



The Yiddish Book Group

New Castle Public Library
 Prepared by Dr. Cynthia Kreisel
 Event: Thursday, Jul 16, 2026
 Copernicus Room
 4:00-5:15 PM



“ Kulbak never quite manages to dampen the novel's subversive spirit, which is reinforced delightfully in Hillel Halkin's impeccable translation.”

-Byan Cheyette, The Times Literary Supplement

The Zelmenyaners: A Family Saga



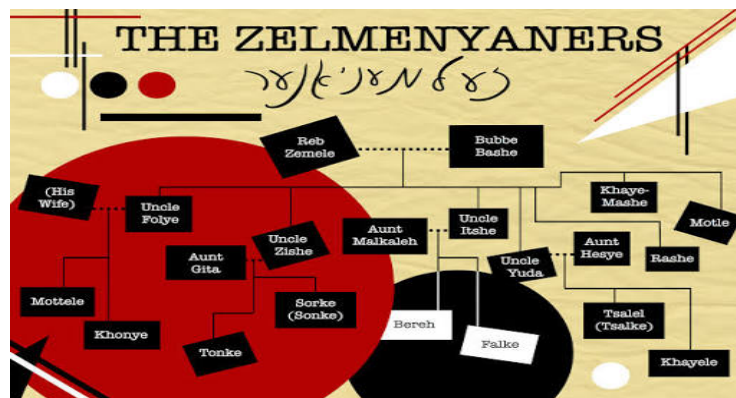
(Translated by Hillel Halkin, with an introduction and notes by Sasha Senderovich (White Goat Press, 2024).

Moyshe Kulbak's *The Zelmenyaners* is a brilliant, satirical Yiddish family saga written between 1929 and 1935. It follows four generations of an artisanal Jewish family in Minsk as they are dragged into the modern, collectivist realities of the early Soviet regime.

About the Author

- ★ Moyshe Kulbak (1896-1937) was a leading Yiddish modernist poet, novelist, and dramatist, born near Vilna, Lithuania.
- ★ He is the author of *Childe Harold of Dysna*, *The Messiah of the House of Ephraim*, and *The Zelmenyaners*, which he first published in serial form (like Dickens and Tolstoy).
- ★ Kulbak was arrested during the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, in which approximately 1 million were killed for alleged political dissidence. Kulbak was executed in 1937, along with many Yiddish and other writers and cultural activists throughout the USSR.

(<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/about/white-goat-press-0/moyshe-kulbak>, accessed 07/09/26).



Reading Guide Questions:

1. From your reading of the novel, what did you learn about Jewish culture in revolutionary- and Stalinist-era Russia?
2. Describe one thing in Kulbak's *Zelmenyaners* that you found particularly interesting or problematic?
3. Exploring the theme of traditionalism v. collectivism, how do the older "uncles" and Reb Zelmele's grandchildren react to radical Soviet secularism?
4. Kulbak uses humor to critique the Soviet project. What specific scenes of Soviet modernization (e.g., electricity, the radio, electric trolleys) cause the most chaos within the family courtyard?
5. While reading *Zelmenyaners*, were you able to "read between the lines" to discover what was going on historically at the time? Do you think Kulbak provides an objective view of the sweeping historical changes affecting the Russian nation between World War One and World War Two? Why or why not?
6. How are these stories relevant to the modern world? What can we learn from them?
7. How were the circumstances experienced by the Zelmenyaner family similar or different from Tevye's and his family's experiences in *Tevye the Dairyman*? Explain.
8. Does knowing that Kulbak will be executed for the "subversive spirit" shown in his works (including *The Zelmenyaners*) affect how you view and/or interpret this novel? Why might the Soviet authorities have believed that this novel might undermine the Soviet agenda?
9. How does *The Zelmenyaners* fit with the theme "Between Two Worlds?" What can we learn about the complexities of religion, identity, and assimilation with these stories?

Historical Context:

For a 5-minute review of Russia from its formation until the death of Stalin see:

 [History of Russia in 5 Minutes - Animation](#) (Stop at 4:09.)

For a 15 minute review of revolutionary and Stalinist Russian History, please see John Green's Crash Course Video:

 [Russian Revolution and Civil War: Crash Course European History #35](#)

(Both videos are low-brow, but provide context for the historical setting of the novel.)

Further Resources:

- Jewish Federations of North America: <https://www.jewishfederations.org/>
- Jewish Book Council: <https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/>
- The Yiddish Book Center: <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/> Offers a wealth of resources on Yiddish prose and poetry including oral history projects, teaching resources, and more.