him [Gronfein] to poison the yardkeeper who saw you attempting to kidnap the boy in the brickyard, and also to pay Marfa Golov not to testify against you. Isn't that the truth?» he asked Gronfein. The counterfeiter, sweat trickling from under his hat down his dark lids, nodded once. (135)

Both the Czar Nicholas II, as himself, and his Minister of Justice Scheglovitov as Count Odoevsky, appear in the novel as ultimate endorsers of the conspiracy against Yakov. In this Malamud is again strictly faithful to history: in *Blood Accusation*, Maurice Samuel devotes two separate chapters to these figures, whom he terms «the angel» and «the producer» of the Beiliss case:

The Beiliss case may be described as a drama –or comedy– portraying how a somnambulistic emperor, a scoundrelly minister of justice and a homicidal underworld slut entered into a combination that made an unexpected and not negligible contribution to world history...

In the language of the theater it can be said that Nicholas II was the «angel» of the play – he provided the backing; Shcheglovitov was the producer – he provided the machinery; and the Cheberyak gang [authors of the murder] came up with the gimmick – it provided the plot line. (97)

Historically, Nicholas II's anti-Semitism was partly learned but also partly due to his belief that the Jews were solely responsible for the social agitation in Russia, since he thought «...international Jewry... was fomenting revolution...through its two wings, Jewish capitalism and Jewish socialism» (Samuel:115). Hence Samuel's definition of him as «a somnambulistic emperor». In Yakov's vision, the Czar tells Yakov «...the Jews are freemasons and revolutionaries who make a shambles of our laws and demoralize our police by systematic bribery...» (270). As to the Minister of Justice, Samuel points out, «[one cannot say enough]...of the shambles he made of the judiciary, giving rise to the byword 'Shcheglovitov justice'...» (Samuel:120). This character is also accurately reflected by Malamud in Count Odoevsky, who at one point leaves Bibikov «...with the unmistakable impression that he expects the evidence to confirm [Yakov's] guilt.» (138).

In *The Fixer*, Malamud presents Bibikov, «Investigating Magistrate for Cases of Extraordinary Importance» (65) as Yakov's only defendant in the midst of the developing administrative conspiracy. Bibikov does all he can to find out the real murderers and thus clear Yakov of guilt, as a result of which he is imprisoned in the cell next to Yakov's under a false pretence and commits suicide in despair for being unable to help the fixer (149). After Bibikov's death, the only character to appear in defense of Yakov is the lawyer Julius Ostrovsky, almost a hundred pages later (245). In this respect, Malamud's intention is, on the one hand, to present the fixer's ordeal as a one-man struggle against the powerful all-embracing conspiracy, the David versus

Goliath theme. But he is also forced to «...rearrange some details of the Beiliss affair in the interests of necessary simplification or even credibility» (Alter:37). For in the Beiliss case, the events and characters concerning Beiliss's defense were infinitely more intricate and no less outrageous. There were in fact as many as five people directly involved, at different stages, in attempting to find the real culprits of the murder and thus clear Beiliss of the absurd accusation: Margolin, Beiliss's first attorney, State Prosecutor Brandorf, Fenenko, «Investigating Magistrate for Important Cases» (Samuel:53) and detectives Mischuk and Krasovsky. It is impossible to establish a univalent relationship between any of these historical characters and Yakov's allies in the novel, since Malamud, for the sake of his story, freely transformed and simplified this aspect of the Beiliss case. From Fenenko he took the appellation «Investigating Magistrate» for Bibikov, although it was Detective Krasovsky who played the major role in defense of Beiliss. However, the events surrounding the official repression against the non-conspirators are historically accurate: Mischuk, the first detective to be put in charge of the Beiliss case, was framed by the administration and sentenced to prison, just like Bibikov in *The Fixer*, because he was honestly trying to clear up the case and thus did not collaborate with the conspiracy (Samuel:29-30). And just as lawyer Julius Ostrovsky tells Yakov that he has been prevented from defending him (253), Detective Krasovsky, State Prosecutor Brandorf and Investigating Magistrate Fenenko were also removed from the Beiliss case for not following along with the conspiracy (Samuel:140-1,53).

Although Mendel Beiliss was not as alone in his misery as Yakov Bok is presented, and certain events experienced by Yakov are purely fictitious while other «...actual events are remolded to fit the inner logic of the narrative» (Friedberg:276), in *The Fixer* Malamud accurately reflects, particularly through the figures of the conspirators, the outrageous spirit of prejudice and inequity which pervaded the Beiliss conspiracy from beginning to end: his «...distillation of history into a product of artistic imagination demonstrates the firm hand of a skilled craftsman.» (Friedberg:276).

#### GUIDE TO THE CORRELATION BETWEEN CHARACTERS IN *THE FIXER* AND HISTORICAL CHARACTERS INVOLVED IN THE BEILISS CASE

<i>The Fixer</i>	The Beiliss Case (source: <i>Blood Accusation</i> )
Yakov Bok (the fixer) .....	Mendel Beiliss
Prosecuting Attorney Grubeshov .....	State Prosecutor Chaplinsky and Attorney Shmakov
Father Anastasy .....	Father Pranaitis
Colonel Bodyansky .....	Lt.Cl. Ivanov & Cl. Kubliako

Gronfein (a Jew) .....	Kozachenko (a Russian)
Minister of Justice.....	Minister of Justice
Count Odoevsky .....	Shcheglovitov
Tsar Nicholas II .....	Czar Nicholas II
<i>Yakov's defendants:</i>	<i>Beiliss's defendants/allies:</i>
Investigating Magistrate	Inv. Magistrate Fenenko,
Bibikov, Lawyer Julius	Margolin (1st attorney),
Ostrovsky.	State Prosecutor Brandorf,
	Detectives Mischuk & Krasovsky.

(no character-to-character correspondence)

## WORKS CITED

- ALTER, ROBERT. «Jewishness as Metaphor» in Field L. & Field J., 29-42.
- FIELD, LESLIE & FIELD, JOYCE, eds. *Bernard Malamud and the Critics*. New York: New York University Press, 1970.
- FRIEDBERG, MAURICE. «History and Imagination. Two Views of the Beiliss Case» in Field L. & Field J., 275-84.
- MALAMUD, BERNARD. *The Fixer*. New York: Dell Books, 1967.
- SAMUEL, MAURICE. *Blood Accusation. The Strange History of the Beiliss Case*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1966.