

## **EHRENBURG'S POETRY AND SOVIET HOLOCAUST MEMORY**

### SUMMARY

In a book-in-progress I examine Holocaust poems created by Jewish-Russian authors during World War 2, printed in Soviet mainstream publications in 1941-1946, and read by mass audiences. Historians of World War II and the Shoah are familiar with the non-fiction and fiction of Ilya Ehrenburg (1891-1967) and Vasily Grossman (1905-1964), and also with their work on *The Black Book*. Yet students of the Shoah—both of history and literature—tend to be less informed about the experience of Jewish-Russian poets bearing witness to the Shoah in 1941-1945.

In January 1945 Ilya Ehrenburg (1891-1967) published a cycle of six short untitled poems about the Shoah in the flagship Soviet magazine *Novyi mir*. The printing size of the magazine was 30,000 copies, and it made Ehrenburg's cycle available to a diverse audience of Soviet readers. The first of the six poems in the cycle was Ehrenburg's poem about Babi Yar, indispensable to students of Holocaust memory in the USSR. Yet Ehrenburg's 1945 cycle has never been examined as a whole or properly contextualized and historicized. The last quatrain of the cycle made the following appeal (rendered here in English translation): "I beg you senselessly, my heart/Approaching, stopping, crossing again,/For just a bit of tremulous art/ Behind a dainty curtain of rain." It is remarkable that as early as January 1945, on the eve of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau by the Soviet troops, Ehrenburg was asking in print, that both the poet and the victims of the Shoah be granted a modicum of remembrance and salvation through art and in art, however muted or vague the art's expression of Jewish loss.

## TEXTS

Note: The English literary translation of Ilya Ehrenburg's "Rachels, Hayims, and Leahs wander..." is reproduced from *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature: Two Centuries of Dual Identity in Prose and Poetry. 1801-2001*, ed. Maxim D. Shrayer, 2 vols. (Armonk, NY and London: M. E. Sharpe, 2007). The English translation of Ehrenburg's January 1945 *Novyi mir* cycle is a work-in-progress, and I am most grateful to my colleagues Dwayne E. Carpenter, M.J. Connolly, and Andrew Sofer for their comments and suggestions, only some of which I was able to address. I welcome comments and suggestions on these translations. The bibliographies precede the texts of the poems and do not purport to be exhaustive. The original Russian versions are taken from the editions marked in boldface. I gratefully acknowledge the contribution of my research assistants, Margaret Godwin-Jones and Leon Kogan. *MDS*

### ILYA EHRENBURG (1891-1967)

"Rachels, Hayims, and Leahs wander..."; wr. 1941; *An Anthology*, 1: 529-530.

"Бродят Рахили, Хаимы, Лии..."; wr. 1941; pub. Il'ia Erenburg, *Vernost' (Ispaniia, Parizh): Stikhi* (Moscow, 1941), 52; rpt. **Il'ia Erenburg, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, ed. B. Ia. Frezinskii (St. Petersburg, 2000), 482.**

\* \* \*

Бродят Рахили, Хаимы, Лии,  
Как прокаженные, полуживые,  
Камни их травят, слепы и глухи,  
Бродят, разувшись пред смертью, старухи,  
Бродят младенцы, разбужены ночью,  
Гонит их сон, земля их не хочет.  
Горе, открылась старая рана,  
Мать мою звали по имени — Хана.

\* \* \*

Rachels, Hayims, and Leahs wander  
Leperlike, half-alive, cast asunder,  
Stones that are deaf and blind torment them,  
Old women wander, shoeless, demented,  
Roused by the night, young children wander,  
Dreams goad them onward, earth does not want them.  
Woe! An old wound is unsealed, and I suffer:  
Hannah, was the name of my mother.

*Translated from the Russian by Alyssa Dinega Gillespie*

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ILYA EHRENBURG (ctnd.)

“Poems”; wr. 1944-1945.

“Stikhi”; wr. 1944-45; pub. *Novyi mir* 1 (1945): 16; rpt.:

“1(Untitled)”: as “Untitled” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Derevo: Stikhi 1938-1945 gg.* (Moscow, 1946), 45-46; “Babii Iar” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Sochineniia* (Moscow, 1953), 4: 605; “Babii Iar” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Stikhi 1938-1958* (Moscow: 1959), 72-73; “Babii Iar” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Sobranie sochinenii v devyati tomakh* (Moscow, 1964), 3: 455; “Babii Iar” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, ed. B. Ia. Frezinskii (St. Petersburg, 2000), 512.

“2(Untitled)”: as “Untitled” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Derevo: Stikhi 1938-1945 gg.* (Moscow, 1946), 83; “Untitled” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Stikhi 1938-1958* (Moscow: 1959): 76; “Untitled” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Sobranie sochinenii v devyati tomakh* (Moscow, 1964), 3: 458; “Untitled” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, ed. B. Ia. Frezinskii (St. Petersburg, 2000), 518.

“3(Untitled)”: as “Untitled” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Derevo: Stikhi 1938-1945 gg.* (Moscow, 1946), 81; “3(Untitled)” of an 8-part cycle in Il’ia Erenburg, *Sochineniia* (Moscow, 1953), 4: 634; “Untitled” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Stikhi 1938-1958* (Moscow: 1959), 85; “Untitled” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Sobranie sochinenii v devyati tomakh* (Moscow, 1964), 3: 470; “Untitled” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, ed. B. Ia. Frezinskii (St. Petersburg, 2000), 518.

“4(Untitled)”: as “1(Untitled)” of a 4-part cycle, “V fevrale 1945,” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Derevo: Stikhi 1938-1945 gg.* (Moscow, 1946), 84;

“1(Untitled)” of a 4-part cycle, “V fevrale 1945,” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, ed. B. Ia. Frezinskii (St. Petersburg, 2000), 519.

“5(Untitled)”: as “2(Untitled)” of a 4-part cycle, “V fevrale 1945,” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Derevo: Stikhi 1938-1945 gg.* (Moscow, 1946), 84-85;

“1(Untitled)” of a 2-part cycle, “V fevrale 1945,” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Sobranie sochinenii v devyati tomakh* (Moscow, 1964), 3: 464; “2(Untitled)” of a 4-part cycle, “V fevrale 1945,” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, ed. B. Ia. Frezinskii (St. Petersburg, 2000), 519.

“6(Untitled)”: as “4(Untitled)” of a 4-part cycle, “V fevrale 1945,” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Derevo: Stikhi 1938-1945 gg.* (Moscow, 1946), 85-86;

“3(Untitled)” of a 3-part cycle, “9 maia 1945,” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Sobranie sochinenii v devyati tomakh* (Moscow, 1964), 3: 466; as “4(Untitled)” of a 4-part cycle, “V fevrale 1945,” in Il’ia Erenburg, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, ed. B. Ia. Frezinskii (St. Petersburg, 2000), 520.

ИЛЬЯ ЭРЕНБУРГ

ILYA EHRENBURG

СТИХИ

POEMS

1.

1.

К чему слова и что перо,  
Когда на сердце этот камень,  
Когда, как каторжник ядро,  
Я волочу чужую память?

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.

Я жил когда-то в городах,  
И были мне живые милы,  
Теперь на тусклых пустырях  
Я должен разрывать могилы,  
Теперь мне каждый яр знаком,  
И каждый яр теперь мне дом.  
Я этой женщины любимой  
Когда-то руки целовал,  
Хотя, когда я был с живыми,  
Я этой женщины не знал.  
Мое дитя! Мои румяна!  
Моя несметная родня!  
Я слышу, как из каждой ямы  
Вы окликаете меня.  
Я говорю за мертвых. Встанем,  
Костями застучим — туда,  
Где дышат хлебом и духами  
Еще живые города.  
Задуйте свет. Спустите флаги.  
Мы к вам пришли. Не мы — овраги.

2.

Ракеты салютов. Чем небо черней,  
Тем больше в них страсти растерзанных дней.  
Летят и сгорают. А небо черно.  
И если себя пережить не дано,  
То ты на минуту чужие пути,  
Как эта ракета, собой освети.

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.

2.

Rockets; fireworks. The blacker the skies,  
The darker the passion of those ravaged days.  
They fly and they burn. And the sky stays black.  
And if you don't survive an attack,  
Then just for a minute, like this rocket steadfast,  
You light someone else's path with yourself.

3.

Чужое горе, оно, как овод,  
Ты отмахнешься — и сядет снова,  
Захочешь выйти, а выйти поздно,  
Оно — горячий и мокрый воздух;  
И как ни дышишь, все так же душно.  
Оно не слышит, оно — кликуша,  
Оно приходит и ночью ноет,  
А что с ним делать — оно чужое.

4.

Будет солнце в тот день или дождь, или снег,  
Тишина удивит. К ней придет человек.  
Тишиной начинается всё. Как во сне,  
Человек возвращается вновь к тишине.  
О, победы последний салют! Не слова  
Нам расскажут о счастье — вода и трава,  
Не орудья отметят сражений конец,  
А биение крохотных птичьих сердец.  
Мы услышим, как тихо летит мотылек,  
Если ветер улегся и вечер далек.

5.

День придет, и славок громкий хор  
Хорошо прославит птичий вздор,  
И, смеясь, наденет стрекоза  
Выходные яркие глаза,  
Будут снова небеса для птиц,  
А Медынь для звонких медунец,

3.

Someone else's woe—like a gadfly;  
You wave it off, but it gets right back at you,  
You'd like to go out but it's late already,  
The woe's hot and muggy air,  
No matter how you breathe, suffocating.  
The woe doesn't hear, a nagging hysteric,  
It comes at night, moaning, aching,  
And what to do with it—someone else's.

4.

Sunshine, downpour, or snow, on that day  
Silence astounds. A person comes to stay.  
Everything starts in silence. Like a dream  
Of a person returning to silence, yet again.  
O, victory's last fireworks! Not words  
Will tell us of happiness—water and grass.  
Not guns will mark the conclusion of battles—  
But the beating of bird hearts, those tiniest of bells.  
We'll hear the quietness of moth wings in flight,  
If the wind has subsided and young is the night.

5.

The day will come, the warblers' loud chirps  
Will sound in chorus, praising birdsome quirks,  
Merrily, a dragonfly will don  
Her brightest weekend eyes and keep them on.  
Once again the skies will be for birds,  
And the honey meadows—for lungworts.

Будут только те затемнены,  
У кого луна и без луны,  
Будут руки, чтобы обнимать,  
Будут губы, чтобы целовать,  
Даже ветер, почитав стихи,  
Заночует у своей ольхи.

6.

Прошу не для себя, для тех,  
Кто жил в крови, кто дольше всех  
Не слышал ни любви, ни скрипок,  
Ни роз не видел, ни зеркал,  
Под кем и пол в снях не скрипнул,  
Кого и сон не окликал.  
Прошу для тех: и цвет, и щебет,  
Чтоб было звонко и пестро,  
Чтоб, умирая, день, как лебедь,  
Ронял из горла серебро.  
Прошу до слёз, до безрассудства,  
Дойдя, войдя и перейдя,  
Немного смутного искусства  
За лёгким пологом дождя.

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Only those will be dimmed at noon,  
Who are moonlit even without the moon,  
There will be hands to hold and embrace,  
There will be lips to kiss and taste.  
Even the wind, after reciting poetry,  
Will fall asleep under its alder tree.

6.

I beg you not for me, but those  
Who lived in blood, whose mirrors froze,  
Who hadn't heard love's violins,  
For the longest, who forgot the smell  
Of roses and the lilt of sleep—  
Beneath them no floor will tilt.  
I beg for them: both color and singing,  
Please give them ringing, motley sounds,  
So that the dying day, like a cygnet,  
Will drop tongue-trilling silver sighs.  
I beg you senselessly, my heart  
Approaching, stopping, crossing again,  
For just a bit of tremulous art  
Behind a dainty curtain of rain.