

Faces of Babi Yar in Felix Lembersky's Art
Presence and Absence



Ilya Ehrenburg (1891-1967)

What use are words and quill pens
When on my heart this rock weighs heavy?
A convict dragging his restraints,
I carry someone else's memory.
I used to live in cities grand
And love the company of the living,
But now I must dig up graves
In fields and valleys of oblivion.
Now every *yar* is known to me,
And every *yar* is home to me.
The hands of this beloved woman
I used to kiss, a long time ago,
Even though when I was with the living
I didn't even know her.
My darling sweetheart! My red blushes!
My countless family, kith and kin!
I hear you calling me from the ditches,
Your voices reach me from the pits.
I speak for the dead. We shall rise,
Rattling our bones we'll go—there,
Where cities, battered but still alive,
Mix bread and perfumes in the air.
Blow out the candles. Drop all the flags.
We've come to you, not we—but graves.

Translated from the Russian by Maxim D. Shrayer

Note on the text: Originally published as Poem 1 of a cycle of six untitled poems in the leading Moscow monthly *Novyi mir* (January 1945), Ehrenburg's poem subsequently appeared, in a modified form, under the title "Babi Yar."

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Execution: Babi Yar, Leningrad, ca. 1944–52. Oil on canvas, 39 x 51 1/4 inches



Execution: Babi Yar, Leningrad, 1952. Oil on canvas, 34 3/8 x 45 3/4 inches



Untitled, from the series *Miners*, Leningrad, 1960–63.
Gouache and oil on paper, 7 1/4 x 8 inches



Reclining: The Siege of Leningrad, Leningrad, 1964. Oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 42 1/8 inches



Household Store (Khozmag), Leningrad, 1964.
Oil on board, 28 1/2 x 19 inches



Sketch for *Household Store (Khozmag)*.
1963-64. Pencil on paper,
4 x 2 3/4 inches



Sketch for *Household Store (Khozmag)*.
1963-64. Pencil on paper,
5 1/8 x 3 5/8 inches

Faces of Babi Yar in Felix Lembersky's Art: Presence and Absence

In response to the horrors of Babi Yar, the single largest mass murder of Soviet Jews that occurred on 29-30 September 1941, Felix Lembersky (1913-1970) turned the bitter memories of the Shoah into art. He created three Babi Yar paintings (among the earliest artistic renderings), the last completed at the height of Stalin's campaign against Jewish culture. Human suffering and dignity persisted as dominant themes in the artist's work on the Ural miners, rich in the symbolism of the Babi Yar series. In the late 1950s, Lembersky moved away from socialist realism to non-conformist forms of art, increasingly returning to his childhood town of Berdichev (where his parents perished at the hands of the Nazis) and employing Jewish symbols and imagery. The artist sought to "awaken the consciousness" by offering art as a puzzle, a path to discovery. In Lembersky's own words: "In my art, I would like to reflect not so much on the visible beauty of objects, but to express my feeling and admiration for them. I attempt to find the hidden spirituality in nature, and treat the object as a metaphor."

ChaeRan Freeze



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