

Limits of Self-representation in the Diaries of the Russian-Jewish Gold Entrepreneur Yakov Frizer (1869-1932)

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The diary-writing tradition was widely spread in Russia in the 19th-early 20th century. Usually, the habit of diary writing is associated with particular social strata, with some rare exceptions. Such an exception were the diaries of Yakov Frizer (1869-1932) and his small archive kept by his family. Yakov Frizer was one of the most prominent private gold entrepreneurs of East Siberia before the October Revolution (1917), a merchant of the 1st guild, the owner of 118 working gold mines, a member of the foundation committee of the Irkutsk stock exchange, ex-deputy of the Irkutsk Jewish community, a member of the numerous Jewish and non-Jewish cultural and charity organizations. He was born in the middle of nowhere, in a Barguzin city with 1160 citizens, most of them Jews, criminals, and political exiles. His family lived in a house that previously belonged to Mikhail Kuchelbecker, the Decembrist, and the brother of Wilhelm Kuchelbecker, Alexander Puskin's friend. His passion for books and diary writing came along with the acquaintance of the book collections of the former owner (some books with Pushkin handwriting) and the secular education he got from famous political prisoners such as E.K. Breshko-Breshkovskaya with whom he was in touch until her death. His diaries depicted a story of the Jewish boy's constant self-development and self-education, as well as a critical analysis of his reading list and book influence on his private and professional development. Many pages of his diaries are devoted to cultural and educational projects he initiated in his gold mines, such as a theater and a library for workers. The impact of these projects on the workers and their families was significant, enhancing their quality of life and broadening their horizons. He chose the reading list, and public readings took place weekly for men and women audiences. The elementary school named after S. Yu. Witte was established for the worker's children, who, to Frizer's great regret, preferred to search for gold instead of studying grammar, literature, and mathematics. Yakov Frizer's diaries emphasized what was the most important for him – self-education, development of an outstanding professional career, and social activity. Children, friends circle, and family life got minor or no reference: his father was described in several sentences as a good man with a complete lack of economic feeling, and his mother deserved more attention as a person who stimulated him in his way to success, his weddings described in one sentence, his daughter was not mentioned, and his son deserves his attention later in Harbin, where the family flew in 1919. Yakov Frizer's diaries represent a pariah from the Imperial periphery for whom his story of a self-made man became the center of his life and narrative.