A Student Reflection on Amelia Glaser's Lecture “Sholem Aleichem, Russian Literary Critic”

On Tuesday June 11th, 2013 the Russian, East European and Eurasian Center hosted a lecture by Dr. Amelia Glaser in its Noontime Scholars Lecture series. Associate professor of Russian and Comparative Literature and Chair of the Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies program at the University of California, San Diego, Dr. Glaser is an accomplished translator. Visiting the University of Illinois as a mentor for REEEC’s Workshop in Scholarly and Literary Translation from Slavic Languages, she was kind enough to give a public lecture entitled “Sholem Aleichem, Russian Literary Critic.”

Dr. Glaser’s lecture was based on her recently published book Jews and Ukrainians in Russia’s Literary Borderlands: From the Shtetl Fair to the Petersburg Bookshop (Northwestern University Press, 2012). This book explores the literary history of the relationship between Russians, Jews and Ukrainians in Czarist Russia through Yiddish, Russian and Ukrainian literature. Instead of looking at each of these literatures in isolation, Dr. Glaser imagines them as a group situated in a distinct time period (1829-1929) and traces their influences on each other, teasing out, in both her book and her lecture, the effects that each literature and each culture had on each other.

Dr. Glaser’s work challenges the conception that the ethnic and linguistic groups created impermeable boundaries in the Russian Empire. Instead, she presents the regions as having porous borders with populations that often interacted and influenced one another. In her lecture, Professor Glaser first summarized the interactions between the Jewish, Ukrainian and Russian communities in the work of Nikolai Gogol. She compared these to her own discoveries in the work of Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem, the pen name of Sholem Naumovich Rabinovich. Dr. Glaser identified numerous commonalities between the two writers, including the role of superstition in their works, the similar use of animals (particularly pigs, and devils) and their conceptualization and exhibition of evil. Both writers often used the public market as a place where ethnic groups encountered and interacted with others. She traced the ways each sociolinguistic group envisioned the other groups it encountered in the public sphere, identifying commonalities and differences.

Dr. Glaser’s lecture was well attended by members of the Translation Workshop, the larger campus community, and the public. The lecture triggered a lively discussion of other writers from the same period who demonstrate similar characteristics in their works. In fact, the discussion had to be moved to an informal setting because the audience was so enthusiastic that it exceeded the time allotted for questions and answers.

Nellie Manis finished her MA at REEEC with a graduate minor in European Union Studies in May 2013. She received a BA in History and a BA in International Studies from Penn State University in 2008. In August she will begin a Fulbright Student grant at the Linguistics University of Nizhnii Novgorod in Russia. In addition to coursework in translation and interpretation, she will research the differences between translation pedagogy in the United States and Russia.