Chapter 4

Jewish-Russian Poets Bearing Witness to the Shoah, 1941-1946: Textual Evidence and Preliminary Conclusions

(Maxim D. Shrayer

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Anglicized, reader-friendly spellings of Russian personal and geographical names are used in the main text of the paper; if a name has already gained a common spelling in English, this spelling is then used (e.g. Ehrenburg, not Erenburg). In the bibliographical references, a simplified version of the US Library of Congress transliteration system is used.

In some cases, preference is given to literary, not literal English translations of poetic texts. Even though the literary translations I quote are metrically precise and otherwise relatively close to the Russian originals, one cannot rely on the English texts alone to draw accurate conclusions about the poem’s structure, meaning and significance. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from the Russian are mine. Literary translations of verse are printed as verse, whereas literal translations of verse are printed as prose.

Unless stated otherwise, in the bibliography I list only the publications I have examined de visu, the latter circumstance being particularly significant in the case of original wartime publications in regional or army newspapers, some of which are very difficult to locate.

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4.1 Introduction

For much of the first three years of the war against Nazi Germany, known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet Union fought the enemy on its own territories. About 3 million of all the total Soviet wartime losses at present estimated at nearly 27 million were Jews. Nearly half of the almost 6 million victims of the Shoah were Jews who had been living on the territory of the Soviet Union at the time of the Nazi invasion on June 22, 1941. I mention this not to divide the dead by refusing to commit lip service to the old Soviet rhetoric on Jewish wartime victimhood, but rather to represent a legacy of the Shoah in the Soviet Union, a legacy with which the country did not deal on the national level until its very last years. Jews and Roma were the only ethnic groups that the Nazis targeted for complete annihilation in the occupied Soviet territories. While the horrors of Auschwitz-Birkenau or Treblinka are widely known, to this day there is much less popular awareness of the countless yars, ravines, out-skirts, ditches, and vacant lots throughout the occupied Soviet territories where the death squads, Einsatzgruppen, assisted by individuals recruited from the local populations, murdered Jewish people. The Shoah by bullet is the term now used to describe a low-tech stage of the Holocaust occurring in the first months of the occupation of the Soviet territories, before the industrialization of the Holocaust, the gas chambers, the Aktion Reinhard death camps in Poland. The Shoah became the Shoah in the weeks and months following the broad Nazi advances all along the Soviet border, from the Baltics in the northwest to the Crimea and Black Sea in the south. Decimated were Jewish populations of entire countries, such as Lithuania, of entire regions, towns, and villages in Belarus, Ukraine, the Crimea, and writers bearing witness to such devastation frequently groped for words. Consider this point of comparison. As Isaac Babel traveled with the Red Army troops in 1920, during the Polish-Soviet war, he witnessed and lamented the destruction of traditional Jewish life in Ukraine. “There are no bees left in Volyn,” Babel wrote in the story “The Way to Brody” from Red Cavalry. Such an allegorical mourning, with bees substituted for the Jews of Volyn, was central to Babel’s artistic method and vision. In “Ukraine without Jews,” an essay composed almost twenty years later, another Jewish-Russian writer, Vasily Grossman, disavowed artistry in the name of bearing witness. “There are no Jews in Ukraine,” reads a sentence in the opening section of his essay. Grossman came to Ukraine in 1943 with a pitch perfect memory, an aching Jewish conscience, and immeasurable guilt over not having saved his own mother, who had been murdered in Berdichev, in September 1941, along with 20,000 other Jews. In order to write about the Shoah, Grossman temporarily rejected all tropes.

The Western mind—and the Israeli mind, for that matter—still views the representation of


the Shoah in the Soviet Union under the following mantra: Nazi genocidal atrocities and specified Jewish losses were obscured by Soviet historiography and silenced in the Soviet media and culture. Depending on what sources one is looking at, this is quite true, not quite true, or quite untrue. The Holocaust literature created and published in the Soviet Union in 1941-1946 remains largely unknown and severely understudied. Western students of Holocaust literature tend to be familiar with the journalism, non-fiction and fiction of Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman, and also with their work on The Black Book. On the whole, Holocaust historians and students of modern Jewish literature are much less aware of literary works written and published in the Russian language, and especially uninformed about wartime Jewish-Russian poetry. I learned this firsthand as I worked on an Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature. A section titled “War and Terror, 1939-1953,” concludes the first volume of the anthology and features works by Jewish-Russian authors who wrote and published about the Shoah in 1941-1946. During those years Jewish-Russian poets created a highly significant body of texts based on the poets’ firsthand experiences as witnesses, on-site investigators, and interviewers of survivors and eyewitnesses of genocide committed by the Nazis, their allies, and local collaborators—on the occupied Soviet territories and in the death camps of Eastern and Central Europe. The earliest texts written and published about the Shoah were poems by Jewish-Russian poet-soldiers and military journalists bearing witness to the immediate aftermath of the killings.

I am currently at work on a book about the experience of Jewish-Russian poets during the Shoah, and this paper sums up some of the principal textual evidence while also attempting to draw preliminary conclusions. With my research I seek to highlights an important albeit virtually unexamined dimension of the Soviet peoples’ awareness and understanding of the Shoah. By probing key Holocaust literary texts in the Soviet cultural mainstream, I hope to add a new perspective to the pioneering work of scholars of the Shoah in the Soviet Union, among them Zvi Gitelman (official and unofficial Soviet policies on discussing the Shoah), Carol and John Garrard (Vasily Grossman reporting on the Shoah and making “art from agony”), Joshua Rubenstein (Ilya Ehrenburg, the Jewish Antifascist Committee, and The Black Book), Ilya Altman (of the memory of the Shoah in the USSR), Kiril Feferman (the Shoah in the Soviet mindset), David Shneer (Soviet Jewish photographers documenting the Shoah), Karel C. Berkoff (the coverage of the Shoah in Soviet newspapers), Arlen Blum (the Shoah and Soviet censorship)


and others, while also building on my own previous investigations of Holocaust memory in Soviet culture.\textsuperscript{121}

For many Jewish-Russian poets, the Nazi invasion was both a rude awakening and a double call to action. Many Jewish-Russian authors served as military journalists during the war, becoming voices of the Soviet people fighting both at the war front and at the home front. Some of them viewed the war and their calling not only in Russian and Soviet, but also in markedly Jewish terms. Consider the case of the poet and translator Arkady Shteynberg (1907-1984), born in Odessa and mentored in his youth by the illustrious Eduard Bagritsky. Shteynberg volunteered in 1941 and was a major by the end of the war. Having previously written with subtlety and power of his Odessan Jewish youth, Shteynberg did not reflect on the Shoah in his literary work. He served in the army’s Seventh Department, whose task was to “demoralize the enemy,” and subsequently headed a special occupation political unit in Romania until his arrest, in October 1944, on fabricated charges of spying. In a 1979 interview (published in 1997), Shteynberg referred to the war as “his happiest years” because he knew that “if we do not win [the war], that would be the end of the world, and, God knows, what else…” \textsuperscript{122} Although the new sense of mission (and commission) was liberating to some of the Jewish-Russian authors,

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it expressed itself in different ways, not all of them literary.

I commence my examination of Jewish-Russian poets bearing witness to the Shoah in 1940-1941 and subsequently zoom in on the years 1944-45, during which the Soviet people’s direct and indirect knowledge of the Shoah expanded, while a remembrance of the Jewish victims was still tolerated in official Soviet culture. Historians have previously examined the presentation and treatment of the Shoah in Soviet media, specifically in the central civilian and military newspapers. Yet to the best of my knowledge, no one has studied poetry published in 1941-1945 as a source of knowledge and information about the Shoah, even though poems routinely appeared in Soviet newspapers and magazines alongside the journalistic coverage of Nazi genocidal atrocities. In some cases, Jewish-Russian poets were able to speak of specified Jewish losses with greater openness and clarity than did many of their cohorts in Soviet wartime journalism and prose fiction. The poets’ triple consciousness—Soviet, Russian, and Jewish—was nowhere as explicit as in their mournfully militant lyrics about the Shoah. In surveying the Jewish-Russian literary response to the Shoah, one needs to account at least for these five factors: 1) the representation of the facts and details of the Shoah, 2) the articulation of specific Jewish losses, 3) the presence or absence of overt Jewish and/or Judaic references, 4) the poetic voice and the poets’ use of the collective pronoun’s ambiguity: “we” Soviets, “we” Russians, “we” Jews, “we” poets, “we” Jewish-Russian poets and so forth, 5) significant differences in the specificity of language in the poems originally published during and right after the war and in subsequent reprintings.

Poems are a special medium of art and of transmitting information, a medium in some ways less susceptible to censorship or self-censorship, and also one that is capable of saying more in fewer lines—and saying it more openly and overtly. Furthermore, the censorial and self-censorial framework of each Jewish-Russian Holocaust poem tells its own powerful story. As I will argue below, the Jewish-Russian poets, Ilya Ehrenburg (1891-1967), Ilya Selvinsky (1899-1968), Pavel Antokolsky (1896-1978), and Lev Ozerov (1914-1996) most prominently, were successful at resisting official Soviet tendencies to obfuscate and silence the Shoah.

4.2 Ilya Selvinsky, 1941-1944

The Nazi invasion and the war on Soviet territories put to the test not only the talents and voices of the Jewish-Russian poets, but also their very sense of historical and cultural identity. None other than Ilya Ehrenburg, the writer who became a principal voice of anti-Nazi resistance, set the tone on August 24, 1941, when he read the essay “To the Jews” at a rally of Jewish people in Moscow—a rally at which Boris Pasternak was also invited to speak, but declined to attend. Pasternak apparently explained his refusal as his unwillingness to limit his antifascist

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feelings to the Jewish question.) “My mother tongue is Russian,” Ehrenburg said at the rally. “I am a Russian writer. Like all Russians, I am now defending my homeland. But the Hitlerites have reminded me of something else: my mother’s name was Hannah. I am a Jew. I say this with pride. Hitler hates us more than anything. And this adorns us” (tr. Joshua Rubenstein).  


Institute in Moscow, he volunteered at the start of the war and was assigned to a newspaper at the Crimean Front. Selvinsky wanted and saw action, not just newsroom, in the Crimea, on the Black Sea coast, in the North Caucasus. He joined the Communist Party in 1941, showed personal bravery in battle, and was twice wounded and decorated. In November 1943, soon after the Soviet troops had liberated Kiev, he was summoned to Moscow. Both Selvinsky and his commanders assumed he was to be decorated again. Instead he was brought to appear at the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and chastised for writing “harmful” and “anti-artistic” works. Stalin himself allegedly made an appearance at the meeting. A draft of a resolution of the Secretariat stated that “Selvinsky slanders the Russian people [...] and offers a slanderously perverted treatment of the war.”

Two resolutions targeting both the publications where Selvinsky’s work had appeared and Selvinsky’s works were passed on December 2, 1943 and December 3, 1943, respectively. An unprecedented thing happened: lieutenant-colonel Selvinsky was punitively “demobilized” from the army. On February 10, 1944 the Secretariat of the Central Committee issued a separate, and even more devastating, resolution, “About I. Selvinsky’s Poem ‘To whom Russia sang a lullaby…’”: “[In the poem ‘To whom Russia sang a lullaby…” [“Kogo baiukala Rossiia...”] by I. Selvinsky, published in the magazine Banner (nos. 7-8 for 1943), egregious political errors are contained. Selvinsky in his poem slanders the Russian people. [...] Comrade Selvinsky shall be relieved of his duties as a military journalist until comrade Selvinsky has proven with his creative work that he is capable of understanding the life and struggle of the Soviet people.”

This resolution on Selvinsky might have been the only wartime resolution of the Central Committee to single out and punish one Soviet poet. Although the Selvinsky poems which were formally targeted in the resolutions, “To Russia” (“Rossii”), “To whom Russia sang a lullaby…,” and “Episode” (“Epizod”), referenced Jewishness and the Shoah in a rather opaque fashion as compared to “I Saw It!” (“Ia eto videl!”) or to “Kerch’,” Selvinsky’s principal poems about the Shoah in the Crimea, there is reason to believe that his case was meant to intimidate other writers into silence about specific Nazi crimes against the Jews. In retrospect it seems rather suggestive that Selvinsky’s troubles began to surge in the summer of 1943, when, within several months from the Soviet victory at Stalingrad, one distinctly observes a general shift in the official, if not publicly announced, Soviet policy on writing about both specified Jewish losses and Jewish valor.

I will now turn to some of the evidence from the poetry Selvinsky wrote and published in 1941-43. The Crimean peninsula, owing to its strategic position, was the site of some of the...
bloodiest fighting in World War II. At the end of December 1941 Soviet troops mounted a landing operation in the areas of Kerch and Feodosia. By January 1 1942 the Kerch peninsula had been liberated; it remained under Soviet control until the middle of May 1942, when the Nazis retook it. In the words of David Shneer, “On December 31 [1942], the city was one of the first areas with a significant prewar Jewish population to be liberated from Nazi occupation, which meant that it was one of the first places where Soviet soldiers, journalists, and photographers saw with their own eyes the effects of Nazi occupation and the war against European Jewry.”

In the first week of January 1942 Selvinsky arrived in the area of Kerch with the staff of the newspaper. Soon thereafter the poet came upon the aftermath of the then recent Nazi atrocities and responded with the poem “I Saw It!” (“Ia eto videl!”). In January 1942 Selvinsky recorded in his diary: “I got to Kerch with the landing troops of the second echelon. The city is half-destroyed. That’s that—we’ll restore it. But near the village of Bagerovo in an anti-tank ditch—[were] 7000 executed women, children, old men and others. And I saw them. Now I do not have the strength to write about it in prose. Nerves can no longer react. What I could—I have expressed in verse.” Selvinsky writes of the mass murder of Jews outside Kerch in the course of several days at the end of November and beginning of December 1941. The Bagerovo (Kerch) massacre received worldwide publicity. On January 6, 1942 Soviet Premier Vyacheslav Molotov pointed to it, alongside references to the Babi Yar massacre and mass executions of Jews in Lvov, Odessa, Kamenets-Podol’sk, Dnepropetrovsk and other Ukrainian cities, in a note on German atrocities—perhaps the only such official Soviet wartime note to speak more or less openly of specified Jewish losses on Soviet territories.
According to eyewitnesses, Selvinsky took notes for and began to compose the poem “I Saw It!” at Bagerovo while standing over an anti-tank ditch filled with executed victims. The poem was printed on January 23, 1942 in Bolshevik, the party newspaper of the Krasnodar region. It was immediately reprinted in Red Star, the army’s central organ, on February 27 1942, and in the January—February 1942 issue of October (Oktiabr’), a leading Moscow literary journal, and a number of times throughout 1942-1943, gaining wide acclaim. “I Saw It!” was also distributed on leaflets and reached a mass audience of Soviet military men. Goebbels attacked Selvinsky in a radio address, disputing Selvinsky’s account and promising “the so-called Soviet writers […] a noose.” Selvinsky responded with the poem “A Reply to Goebbels.”

In the opening quatrain of “I Saw It!” Selvinsky introduced himself as an eye-witness: “You could disregard people’s stories,/ Or disbelieve newspaper columns./ But I saw it! With my own eyes!/ Do you get it? Saw it! Myself!” (“Можно не слушать народных сказаний,/ Не верить gazetnym столбцам. Но я это видел! Своими глазами!/ Понимаете? Видел! Сам!”). In what was arguably the first Russian-language poem about Nazi atrocities against the Jews published in the Soviet Union, Selvinsky faced a number of challenges and made compromises. In giving the real victims lying in the ditch imaginary identities, he fashioned some as Slavs and others as Jews. He conjured up the image of a “pug-nosed” (“kurnosyi”) eleven-year-old boy by the name of “Kol’ka” (diminutive of Nikolay). Later in the poem Selvinsky described a “mauled Jewish woman” (“rasterzannaia evreika”) lying in the ditch with her small child. In a letter to his wife, Selvinsky wrote about “I Saw It!” that he “hadn’t expressed even one hundredth of what [he] should have expressed.” How excruciatingly difficult it must have been to witness truthfully while complying with the demands of military censorship and one’s internal censor:


135 “Il’ia L’vovich Sel’vinskii,” in Russkie sovetskie pisateli. Poety, 40. I have not examined the publication in Bolshevik (Krasnodar) de visu.

136 See, for instance, Lev Ozerov’s article “Sila slova,” Moskovskii bol’shevik, 11 December 1942.

137 Babenko, 30; see also I. L. Mikhailov and N. G. Zakharevich’s commentary in Il’ia Sel’vinskii, Izbrannye proizvedeniia, 1973, 900-901.

138 See Sel’vinskii, “Ia eto videl!” Krasnaia zvezda 27 February 1942: 3; Oktiabr’ 1-2 (1942): 65-66; in Ballady, plakaty i pesni (Krasnodar: Kraevoe izdatel’stvo, 1942), 87-92; Zverstva nemetskikh fashistov v Kerchi. Sbornik rasskazov postradavshikh i ochevidcev (Sukhumi: Krasnyi Krym, 1943), 33-38; Sel’vinskii. Ballady i pesni (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1943), 42-45; Sel’vinskii, Voennaia lirika (Tashkent: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo UzSSR, 1943), 18-22; Sel’vinskii, Krym Kavkaz Kuban’. Stikhii. (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1947), 7-12; Sel’vinskii, Lirika i dramy (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo khudozhestvennoi literaturey, 1947), 51-55. See Works Cited for information on the publication history of “I Saw It!” I quote the text of Selvinsky’s “I Saw It!” from its publication in Oktiabr’ 1-2 (1942): 65-66. A detailed comparison all the versions of the poem goes beyond my purposes in this paper.

139 Quoted in Babenko, 25.
“The ditch... Can one speak about it in a long poem? 7000 corpses... Jews... Slavs...” There was something tortured in the way, in some of the post-Stalinist editions, Selvinsky changed “Jews” to “Semites” in this line (or restored “Semites”), as if to evoke Nazi racist ideology in the context of the historical legacy of antisemitism. The change from “7000 tysiąch trupów... Ewrej... Slawianie...” to “7000 tysiąch trupów... Semity... Slawianie...” did not alter the line metrically, but it did change the meaning significantly.

In 1998 the poet Evdokia Olshanskaya reminisced about the early spring of 1944: “My sister [...] had already returned to Kiev from evacuation. [...] One time she sent me a poem by Ilya Selvinsky. It was called ‘I Saw It!’ [...] It told about the execution of Jews in the Crimea. But Kievans received it as a description of the tragedy of Babi Yar [...]. Therefore in Kiev the poem “I Saw It!” was passed from hand to hand, people copied it, memorized it, which is how it had reached me.”\textsuperscript{140} Olshanskaya’s comment testifies to the way Selvinsky’s poem about the Nazi atrocities in his native Crimea spoke to the readers of the Shoah by bullet on all of the occupied Soviet territories.

Later in 1942, Selvinsky revisited the Bagerovo massacre in the poem “Kerch,” a much more complex literary text, if such comparisons are worth anything, given the gravity of the matter. “Kerch” would remain unpublished until December 1943, when it ran in \textit{Forward for the Motherland} (\textit{Vpered za Rodinu}), the newspaper of the Separate Maritime Army, and would not reach a wider Soviet audience until February 1945, when it was published in the prominent Moscow monthly \textit{Banner} (\textit{Znamia}). Unlike “I Saw It!” the poem “Kerch” makes no mention of the identity of the victims. Selvinsky renders the victims in ethnically non-specific terms, bestowing upon the thousands of victims of the Bagerovo massacre the collective identity of “the dead” (“mertvetsy”). At the same time, official rhetoric is notably absent from “Kerch.” That Selvinsky was content with the results may also be inferred from the fact that he made no substantive changes in the text of the poem—this as compared to the extensive changes in the published versions of “I Saw It!”\textsuperscript{141}

The poem opens with a reminiscence of Selvinsky’s Crimean youth. As Selvinsky looks at Kerch liberated by Soviet troops in 1942 (temporarily, as it turned out to be), he is reminded of its ancient Greek name, Panticapaeum. Then follows a particularly gorgeous description of ancient Mount Mithridates, and of life in the ancient Greek city as Selvinsky envisioned it:

\begin{verbatim}
В лиловом и оранжевом тумане
Над морем воспарил амфитеатр
Пленительного города. Гора
С каким-то белым и высоким храмом
Курилась облаками. Дальний мыс
Чернел над хризолитовым заливом.
А очертанья зданий на заре
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{140} Ol’shanskaja.

It would be tempting to suggest that Selvinsky implicitly equates the devastation of Bosporus by Goths and Huns, whom representatives of Graeco-Roman civilization regarded as hordes of barbarians, with the destruction brought upon modern Crimea by the Nazis, whom the Soviet press commonly labeled as barbarians and ruffians. I suspect however, that Selvinsky’s point is not to equate the Nazis with the tribes whom the Greeks viewed as wild and uncivilized. He rather wanted to establish that Nazism had developed in culturally refined Germany, in the lap of Western civilization, an apparent to Greece and Rome. Selvinsky’s point, then, was to suggest, preemptively, before he described the site of the Bagerovo massacre, that the legacy of high culture and beauty had not prevented the Nazis from committing their crimes.

The heart of the poem focused on the problem of bearing witness to the Shoah. A survivor of the massacre who has lost his mother, wife, and two daughters points Selvinsky and his colleagues to the site:

Далеким голосом (таким далеким,  
Что нам казалось, будто бы не он,  
А кто-то за него) — он нам поведал  
Пещерным слогом каменного века,  
Рубя на точках:  
“В десяти верстах  
Тут Багерово есть. Одно село.  
Не доходя, направо будет ров.  
Противотанковый. Они туда  
Семь тысяч граждан.

In a faraway voice (so faraway  
That we felt it wasn’t he who spoke,  
But someone else spoke for him) — he told us  
In caveman’s speech of Stone Age intonations,  
Incising the full stops: “Six miles from here.
There’s Bagerovo. A small town.
Before you get there, to the right there’s a ditch.
Anti-tank. They took over there
Seven thousand folks [...].

In Selvinsky’s account, the poet’s individual I, both the voice of identity and the point of view, morphs into a collective “we” of the witnesses:

Мы тут же и пошли. Писатель Ромм,
Фотограф, я и критик Гофсеншефер.

We set out right away. The writer Romm.
The photographer, myself, and the critic Goffenshefer.143

All three literary practitioners in the poem (Ilya Selvinsky, Aleksandr Romm, and Veniamin Goffenshefer) were Jews, and in light of David Shneer’s research it appears that the photographer Selvinsky refers to was also a Jew.144 This is crucial evidence for our understanding of the role Jewish littérateurs and photographers played in bearing witness to the Shoah.

The military journalists approach the site of the recent mass murder:

Под утро мы увидели долину
Всю в пестряди какой-то. Это были
Расползшиеся за ночь мертвецы.
Я очень бледно это описал
В стихотворении “Я ЭТО ВИДЕЛ!”
И больше не могу ни слова.
Керчь...

By sunrise we had come upon a valley
All covered in some dappled cotton fabric. Those were
The dead who had crawled out during the night.
I have described this very hazily
In the poem “I SAW IT!”
And I cannot add even a single word.
Kerch...

I find it particularly moving that Selvinsky acknowledges the limitations of his previous poem about the murder of Jews at the Bagerovo anti-tank ditch. A Soviet photographer takes pictures of the massacre and reports (and, under pressure, manipulates) the truth through images. Selvinsky and his literary colleagues, Jews all three, find themselves at a loss:


143 See Shneer, 2010, 21-32; see Mark Redkin [phot.], “Strashnye prestupleniia gitlerovskikh palachei,” Ogonek 4 February 1942: 4. At the Bagerovo trench Selvinsky might have encountered the photographers Dmitrii Bal’termants, Leonid Iablonskii, Izrail’ Ozerskii, Mark Redkin, or Mark Turovskii.
“Какое зверство!” — говорит писатель,
И эхом отозвался критик: “Зверство”.
Их ремесло — язык. Стихия — речь.
Они разворочили весь словарь
И выбрали одно и то же: “Зверство”.

“What beastliness!” the writer slowly says.
And then the critic echoes: “Beastliness.”
Language is their trade. Their element, speech.
They have rummaged through the whole dictionary
To choose the selfsame word: “Beastliness.”

The word “beastliness” (zverstvo) does not cut it for Selvinsky. If not beastliness, then
what? “Kerch,/ You are the mirror, in which the abyss has been reflected” (“Керчь!/ Ты —
зеркало, где отразилась бездна”) writes Selvinsky. What common or uncommon words is the
Jewish-Russian poet-soldier to choose in order both to witness and to describe the “abyss”?

With this question in mind, I would like to turn to Jewish-Russian Holocaust poetry written
and published between the summer of 1944 and the summer of 1946.

During those two years the issue of Jewish historical memory—and, specifically, of
Holocaust memory—became acutely significant to many Soviet Jews. The wartime surge of
Jewish-Soviet patriotism coupled with a publishing window of opportunity during the vic-
torious year and the year following it sometimes engendered a curious blend of Soviet and
Judaic rhetoric. For a number of poets the years 1944-46 were the peak of their lifetime en-
gagement with Jewish topics. Very indicative of this tendency is the story of chapter 18 of the
epic poem Your Victory (Tvoia pobeda) by Margarita Aliger (1915-1992). In 1944 Aliger pre-
pared the materials on the destruction of Brest-Litovsk’s Jewish community for the Ehrenburg-
Grossman Black Book. Composed in 1944-45, Your Victory originally appeared in Moscow, in the
September 1945 issue of Banner. In a section of the poem, Aliger’s lyrical protagonist visits her
mother, evacuated to a small town on the Kama River in the Urals. In the midst of their reun-
ion, the daughter dialogues with her mother about her Jewish reawakening in the context of
both the war and of the Shoah:

“[… ] Who is coming to pursue us, mama?
Who are we, to whom do we belong?”
Stoking fire to warm her cold fingers,
arranging everything to live anew,
mother answered me, “So you forgot it?
How dare you let yourself?! We are Jews.”
(here and hereafter tr. Sibelan Forrester)
The daughter, a Jewish-Russian poet, continues:
“[… ] Mama, it’s true, I knew but had forgotten,
couldn’t yet imagine or allow,
think that one could only glance in passing,
in secret, on the sky, to see the sky,
as behind us they are coming, chasing,
drive us to Treblinka barefoot, smother
us with gas, right there as we stand,
burn and shoot and hang us—they murder,
tread our blood into the dirt and sand.

“We are a people prostrate in the dust.
We are a people trodden by our foe...”
Why? And what for? Is that truly us?
My people, there is something else I know.
I recall the scholars and the poets
from other countries, dialects, and years,
who loved life as little children know it,
noble jokers who through all their tears
were generous with talents and ambitions,
didn’t hoard the best strength of their soul.
I know the doctors and musicians,
laborers—the great as well as small,
of the Maccabees the brave descendants,
flesh and blood sons of their ancestors,
thousands of Jews went into battle,
Russian commanders, Russian soldiers too [...].”

The first authorized version of Aliger's Holocaust poem was reprinted twice in 1946–1947. Its subsequent publishing history, which lies outside the scope of this paper, is a history of obfuscating Jewish and Holocaust references to the point of their utter obliteration—and of contradicting the messages of the original version.

Why are the years 1944-1946 so remarkable for our understanding of the history of both Jewish-Russian poetry and Holocaust memory in the Soviet Union? Although as early as 1942 Jewish-Russian poets decried atrocities committed against the Jews on the occupied territories, in the summer of 1944 Soviet troops began to liberate Nazi death camps. Military journalists and writers traveled with the advancing Soviet troops beyond the pre-1941 Soviet borders. Just how much of a shock the sight of the Nazi death camps must have been even for the best-informed among the writers and journalists, who had already witnessed the aftermath of the Shoah by bullet, can be gleaned from Ehrenburg’s famous memoir People, Years, Life. Ehrenburg included an account of visiting the site of the Trostyanets death camp in Belarus: “[...] I saw Trostyanets. There Hitlerites buried Jews in the ground—Jews of Minsk and Jews brought from Prague, Vienna. The doomed ones were brought here in mobile gas chambers [...] I saw charred women’s bodies, a little girl, hundreds of corpses. [...] Then I did not yet know about Majdanek, Treblinka, or Auschwitz. I stood there, unable to move [...] It is hard to write about this—no words.”

Seeking and being unable to find words fit to document the aftermath of the Shoah becomes a leitmotif in the works by poet-witnesses.

In early 1944 Ehrenburg’s short essay “Nationkillers” (“Narodoubiitsy”) was published in Banner as a preface to a selection of testimonies about Nazi atrocities. Note also that by the summer of 1944 the work of the Black Book project was in full swing, and Ehrenburg managed to involve a number of Jewish-Russian poets, among them Margarita Aliger, Pavel Antokolsky, Vera Inber, and Lev Ozerov, in preparing the eyewitness accounts and writing about the Shoah. In July 1944 the Soviet troops came to Majdanek, which the Nazis had attempted to demol-


146 Il’ia Erenburg, Liudi, gody, zhizn’. Vospominaniiia (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1990), 2: 337.

ish in haste, leaving the gas chambers standing." In the summer of 1944 the Soviet troops also came to the Aktion Rheinhard death camps, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka, all three camps having been nearly dismantled in 1943. Vasily Grossman was with the Soviet troops in August 1944 when they came upon the fields of powdered bones on the site of the Treblinka death camp. In November 1944 Grossman’s documentary tale “The Hell of Treblinka” (“Treblinskii ad”) appeared in Banner, publicizing the truth about the Nazi genocide of the Jews. In his article “To Remember!” (“Pomnit!’”) published in Pravda on December 17, 1944, Ehrenburg put an accurate number, almost 6 million Jews, on the toll of the Shoah. And he presented the murder of Jews on the occupied Soviet territories and in the death camps in Poland as part of the same genocidal Nazi plan. In January 1945, with the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Soviet troops and the writers traveling with them encountered overwhelming evidence of the Nazi extermination industry and the so-called “Final Solution.” After Auschwitz-Birkenau came the other death and concentration camps in Poland, in the Baltic lands, and in Germany.

In the remaining pages I will focus on the Holocaust poems by Ehrenburg, Selvinsky, Ozerov, and Antokoly written in 1944-45. In my closing remarks, I will discuss the price the Jewish-Russian poets paid for bearing witness to the Shoah. These poems were originally published in 1945-46 in three leading Moscow-based magazines. By the standards of the time—and by any standards—their official print runs were large: 30,000 for Novyi Mir in January 1945, when Ehrenburg’s cycle of six Holocaust poems appeared there; 60,000 for Banner in 1945, when Selvinsky’s “Kerch” and Antokolsky’s “Death Camp” (“Lager’ unichtozheniia”) were published there, in February and October, respectively; 60,000 for October in 1945-1946, when Selvinsky’s “Kandava” and Ozerov’s long poem Babi Yar appeared there, in January-February 1945 and March-April 1946, respectively. These publications spoke of the Shoah to a mass and diverse audience of Soviet readers. They owed themselves mainly to the historical context of the war moving beyond the Soviet borders in 1944-45 and the liberation of the Nazi death camps, but to same extent to a brief cultural liberalization in 1945 and early 1946. The window of opportunity lasted from 1944 the late summer of 1946. Zhdanovshchina, the onslaught of ideological and cultural reaction so known after the party’s secretary for ideology Andrey Zhdanov, began in August 1946, to be followed, in 1948, by the onset of the so-called anticosmopolitan campaign. The brief interlude of publishing about the Shoah came to halt by 1947, with the steamrolling of The Black Book.

4.3 Ilya Ehrenburg

In January 1945 Ilya Ehrenburg published a cycle of six poems about memory, mourning, and artistic response to catastrophe, in the flagship Moscow literary monthly Novyi Mir. Ehrenburg’s voice of anti-Nazi resistance was nowhere as ruthless as in his wartime journalism and nonfiction read and heard by millions. While fighting the Nazis with his quill pen, Ehrenburg arguably did more than any other writer to bring to the world the truth about the Nazi atroc-
ities. Throughout the war, Ehrenburg worked tirelessly as a journalist and leading Soviet anti-Nazi propagandist, while continuing to compose lyrical poetry. We know quite a bit about Ehrenburg’s experiences at reporting the Shoah in his articles, speeches, and works of fiction, as well as about the key role Ehrenburg played in the Black Book project. Much less has been made of the significance of his wartime poetry in disseminating the facts of the Shoah, and yet in 1941-1946 Ehrenburg wrote and published an astonishing number of poems with explicit and coded references to the Shoah by bullet on the occupied territories and to the industrialized murder of Jews in the Nazi death camps. Ehrenburg’s experience as a witness to the war and Shoah differed from the experience of his colleagues such as Vasily Grossman, who spent much of the war’s four years as a posted frontline correspondent in the trenches, or Ilya Selvinsky, who took part in military action from the summer of 1941 through the autumn of 1943, was punitively removed from the front, and allowed back to the front only in the spring of 1945. Many of Ehrenburg’s wartime articles and dispatches were based on the information that reached Ehrenburg in Moscow. So more valuable, for the purposes of my investigation, are Ehrenburg’s writings on the war and Shoah that were directly informed by his visits to the then recently liberated occupied Soviet territories in 1943-1944.

Of the six poems published in Novyi mir in January 1945, Ehrenburg had composed at least two in 1944, and the rest in early January 1945. Originally, the cycle that Ehrenburg had submitted consisted of at least seven poems, the earliest composed in 1943. As of early January 1945, Soviet troops had not yet liberated Auschwitz-Birkenau. They would approach the complex in the middle of January and liberate the camp on January 27, 1945. The minutes of the January 16, 1945 meeting of Novyi mir’s editorial board have preserved some details of the cycle’s publication history: “Discussed: About Ehrenburg’s poems. [K.] Fedin: The poems are publicistic. They are suitable for publication. […] [V.] Shcherbina: To drop the poem “Byl chas odin—dusha oslabla….” [“There was an hour when the soul had grown weak…”]. In this poem the author appears to be taking upon himself some blame for the world war.”

Among the six short poems in the cycle was Ehrenburg’s poem about Babi Yar (“K chemu slova i chto pero…” [“What use are words and quill pens…”]), indispensible to students of Holocaust memory. Yet Ehrenburg’s Novyi mir cycle has never been examined as a whole or properly contextualized and historicized. In Novyi mir the cycle bore the nondescriptive title “Stikhi” (“Poems”); the six poems printed there in January 1945 were all untitled and bore the


151 Here and hereafter, I am indebted to Boris Frezinskii’s commentary in his academic edition of Ehrenburg’s poetry, I’ia Erenburg, Stikhotvoreniia i poemy, ed. B. ia. Frezinskii (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt [Novaia biblioteka poeta, Bol’shaia seriia], 2000); see especially 736-745. See also N. G. Zakharenko’s commentary in Erenburg, 1977, 436-440.

152 Quoted in Frezinskii, 740. The dropped poem, “Byl chas odin—dusha oslabla…” (“There was an hour when the soul had grown weak…”), was composed in 1943 and would be published in the Leningrad-based magazine Zvezda (Star) in the summer of 1945: Erenburg, “Stikhi voennykh let,” Zvezda 7 (1945): 5; also see Erenburg, ed. Frezinskii, 743.
numbers 1-6.

During the Soviet period, some but not all of the individual poems in the Novyi mir cycle were subsequently reprinted. Even though Poem 1 appeared—in modified form and under the title “Babi Yar”—in several of Ehrenburg’s lifetime collections and editions and became one of his most famous texts, the cycle has never since been reprinted in its entirety, either in Ehrenburg’s life or subsequently.153 Both circumstances speak to the cycle’s paramount signifi-


Ehrenburg’s own arrangement of the cycle’s six poems in his subsequent lifetime editions may have added to the textological confusion. In volume 4 of his 9-volume Sochinenia (1953), Poem 1 is published as “Babi Yar,” whereas Poem 3 appears under the same number in a selection of eight numbered poems, which does not feature any other poems from the January 1945 volume of Novyi mir. In Stikhi 1938-1958 (1959), three of the cycle’s six poems are reprinted, but neither one appears as part of a numbered cycle or selection. In volume 3 of Ehrenburg’s 9-volume Sobranie sochinenii (1964), four of the Novyi mir cycle’s six poems are reprinted, two as stand-alone poems, and two in different cycles: Poem 5 as the first of two numbered poems in a cycle titled “V fevrale 1945” (“In February 1945”), and poem 6 as the third of three numbered poems in a cycle titled “9 maia 1945” (“9 May 1945”). Note also that in Stikhi 1938-1958 (1959) Ehrenburg published, under the title “In February 1945,” only the first of the two poems he would later group into the cycle “In February 1945” in volume 3 of the 9-volume Sobranie sochinenii (1964). In Poems 1938-1958 (1959), the cycle of two numbered poems titled “9 May 1945” does not include Poem 6, whereas in 1964 Ehrenburg (and his editors) would include Poem 6 as the last of the three poems in the cycle also titled “9 May 1945.”

A major landmark in the publication history of Ehrenburg’s poetry was the 1977 edition of his Poems in Biblioteka poeta (Poet’s Library). Prepared and edited by the Jewish-Russian critic Benedikt Sarnov, who would later write a book about Ehrenburg, and by the bibliographer N. G. Zakharenko, who had coedited the 1972 Poet’s Library edition of Il’ya Selvinsky’s poetry, the 1977 volume took stock of Ehrenburg’s many lifetime volumes and periodical publications and also referenced Ehrenburg’s archival manuscripts and typescripts. In the Sarnov/Zakharenko edition, Poem 2 precedes Poem 1, but is followed by Poem 3 and Poem 4, all four appearing as stand-alone texts, with other stand-alone poems placed between them, without any indication that Poems 1, 2, 3, and 4 might be connected or related. At the same time, Poem 5 appears as a single two-poem cycle “In February 1945,” exactly as it was published in volume 3 of Sobranie sochinenii (1964), whereas Poem 6 is included as No. 3 in the cycle “9 May 1945,” the same way as it stands in the 1964 volume. As Zakharenko notes in his commentary (440), Ehrenburg’s papers contained a typescript with a selection of poems titled “Stikhi fevralia 1945” (“Poems of February 1945”), but only the first of the two poems that appear in the typescript—Poems 1, 2, and 3—were included in the 1977 edition.
icance in the canon of Holocaust literature, for which the original publication of the six poems in the January 1945 Novyi mir cycle remains a defining circumstance. Soviet readers were originally exposed to Ehrenburg’s poems about the Shoah through the Novyi mir cycle.

As published Ehrenburg’s poems were not arranged in simple chronological order. Both the versification in the individual poems and their order and structural arrangement reveals a deliberateness of arrangement, an internal logic which augments the cycle’s rhetorical structure. One way of experiencing the cycle’s compositional unity is to identify some of its recurrent verbal motifs. For instance, the word yar, repeated twice in a row in Poem 1 and pointing to Babi Yar in Kiev, finds a not so distant echo in the adjective yarkii (bright) in Poem 5; “yar” (“ravine”) and “yarkii” (“bright”) are not etymologically related. One of the most striking motifs is that of the Shoah as “someone else’s” legacy—“memory,” “path,” and “woe.” Forms of the adjective “chuzhii” (“someone else’s”; “another’s”) punctuate Poems 1-3: “I carry someone else’s memory” (1); “You light someone else’s path with yourself” (2); “Someone else’s woe—like a gadfly”; “And what to do with it—someone else’s” (both in 3). Another recurrent verbal motif has to do with the physicality of the memories of desire and love. A reference to the poet’s imagined kissing of the hands of a woman who had died in the Shoah (“The hands of this beloved woman/ I used to kiss, a long time ago”) travels from Poem 1 to poem 5, where the poet sounds out a promise of physical enactment of desire: “There will be hands to hold and embrace,/ There will be lips to kiss...” Both the noun ruki (“hands) and the verb tselovat’ (“to kiss”) appear in Poem 1 and Poem 5 in exactly the same grammatical forms. Then there is the motif of fireworks, signaling an imminent celebration of victory over Nazism; this motif notably connects Poem 2 and Poem 4.

As Russia’s leading Ehrenburg scholar Boris Frezinskii remarked, referencing Poem 3 (“Chuzhoe gore, ono, kak ovod...” [“Someone else’s woe—like a gadfly...”]), Ehrenburg understood perfectly well that to “the [Soviet] state the Holocaust was ‘someone else’s woe.’” Indeed, we should take stock of the absence of the word “Jew” and its cognates from the cycle. Ehrenburg withheld an explicit reference to Babi Yar, communicating it through the use and repetition of the word yar, and broadened the scope of memorialization of the Shoah.

Kiev and Babi Yar occupied a special place in Ehrenburg’s wartime writings. With great difficulty, Ehrenburg was able to speak in print about the fall of Kiev to Nazi armies, in a short Red Star article published on September 27, 1941: “We will liberate Kiev. The enemy’s blood will wash the enemy’s footprints (tr. Joshua Rubenstein).” Kiev—and Babi Yar—was also a personal wound for Ehrenburg. Ehrenburg was born in Kiev in 1891 but grew up in Moscow, where his father, an engineer, moved the family in 1894. Following the February 1917 Revolution, Ehrenburg returned to Russia. He did not accept the Bolshevik coup and moved to Kiev, where he witnessed civil-war violence, including a pogrom. In Kiev Ehrenburg met and married Lyubov Kozintseva.

At Babi Yar outside Kiev, over 33,000 Jews were murdered on September 29-30 1941, and altogether as many as 100,000 people, about 90,000 of them Jewish, were killed through Poem 4, Poems 5, and Poem 6 of the 1945 Novyi mir cycle along with other texts. B. Ia. Frezinskii’s 2000 edition of Ehrenburg’s poetry supersedes all previous academic editions; yet it does not reconstruct Ehrenburg’s January 1945 Novyi mir cycle. Further textological considerations go beyond the scope of this paper.

154 Frezinskii, 57.

out the Nazi occupation. One of the best informed Soviet figures, Ehrenburg had known of Babi Yar early on. But he had to wait two years before he was able to visit Kiev and bear witness—soon after the Soviet troops liberated it on November 6, 1943. Before setting foot on Babi Yar in 1943, Ehrenburg had been making references to it in his articles, and he continued to do so throughout 1943-1945. Notably, in the reports on the Kharkov Trial, he spoke of the “dead [who] would rise from ditches and ravines [iz rvov i yarov]” to bear witness—in the liberated Soviet cities. Echoes of Babi Yar resound through the text of Ehrenburg’s article “To Remember!” (“Pomnit!”) published in Pravda on December 17, 1944, only weeks before the completion of the Novyi mir cycle: “In the countries and areas that they occupied the Germans murdered all the Jews [even] old people and infants. Ask a captured German, why his countrymen annihilated six million innocent people, and he will answer: ‘They are Jews. They are black (or red-haired). They have different blood.’ This started with vapid jokes, with street urchins’ yelling, with graffiti on the fences, and it led to Maidanek, Babi Yar, Treblinka, to ditches filled with corpses of children....” In the article Erhenburg put an accurate number on the toll of the Shoah and presented the murder of Jews on the occupied Soviet territories and in the death camps in Poland as part of the same genocidal Nazi plan and steeps the Shoah in the history of antisemitism. Having previously written about Babi Yar in his news reports and articles, Ehrenburg did not commemorate the victims of Babi Yar in poetry until 1944. This deferral of poetic commemoration of Babi Yar must have had something to do with an imperative to witness the aftermath before writing about it in poetry. Additionally, one should consider the disgust and horror with which Ehrenburg reacted to what he heard regarding a surge of antisemitism in Kiev during and after the occupation. Hirsh Smolar, a partisan commander from Minsk, recalled visiting Ehrenburg in Moscow in 1944: “Ehrenburg had just returned from Kiev and he was in a rotten mood […]. ‘This was my hometown,’ he told me, ‘and I will never go back there.’” Other eyewitnesses previously, and Holocaust historians recently, have written about the shock of recognizing—really not recognizing—Kiev after the Nazi occupation.

The extensive cultural legacy of Babi Yar has received previous critical attention. Let me

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157 For details, see Rubenstein, Tangled Loyalties, 209-210.


159 Ehrenburg, “Pomnit!” Pravda 14 December 1944.

160 Quoted in Rubenstein, Tangled Loyalties, 208-209.

161 For a new assessment, with a particular focus on Kiev, see Victoria Khiterer, “We Did Not Recognize Our Country: The Rise of Anti-Semitism in Ukraine before and after World War II (1937-1947),” forthcoming in Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry. I am grateful to Victoria Khiterer for sharing with me the manuscript of her article.

note in passing that Soviet authors, both Jewish and not, turned to the subject of Babi Yar during the wartime years, several as early as 1942–44. Among the early examples are the Ukrainian poem “Abraham” (1943) by Sava Holovanivskyi (1910–19??), a 1944 article and a 1947 story in Yiddish by Itsik Kipnis (1896–1974), episodes in the Yiddish-language epic Milkhome (War, first complete book edition 1948) by Perets Markish (1895–1952). In the postwar years, the commemoration—or, rather, the official non-commemoration—of the Babi Yar massacre became a cause célèbre of Soviet culture; in the West the public awareness of Soviet artists’ response to Babi Yar still tends to be limited to Evgeny Evtushenko’s poem “Babi Yar” (1961) and Dmitry Shostakovich Sympony No. 13 (1962) based in part on Evtushenko’s poem, and, to a lesser degree, to Anatoly Kuznetsov’s docunovel Babi Yar (1966). Ehrenburg’s record was to publish the first Russian-language poem about Babi Yar in January 1945. While Lev Ozerov, Ehrenburg’s younger contemporary, composed his Babi Yar, a long and detailed account of the September 1941 massacre, in 1944-45, it was not published until the spring of 1946. Ehrenburg would subsequently return to the subject of Babi Yar in a scene in his novel Storm (1947).

As I argue in these pages, Jewish-Russian writers paid a price for being able to tell the world in print about the Shoah on occupied Soviet territories. In the wartime years, as the official position shifted from a partial obfuscation of the Holocaust to a virtual ban on discussing Jewish victims apart from generalized Soviet victims, the price tended to be a compromistic rhetoric mixing historical truth with some historical fiction. In Selvinsky’s landmark poem “I Saw It!” (1942), murdered “Jews” and “Slavs” lie side by side in the Bagarkovo ditch, a site where thousands of Jews were murdered by bullet. In Grossman’s short story “The Old Teacher” (1943), Ukrainian collaboration with the Nazis is an exceptional, singular occurrence, whereas the vast majority of the local population on occupied Ukrainian territories display empathy or support for the Jews who are being annihilated. One of the most remarkable aspects of Ehrenburg’s Novyi mir cycle of January 1945 is that Ehrenburg spoke of the Shoah in code: the word Jew is nowhere mentioned, while obvious signs of the victims’ identity are missing throughout the cycle’s six poems. And yet, Babi Yar served as the historical, moral and aesthetic tuning fork of Ehrenburg’s January 1945 Novyi mir cycle. Consider the opening poem of the cycle:

163 The poetic cycle “Kirillovskie Iary” (1942) by the half-Russian, half-German Olga Anstei (1912-1985), who was in Kiev during the September 1941 Babi Yar massacre and left the occupied USSR during the war, was first published in 1948 in Munich. Note also that Liudmila Titova had apparently written about Babi Yar in 1941, but her poem was not discovered and published until the 1990s.

164 On this subject, see Shrayer, “Bearing Witness.”
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. Встаем,
Костями застучим — туда,
Где дышат хлебом и духами
Еще живые города.
Задуйте свет. Спустите флаги.
Мы к вам пришли. Не мы — овраги.

1.
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.
(here and hereafter, tr. Maxim D. Shrayer)

The power of the poem comes from the construction of the poet’s physical connection to
the victims of Babi Yar, and especially from the devastating note of desire, imagined, re-envisioned,
reconstructed. The language of desire burns the lips of the mourning Jewish-Russian
poet—and of the reader that whispers along. Yet the victims in the poem are unmarked in ei-
erther ethnic or religious terms. In the original publication, line 19 of Poem 1 reads: “Ia govoriu za
mertvykh, vstanem” (“I speak for the dead, let’s rise” or “I speak for the dead. We shall rise.”
In the version of the poem published in the collection Poems 1953-1958 (1959) and subsequent-
ly, Ehrenburg restored the title “Babi Yar.” However, line 19 now read as: “My podnatuzhim-
sia i vstanem” (“We shall gather strength and rise”). I think the change cuts both ways. In one
respect, it makes for a more Jewishly articulated call for action, consistent with Ehrenburg’s
previous calling on the Jews murdered in the Shoah to rise and bear witness to Nazi crimes.
Yet the absence of the bluntly programmatic words “I speak for the dead” signals an econo-
my of loss in Ehrenburg’s republication of his “Babi Yar” poem. According to Ehrenburg’s po-
em, the rite of mourning demands that the lights be turned off and the flags lowered, and this could also be read to mean that there is no nationality or citizenship for those lying in Babi Yar, only their victimhood. Is this Ehrenburg’s necessary allegiance to the official Soviet refusal to “divide the dead” or the opposite, a bestowal onto the dead Jews lying at Babi Yar of a poetic matzevah in place of a missing physical marker or monument? The final spark of Ehrenburg’s poetic imagination occurs in the second half of the final line: “My k vam prishli, ne my — ovr-agi” (“We’ve come to you, not we—but graves [literally, “not we—but ravines,” although Ehrenburg uses not yar but ovrag, a different word for ravine]”). Paronomastically, the poem suggests an alternative phrasing and reading: ne my (not we) can also be reimagined as nemy ([are] mute). Mute—or muted—are the voices of the victims lying in Babi Yar, but in the USSR the voice of the Jewish-Russian poet is also muted in the devoiced Jewishness of the response to the Shoah. Despite the deeply personal, lyrical tone, and despite its evocation of desire, a woman’s body, past love, in this poem the Jewishly personal is depersonalized and made outwardly not Jewish, and especially so if you can imagine the act of reading this poem by a mainstream Soviet audience in 1945: an untitled poem numbered “1” in a selection of six heart-rending poems about response to loss.

Poem 2 of the cycle negotiates between a heady rhetoric of Soviet victory, then still several months and hundreds of thousands of lives away in January 1945, and a subdued reckoning of losses. While “fireworks” illuminating a black sky metonymize celebrations of victory over Nazism, the “passion of those ravaged days” directs the reader away from jubilation. Referring to the brutally murdered victims, the Russian adjective “rasterzannykh” (ravaged, harrowed, literally “torn apart”), also occurs in Ehrenburg’s wartime articles; even the same grammatical structure, genitive plural, of the adjectives and nouns underscores the parallelism between the “ravaged children” (rasterzannykh detei) at Babi Yar and the “ravaged days” (rasterzannykh dnei), as does also the echoing rhyme of the nouns (dnei- detei [days-children]).

The burning rockets not only celebrate victory, but also invoke the burning corpses at the sites of Nazi massacres. Ehrenburg’s diction in line 2 of Poem 2 is couched in the language of Christ’s passion and martyrdom. In 1911 Ehrenburg had gone through a phase of fascination with Catholic medieval mysticism. Echoes of a Christian—specifically Catholic—sensibility continued to inform Ehrenburg’s poetic vocabulary. It is quite possible that the invocation of the passion of Christ in Ehrenburg’s poem about the Shoah compensates for his inability to introduce specifically Judaic references.

Poem 3 shows that a major change in Ehrenburg’s perspective on Holocaust memory had occurred by the end of 1944. The visits to the liberated Soviet territories had expanded and darkly animated Ehrenburg’s knowledge of the Shoah. At the same time, another major factor, which Poem 3 registers with layered precision, was Ehrenburg’s growing bitterness over the rise of popular antisemitism during the war, in the occupied territories and elsewhere in the USSR, and by the concerted official efforts to conceal both Shoah by bullet and local collaboration with the Nazis. In conjuring up a tumultuous, feverish image of Soviet memory of the Shoah, Ehrenburg saves the best for last in this poem of eight lines:

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.

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—one else’s.

In the original Russian, “woe” is likened to a klikusha, a feminine noun with a complex meaning and pedigree. First, “someone else’s woe,” here contextually understood as Jewish Holocaust woe, is compared to a “gadfly” (“ovod”) — something of a popular cliché, in which an unrelenting insect attacking and biting horses and cattle is transformed into a person unhinging the status quo. Used figuratively and applied to society, the term gadfly occurs in cornerstone religious and philosophical texts. Plato, in the Apology of Socrates, has Socrates comment during his trial that a dissenting person or opinion is like a gadfly.\(^{165}\) (In the Soviet imagination, the term gadfly gained much popularity with the widely read Russian translation of the 1897 novel The Gadfly by Ethel Lilian Voynich.) Ehrenburg presents the memory of the Shoah as a popular irritant, peddled by Jews yet unwanted by the rest of the Soviet population now focused on victory and jubilation. In keeping with the cycle’s close reliance on images of weather and atmospheric conditions, the poem’s second tier renders the Soviet memory of the Shoah as “hot and muggy air.” Here Ehrenburg’s subtlety lies not only in suggesting that one can never do justice to the memory of the Shoah as the void can never be undone, just as the authorial persona cannot catch enough air and keeps suffocating with the knowledge of the Shoah saturating his memory. But likening the memory of the Shoah to “hot air” might also underscore its irrelevance to the lives of the indifferent Soviet mainstream.

At the same time, the Russian folk term klikusha may be literally translated as “shrieker.” According to various Russian popular beliefs, klikushi are females possessed by the demons; blessings and other religious rituals have the power to drive the unclean spirit out of them. The term klikusha (and its cognate klikushestvo) may have referred to what was once termed “feminine hysteria,” to a spectrum of neurological conditions, and to psychic conditions resulting from trauma or abuse.\(^{166}\) Figuratively, in the Russian language the term klikusha may refer to speakers and polemists who are viewed as intemperate and unstoppable. Ehrenburg sounds one of the cycle’s most disturbing notes: You cannot get away from the memory of the Shoah, yet no public options are available to deal with this someone else’s (read: Jewish) woe in the Soviet Union of 1945.

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\(^{166}\) See “Klikushi,” http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Кликуши, accessed 11 December 2010. Russian writers, notably Dostoevsky in connection with Alesha’s mother in The Brothers Karamazov, have drawn on klikushi to explore complex linkages between illness and sainthood, idiocy and power of clairvoyance, abuse and victimization of the victims themselves.
Both Poem 4 and Poem 5, when read outside the context of the January 1945 Novyi mir cycle as stand-alone texts, are the least marked by obvious yet coded references to the Shoah. This is not surprising. Here Ehrenburg outwardly addresses a topic, to which many other Soviet writers turned in late 1944 and 1945: the soldier’s return from the war. In Poem 4, the most general and abstract of terms, chelovek (“person”; “human being”) figures in reference to a returnee from the war and its horrors. This returnee, a Soviet every (service) man, could be anybody. In the cycle’s semiotic system, the absence of his or her ethnic markedness brings home the idea that memory of the Shoah inadvertently rests in all of the Soviet survivors of the war: soldiers and generals, former prisoners of war and concentration camp inmates, Russians, Ukrainians, Jews et al. All of them, whether they know it or not, are witnesses to the Shoah and bearers of its memory, and they are all in need of nature’s idyllic setting—both as a refuge of peace and a source of consolation. A key motif pulsing through Poem 4 is human silence and nature’s voices and sounds as a respite from human rhetoric:

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.

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.

The failure of the victorious Soviet grandiloquence to make room for the Shoah troubles Ehrenburg, as it also troubles other Jewish-Russian poet-witnesses, among them Selvinsky, Antokolsky, and Ozerov. It seems incredible that the censors let stand Ehrenburg’s daring juxtapositions of victory’s gunfire and the healing silence cloaking the minds of the returnees. That the happiness of having survived is coached not in words but in “water and grass,” in nature’s primordial elements, negates the ability of a brandishing rhetoric to accord a modicum of peace after four years of war. By pointing to the vulnerability of both birds and especially of butterflies and moths (souls of the dead, images which, as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross observed, Jewish children depicted on the antechambers of death), Ehrenburg strikes an otherworldly note while also underscoring the fragility of the memory of the Shoah.

This triple motif—silence, defiance of rhetoric, and nature’s embrace of both the victims and the rememberers—continues in the opening part of Poem 5. Ornithological and entomological references—warblers and dragonflies—carry over from Poem 4 into Poem 5. Furthermore, a euphonically rich tautology in line 6 of Poem 5 carries implied references to bees and beekeeping: “A Medyn’ dlia zvonkikh medunits.” The name of Medyn’, a district center in the north of the Kaluga Province, is derived etymologically from the word med (“honey”), for which the area had probably once been known. During the war the area was briefly occupied in October 1941-January 1942 and heavily destroyed. Medunitsa, the Russian name of the flower “lungwort,” also derives etymologically from the Russian word for honey. Thus, both the place and
the flower communicate connections to honey; it would be impossible to do this line justice in translating it in verse both literally and figuratively. In rendering it as “And the honey meadows—for lungworts,” I sought to pick up on the poem’s hint that the war destroys such traditional rural professions as beekeeping. Ehrenburg relies on bees as a trope for Jews, a trope familiar to Jewish-Russian authors describing the destruction of Jewish life.

Ehrenburg, like Babel writing of Ukraine in 1920, refused to disavow artistry when speaking about the decimation of the Jewish population in the occupied territories. The second half of Poem 5 calls on the cycle’s opening poem by bringing back memories of desire, love, and the body’s physicality:

Будут только те затемнены,
У кого луна и без луны,
Будут руки, чтобы обнимать,
Будут губы, чтобы целовать.

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.

There is mystery in the lines connecting the opening of Poem 5, with its trappings of an idyll and a semblance of a poem for children, to the poem’s latter half. Who are the ones who are “moonlit even without the moon”? The victims themselves? The survivors? The bereaved ones performing the rituals of mourning? Ehrenburg does not tell the reader. But the logic of the poem links those who are “dimmed at noon” with memories of their prewar—and pre-Shoah—living. That which in Poem 1 Ehrenburg’s lyrical voice recalled through the prism of his individual destiny in the past tense (“The hands of this beloved woman/ I used to kiss, a long time ago”) is now presented as a collective promise and reassurance to all the readers, whom the poem positions as survivors of catastrophe (“There will be hands to hold and embrace,/ There will be lips to kiss...”). It is specifically under the terms of this vague promise that poetry itself is textualized, for the first time in the entire cycle:

Даже ветер, почитав стихи,
Заночует у своей ольхи.

Even the wind, after reciting poetry,
Will fall asleep under its alder tree.

These Holocaust verses of consolation and sorrow are recited by the wind, textualized yet unprinted—unprinted along with much of what Ehrenburg and fellow Jewish-Russian poets could not say in public.

Ehrenburg’s exceptional status enabled him to speak softly, in those loudspeaking days, about victims and survivors. The opening line of Poem 6, the conclusion of the cycle, throws a bridge of memory to Poem 1 (known later as “Babi Yar”) by restoring the I/eye-witness identity of the lyrical voice:

6.
Прошу не для себя, для тех,
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.

Poem 6, the most artistically accomplished in the cycle, is also the one to articulate Ehrenburg’s plea for art: great art, pure art, tremulous art. The epithet smutnoe, which modifies the word iskusstvo (“art”) in the penultimate line, means or can mean “tremulous,” “vague,” “uncertain,” and “inaarticulate.” But Ehrenburg also invokes the idea of art at the time of troubles (smutnoe vremia, in the Russian), a term specifically referring to the period in the history of Russia (Muscovy) at the very end of the 16th and the start of the 17th century, with Russia overwhelmed by the Polish and Swedish invasion and in the midst of dynastic crisis. With his gift of historical clairvoyance (consider the terrifying prophesy of the Shoah in Julio Jurenito), Ehrenburg may have been alluding to a dynastic uncertainty of late Stalinism while also anticipating a time of troubles for Soviet Jewry.

Echoing Joshua Rubenstein’s characterization of Poem 1 as a “Kaddish,” Boris Frezinskii referred to Poem 6 of the Novyi mir cycle as a “prayer” and suggested that after Stalin’s death this prayer “could [finally] become a program of action” for the commencing Thaw, in which Ehrenburg was a key figure.167 Nazism, the war, and the Shoah had put to the final test Ehrenburg’s principal métier: a polemicist and a witness to his times. In a sense, both the deceiving simplicity of the cycle’s classical prosody and Ehrenburg’s self-contorting plea for “tremulous art” in a “time of troubles” represents something of a break with his artistic past by calling for art to be free of stylistic obligations, read: ideological commitments. In the con-

167 Frezinskii, 2000, 61. There is probably a misprint in the text of Frezinskii’s introduction as Frezinskii dates the poem, published in the January 1945 issue of Novyi mir, as “May 1945.”
text of late Stalinism and official Russo-Soviet chauvinism, such a plea for tremulous art, voiced in a cycle of poems about the Shoah, was Ehrenburg’s open challenge to Soviet culture.

4.4 Lev Ozerov

The story of Jewish-Russian poets bearing witness to the Shoah reaches its apogee with the publication Lev Ozerov’s long poem Babi Yar. Ozerov, who was born Lev Goldberg in Kiev in 1914, wrote poetry from the age of fifteen, and studied philology at the Moscow Institute of Philosophy, Literature, and History (MI Fil) in 1934–39. Peers identified his aesthetics of the time with the Lakes School of English romanticism (ozernaia shkola), hence his flight in 1935 to the (illusory) safety of the non-Jewish pseudonym Ozerov (literally “of the lakes”). Ozerov’s first collection, Environ of the Dnieper, appeared in Kiev in 1940. Soon after the Nazi invasion, Ozerov was dispatched to the Northern Caucasus as part of a Komsomol “labor troop.” He contributed to the newspaper Pobeda za nami (Victory Shall Be Ours) and to the radio broadcasts of the political department of the Separate Mechanized Brigade for Special Tasks (OMSBON), as well as for the national civilian newspapers Literature and Art (Literatura i iskusstvo), Labor (Trud) and others. Recalled to Moscow to defend his dissertation in literature in 1943, Ozerov stayed to teach creative writing at the Literary Institute.

Ozerov apparently visited his native Kiev soon after its liberation in November 1943. His article “Kiev, Babi Yar,” based on collected eyewitness testimony and other documents, opened Part 1 (“Ukraine”) of the Ehrenburg–Grossman (deralled) Black Book. Ozerov composed his Babi Yar in 1944–45, and it appeared in the April–May 1946 issue of October, where Ozerov served as poetry editor in 1946–1948. In 1947 it was reprinted in his collection Liven’ (Downpour), edited by Pavel Antokolsky himself. Reprinted for the first time twenty years later in Ozerov’s 1966 Lyric: Selected Poems (and again in 1974, 1978, and 1986), it endured as the longest and the most historically extensive treatment of Babi Yar in all of Soviet poetry. In Ozerov’s “Babi Yar,” a documentary imperative of an eyewitness to the Nazi atrocities gains its heart-stopping power from the mournful lyricism of the authorial voice. As the last great poem about the Shoah written and published by a Jewish-Russian poet in the immediate aftermath of the liberation of the occupied Soviet territories and the Nazi death camps, Ozerov’s Babi Yar owed its creation not only to Ozerov’s greatest moment of Jewish self-awareness or his private

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168. See Maxim D. Shrayer, “Lev Ozerov”; for an extensive, albeit not exhaustive bibliography of works by and about Ozerov, see “Lev Adol’fovich Ozerov,” in Russkie pisateli. Poety (Sovetskii period), vol. 16 (St. Petersburg: Rossiiskaia natsional’naia biblioteka, 1994), 89-179.

169. Beyond what implicitly follows from Ozerov’s research and contribution to the Black Book—and what third parties mentioned elsewhere—I am not aware of Ozerov’s own discursive accounts of visiting Babi Yar immediately after Kiev’s liberation; see, for instance, Il’ia Sel’vinskii, “Poeziia L. Ozerova [rev. of Liven’ by Lev Ozerov], Oktiabr’ 8 (1947): 178.


connection to Kiev, but also to Ozerov’s generation and literary pedigree and his greater reliance on the experience of teachers and mentors, among them Selvinsky and Antokolsky. Furthermore, Ozerov’s precise and unambiguous articulation of Jewish victimhood might have been a polemical response to the then recent publication of Ehrenburg’s January 1945 Novyi mir cycle, with its coded poetic commemoration of the victims of the Shoah and its plea for tremulous art.

As a young Jewish man and an aspiring poet in Kiev in the 1930s, Ozerov admired the early Soviet modernists (Eduard Bagritsky, Ilya Selvinsky, and Nikolay Zabolotsky). By the early 1930s, Ozerov was enthralled by Boris Pasternak. In terms of Soviet literary dynamics and verse aesthetics, Ozerov belonged to the generation that took the torch from the hands of the generation to which Selvinsky, Ehrenburg, and Antokolsky, the other three protagonists of this paper, had all belonged. Although a student and disciple of the poets of the Russian Silver Age and of the early Soviet modernists, in his Holocaust poem Ozerov did not resort to mythology, be it the poet’s personal mythology of artfully “making life” or Judeo-Christian biblical mythology. In contrast to the classical prosody of Ehrenburg’s and Antokolsky’s Holocaust poems, Ozerov’s poem employs a nonclassical, tonic meter. The poet’s Jewish-Russian poetic voice reverberates with traditions of Soviet modernism, while the rhetoric of the poem is one of historical documentation, remembrance, and...revenge. A remarkable clarity of diction combined with a historical reconstruction of the September 1941 Babi Yar massacre makes this poem especially valuable for historians. Also notable is the fact that in its subsequent publications in Ozerov’s collections, the poem was virtually spared editorial changes and remained almost identical to the original publication. The only major change concerned the following lines in the original 1946 publication of Ozerov’s poem in October:

И выстрелы.
Выстрелы.
Звезды внезапного света.
И брат обнимает последним объятьем сестру...
Если есть Бог и он видел и слышал это,
Зачем не хотел он со всеми погибнуть в Яру?!?

(Literally)
And shots.
Shots. Stars of sudden light.
And a brother embraces a sister with a final embrace...
And if there is a God and he saw and heard all of this
Why did he not wish to perish with all of them in the Yar?!

In the 1947 publication in Ozerov’s collection Downpour and subsequently, this section appeared as follows:

And shots.
Shots. Stars of sudden light.
And a brother embraces a sister with a final embrace...
And if there is a God and he saw and heard all of this
Why did he not wish to perish with all of them in the Yar?!

I have come to you, Babi Yar.
If grief were subject to age,
Then I would be too old by far.
Measure age by centuries?—too many to gauge.
Pleading, here at this place I stand.
If my mind can endure the violence,
I will hear what you have to say, land—

This protest against unremembrance would become a leitmotif in subsequent Soviet works about Babi Yar, including Evtushenko’s “Babi Yar” and Kuznetsov’s novel of the same title.

So as to coexperience the massacre with the victims, in the middle section of the poem Ozerov reenacts the events in the historic present. Photographic or cinematic details (including a rueful reference to snapshots taken by an SS officer) assist the poet in his efforts
at reimagining Babi Yar:

 Сегодня по Львовской идут и идут.
 Мглисто.
 Долго идут. Густо, один к одному.
 По мостовой,
 По красным кленовым листьям,
 По сердцу идут моему.
 Ручьи вливаясь в реку.
 Фашисты и полицаи
 Стоят у каждого дома, у каждого палисада.
 Назад повернуть — не думай,
 В сторону не свернуть,
 Фашистские автоматчики весь охраняют путь.

 Today they keep coming down Lvov Street.
The air is hazy.
On and on they come. Packed together, one against the other.
Over the pavement,
Over the red maple leaves,
Over my heart they go.
The streams merge into a river.
Fascists and local Polizei
Stand at every house, at every front yard.
Turning back? Impossible!
Turning aside? Not a chance!
Fascist machine gunners bar the way.

A reference to a “Jewish cemetery”—the most explicit reference to the victims’ Jewishness—renders unambiguous the identity of the victims:

 За улицей Мельника — кочки, заборы и пустошь.
 И рыжая стенка еврейского кладбища. Сстой...
 Здесь плиты наставлены смертью хозяйственно густо,
 И выход к Бабьему Яру,
 Как смерть, простой.
 Уже все понятно. И яма открыта, как омут.
 И даль озаряется светом последних минут.
 У смерти есть тоже предбанник.
 Фашисты по-деловому
 Одежду с пришедших снимают и в кучи кладут.

 Beyond Melnik Street are hillocks, fences, and vacant land.
And the rusty-red wall of the Jewish cemetery. Halt...
Here the gravestones erected by death are parsimoniously dense,
And the exit to Babi Yar,
Like death, is simple.
It’s all clear to them now. The pit gapes like a maelstrom,
And the horizon is brightened by the light of final minutes.
Death, too, has its dressing room.
The Fascists must get down to business.
They divest the newcomers of their clothes, which they arrange in piles.

Furthermore, Ozerov’s representation of the topography, of the route which the Jews
followed on their way to their execution, makes crystal clear that the poet telling the story of the Babi Yar massacre has personally investigated it and has interviewed the survivors and eyewitnesses. Ozerov, of course, prepared the report “Kiev: Babi Yar” for the Ehrenburg-Grossman Black Book, where several narrative sections read parallel to the poem: “The city had fallen silent. Like streams flowing into a river, crowds flowed onto Lvov Street from Pavlovskaya and Dmitrievskaya, from Volodarskaya and Nekrasovskaya. After Lvov [Street] they came to Melnik Street and then went up a barren road through stark hills to the steep ravines known as Babi Yar. As they approached Babi Yar, a murmur mixed with moans and sobbing grew louder and louder.”175

Especially devastating are Ozerov’s evocations of the atrocities committed against children:

Девочка, снизу: — Не сыпьте землю в глаза мне… —  
Мальчик: — Чулочки тоже снимать? —  
И замер,  
В последний раз обнимая мать.  
А там — мужчины закопали живыми в яму.  
Но вдруг из земли показалась рука  
И в седых завитках затылок...  
Фашист ударил лопатой упрямно.  
Земля стала мокрой,  
Сровнялась, застыла...  
A girl, from below:—Don’t throw dirt in my eyes—  
A boy:—Do I have to take off my socks, too?—  
Then he grew still,  
Embracing his mother for the last time.  
In that pit, men were buried alive.  
But suddenly, out of the ground appeared an arm  
And gray curls on the nape of a neck...  
A Fascist struck persistently with his shovel.  
The ground became wet,  
Then smooth and hard...  

In the context of Jewish-Russian poems written and published in the immediate aftermath of the Shoah, the words said by the Jewish children in Ozerov’s poem recall Ehrenburg’s essay “Nationkillers,” published in early 1944. Ehrenburg invoked the image of a little Kievan girl, who says, after having been thrown by the Nazis into a grave: “‘Why are you pouring sand in my eyes?’”176

The last two lines of the middle part return the poet’s persona to the poem’s present, 1944, as he stands over the mass grave to say the poem’s coda, a Jewish-Russian commemoration and a plea for the post-Shoah Soviet times. Among the voices of the dead calling for both memorialization and revenge are the poet’s intimates (here, it seems, historical personalities rather than the imagined relatives in Ehrenburg’s “Babi Yar”):

Мой племянник захочет встать,  
Он разбудит сестру и мать.  
Им захочется руку выпростать,  

In the last two stanzas, the collectivized Jewish voices of the dead lying in the yar become personalized as they entrust their testament to the poet:

И ребенок сказал: — Не забудь, —
И сказала мать: — Не прости, —
И закрылась земная грудь.
Я стоял не в Яру — на пути.
Он к возмездью ведет — тот путь,
По которому мне идти.
Не забудь...
Не прости...

And a child said:—Don’t forget.
And a mother said:—Don’t forgive.
And the earthen breast swung shut.
I was no longer at the Yar but on my way.
It leads to vengeance—that way
Along which I must travel.
Don’t forget...
Don’t forgive...

The imperative structure of the closing two lines, “Ne zabud’...!/ Ne prosti...” (“Don’t forget.../Don’t forgive...”) grammatically reaffirms the role that the poet takes upon himself and the commission he must carry out. This double commission—not to forget and not to forgive—is the most Jewish of commandments a Soviet poet might be able to carry out, and the Shoah urged Ehrenburg, Selvinsky, Ozerov, and Antokolsky to bear poetic witness.

4.5 Pavel Antokolsky

Pavel Antokolsky was already a minor classic by the end of the 1930s. A wartime correspondent of Komsomol’skaia Pravda (Komsomol Pravda) and other national newspapers, Antokolsky joined the Communist Party in 1941 immediately following the Nazi invasion. He responded to the death of his son, a junior lieutenant, in battle with the long poem Son (1943), which was awarded the Stalin Prize in 1946. As was the case with other Soviet writers of Jewish origin otherwise disinclined to discuss Jewishness, Antokolsky was compelled to turn to Jewish themes by the war, the Shoah, and especially the experience of traveling with the troops to the previously occupied Soviet territories. Antokolsky spent most of October 1943 traveling...
across the Kharkov, Chernigov, and Poltava provinces of Ukraine and contributed articles to civilian newspapers, returning to Moscow just days before the liberation of Kiev. Antokolsky’s reports from the newly liberated occupied territories were free of references to Jewish victimhood. As a specific point of reference, consider his poem “Hatred” (“Nenavist’”), which was published in Banner in February 1945—in the same issue as Selvinsky’s “Kerch.” In projecting a path of Soviet vengeance and victory going all the way to Berlin, Antokolsky speaks of hatred that would lifts human remains “from ditches, crematoria and gas chambers” (“iz rvov, pechei i dushegubok”), thereby invoking circumstances of both Shoah by bullet and the death camps. Furthermore, Antokolsky also describes a “little skeleton” of a ten-year-old “bound by rusty barbed wire” and “murdered by a Western nation.” Yet nothing in the poem points directly to Jewish victimhood. In the autumn of 1944 Antokolsky traveled with the troops liberating Belarus and entered Poland. The second trip provided raw material for “Death Camp” (“Lager’ unichtozheniia”), a masterpiece of Holocaust poetry. However, what has survived of Antokolsky’s wartime journals bears no mention of the aftermath of the Shoah. Perhaps nothing clues us to Antokolsky’s internal turmoil better than an entry in his journal, dated October 25, 1943. Here notes of a father’s grief are enmeshed with notes of a poet’s inability to find the right words—any words—to describe catastrophe: “With my poems—a total and complete failure. I am not only incapable of writing them, but I also do not want to: any language seems approximate, poor, alien. And rhyme and rhythm irritate me as a convention. I cannot say in verse anything that has not been said a thousand times before.” Antokolsky would find the words, the rhythm, and the rhymes after seeing the death camps in Poland.

Antokolsky’s poem “Death Camp” gains its haunting quality from two factors. One is Antokolsky’s use of anapaestic tetrameter with all masculine, alternating rhymes, which creates an initial intonation of hurried chanting discordant with the poem’s subject matter. The other is Antokolsky’s decision to begin his reportage in medias res, as though any opening or exposition had been unwarranted:

И тогда подошла к нам, жёлта как лимон,
Та старушка восьмидесяти лет,
В кацавейке, платке допотопных времен –
Еле двигавший ноги скелет.
Синеватые пряди ее парика
Гофрированы были едва.
И старушечья в синих прожилках рука
Показала на оползни рва.
“Извините! Я шла по дорожным столбам,


178 See, for instance, this article Antokolsky filed just days before the liberation of Kiev: “Na pravom beregu,” Komsomol’skaia Pravda, 5 November 1943; see also the short article commemorating the liberation of Kiev, “Slaven naveiki,” Literatura i iskusstvo, 7 November 1943.


180 See Antokol’skii, “Ukraina I-II” [October 1943-July 1944], unpublished journal. I am deeply grateful to Anna and Andrei Toom for sharing this material with me.
По местечкам, сожженным дотла.
Вы не знаете, где мои мальчики, пан,
Не заметили, где их тела?
Извините меня, я глуха и слепа,
Может быть среди польских равнин,
Может быть, эти сломанные черепа —
Мой Иосиф и мой Веньямин...
Ведь у нас под ногами не щебень хрустел.
Эта черная жирная пыль —
Это прах человечьих обугленных тел”, —
Так сказала старуха Рахиль.

And then that woman came, distressed,
Eighty, with lemon-sallow skin,
Wearing a shawl and quilted vest—
A feebly hobbling skeleton.
Her bluish wig of straggly strands
Must have been made before the Flood.
She pointed her thin blue-veined hands
Down at a ditch of oozing mud.
“Excuse me. I've walked very far
Through shtetls burnt down to the ground.
Sir, do you know where my boys are,
Where their dead bodies may be found?
“Excuse me. I've gone deaf and blind,
But maybe in this Polish glen
Among these broken skulls I'll find
My Joseph and my Benjamin,
“Because your feet aren't crunching stones
But blackened ashes of the dead,
The charred remains of human bones,”
Rachel, that ancient woman, said.81
(tr. Maxim D. Shrayer and J. B. Sisson)

By giving the old Jewish-Polish woman the name Rachel (Rakhil’) and naming her murdered “boys” Joseph (Iosif) and Benjamin (Veniamin), Antokolsky refashioned the Biblical story of Jacob and his sons in the context of the Shoah. Rachel is said to be “v tri tysiachi let” (“three thousand years old”) in the original 1945 publication in Banner and his Selected Works (Izbrannoe, 1946); in the subsequent reprintings, Antokolsky changed the old woman’s age to “eighty”—perhaps in order to increase the sense of history at the expense of Biblical mythopoetics. Antokolsky reactivated the Joseph story yet transmogrified it to reflect the horror of the catastrophe and the burdensome poetic duty of bearing witness. In conflating some of the characteristics of Rachel and Leah, Antokolsky attempted a post-Biblical incarnation of the Jewish myth. Rachel, for instance, is said to have gone “deaf and blind,” and her blindness also recalls Leah’s “weak” eyes (Genesis 29: 16). Rachel the matriarch, here an old Jewish-Polish woman, is said to be wearing a shawl that “must have been made before the flood”; in this English translation, the poet J. B. Sisson and I rendered Rachel’s wig (Russian parik; Yiddish sheytl), rather than her shawl, as dating before the Flood. Rachel is ancient; confounded by

the aftermath of the Shoah, Antokolsky’s post-Biblical imagination resurrects her to live out a mother’s—foremother’s—worst nightmare: surviving her sons and wandering the fields in search of the “dead bodies” of her beloved Joseph and Benjamin.

What camp site does Antokolsky have in mind? We cannot answer this question precisely on the basis of the text alone, but this much we do know: this is a camp in Poland, and the time is the fall of 1944. Twice the poem identifies the site of the camp as located in Poland. Rachel speaks of having walked, in search of her sons, “through shtetls burned down to the ground” (“po mesteckham, sozzhennym dotla”). Given what we know, extratextually, about Antokolsky’s familiarity with the death camps in Poland, Sobibor comes to mind. Antokolsky investigated the history of this camp and coauthored with the Jewish-Russian writer Veniamin Kaverin the essay “The Uprising in Sobibor” for the Ehrenburg-Grossman Black Book. We should also consider that at the liberation of Majdanek the stellar Soviet author and military journalist Konstantin Simonov had been assigned to write a story for Red Star; Simonov’s three-part report, titled “Death Camp” (“Lager’ unichtozheniia”), exactly like Antokolsky’s poem, appeared there in August 1945. At the same time, we should not seek complete correspondences between the camp site in Antokolsky’s poem and a specific historical antecedent such as Sobibor. “Cans of gas,” which Antokolsky specifically mentions in the poem, were not used at Sobibor, where the inmates were killed by carbon monoxide supplied to the gas chamber from engine exhaust pipes. Through the persona of its Jewish-Polish protagonist Rachel—and through the eyewitnessing experience of the Soviet liberators—the site of the camp in Antokolsky’s poem represents the collective fate of European Jews murdered in the Nazi death camps in Poland. In fact, the term “in the death camps in Poland during the war in 1941-1945” (“v lageriakh unichtozheniia Pol’shi vo vremia voiny 1941-1945”) figures directly and prominently in the subtitle of the Black Book.

It is especially significant that in “Death Camp” Antokolsky takes the Shoah beyond the Soviet borders. The old woman and her murdered sons are Polish Jews. Rachel addresses Antokolsky in Polish or, perhaps, in a mixture of Polish, Yiddish, and Russian. A faint echo of a Jewish intonation can be heard in old Rachel’s speech. If we take the poem on its own terms, it is not clear whether the old Jewish-Polish woman can identify Antokolsky’s persona as a fellow Jew, although she knows he is a Soviet. Antokolsky weaves together disparate threads of the mythic story of Jacob, Leah, Rachel and their children to achieve a macabre version. One wonders what Antokolsky might have meant by this transmogrification of the relationship of the other children of Jacob (Israel) to their murdered brothers.

A change of tone occurs halfway though the poem, where a new collective emerges: no longer the “we” of the Soviet liberators of the death camp, but a “we” of voices of the Jewish dead speaking with an otherworldly pathos of lofty poetry (cf. the “we” in Selvinsky’s “Kerch”):

И пошли мы за ней по полям. И глаза
Нам туманила часто слеза.
А вокруг золотые сияли леса,
Поздней осени польской краса.
Там травы золотой сожжена полоса,
We followed, grievously aware
Those were the fields of her despair.
The golden woods glowed bright and fair
In the late autumn Polish air.
A swath of grass was scorched and bare.
No scythes or sickles lingered there
But voices, voices everywhere,
Voices that whispered to declare,
“We’re dead. We lie still and embrace.
To these loved ones and friends we cling,
But we tell strangers of this place.
To strangers we tell everything.

Why did Antokolsky end the poem with a note of resurrection in terms concordant with both Jewish and Christian metaphysics of the afterlife? I believe he aimed for his bicultural poem to be understood by both a mainstream Russian (Soviet) audience and an audience of Jews:

“The killers used their cans of gas.
Death in its beauty would soon pass
Down the highway from this morass,
Because in the new waving grass,
In evening dew and in birdsong,
In gray clouds over the world’s grime,
You see, we are not dead for long
We have arisen for all time.”

To a Jewish-Russian deeply acculturated person of Antokolsky’s age and upbringing, a Judaic knowledge—rather a memory of a past knowledge of Judaism—might amount to a version of Maimonides’s Shloshah-Asar Ikkarim (the Thirteen Articles of Faith) drawn from the Torah’s 613 commandments. Article 13, the last of the Articles of Faith, postulates, as does the ending of “Death Camp,” that there will be resurrection of the dead. In the same period Antokolsky wrote another Shoah text about the memory of the Jews murdered in the Shoah. His cycle “No Memory Eternal” (“Ne vechnaia pamiat’”), which was published in the July 1946
issue of Banner and mourned the destruction of much of Jewish civilization. Through the evocation, in the last stanza, of the opening of the Shema (Hear, O Israel; Sh’ma Yisrael’, spelled in Russian transliteration and furnished with an explanatory footnote), Antokolsky called on the survivors to remain Jewish against all odds.

4.6 Ilya Selvinsky in 1945

Consider this telling footnote to the the story of Selvinsky as a poet-soldier-witness. Following his punishment and forced demobilization, Selvinsky kept petitioning the authorities to allow him to return to the war front. In 1944 Selvinsky composed the poem “Reading Stalin” “(Chitaia Stalin’a”). Some of his biographers believe that Selvinsky did this to earn back official favor. Back in 1941-1942 Selvinsky had praised Stalin in poetry and articles; in 1942-1943 his poem “Stalin at the Microphone” (“Stalin u mikrofona”) had been printed in October and in Selvinsky’s books of poetry. In March 1945, following Selvinsky’s formal letter to the Central Committee, his request to return to the army was finally granted. His military rank was restored, and in April 1945 he was finally sent to the war front, the Second Baltic Front, at the time one of the very few areas of the war theater without military action. In his exile of a sort in Kurland (Latvia), Selvinsky continued to reflect on his firsthand experiences of the Nazi atrocities against the Jews going back to his service in the Crimea, on the Black Sea coast of Russia, and in the North Caucasus, in 1941-43. Selvinsky’s long poem Kandava (1945) appeared in January-February 1946 in October as part of the selection titled “Spring of 1945” (“Vesna 1945 goda”). At the heart of the long poem lies Selvinsky’s first-hand account of the surrender of a Nazi division at Kandava (Kandau) to the Soviet troops on May 8, 1945, right on the eve of the Nazi capitulation in Berlin. As the poem opens, Selvinsky places a nightmarish dream in which he and his wife Berta “walk somewhere in Auschwitz/ or Majdanek” before a “formation/ of fascist grey-blue soldiers/ and thousands of icy eyes,/ contemptuous, mocking, vicious,/ or just plain curious, looking/ at us walking to our death.” The mode then shifts from oneiric vision to reconstructed reality, and Selvinsky describes being in a group with a Soviet general and seven Soviet officers accepting the surrender of the Nazi troops. As Selvinsky’s eyes scan the rows of soldiers and officers, he recalls his recent nightmare about being mur-

183 Pavel Antokol’skii, “Ne vchenia pamiat’,” Znamia 7 (1946): 64-65. Subsequent reprints and expurgated versions are listed in Works Cited.


185 I note in passing that the official displeasure with Selvinsky’s wartime and Holocaust poems, including his poems about the Shoah in Crimea, would continue to haunt the poet throughout the postwar Stalinist years. Specifically, as early as the summer of 1946, when the anticosmopolitan campaign was being launched, Georgy Malenkov admonished Leningrad’s literary journals: “You’ve made it cozy for Selvinsky!” (quoted in Ozerov, “Il’ia Sel’vinskii: ego trudy i dni,” 9). During the summer of 1946, Selvinsky was chastised in a number of Party documents and discussions about Soviet literature, by Zhdanov, Malenkov and Stalin himself; see Artizov 563-564; 568.

dered, alongside his wife, in a Nazi concentration camp: “There! There they are, those same eyes,/ which started at me and my beloved. I recognized/ This one! And that one! And those,/ The ones... the ones standing in the second row.../If I were I to say to them: ‘Majdanek,’
‘Auschwitz,’/ ‘Treblinka,’ or ‘Kerch,’ they would understand./ They were there!” Having previously written and published two key poems about the Bagerovo massacre of 1941 (“I Saw It!”
and “Kerch”), Selvinsky now places the Bagerovo massacre of the Crimean Jews in the same row with the Nazi death camps in Poland. In a particularly powerful, cinematic twist of imagination, Selvinsky describes noticing that a Nazi captain wears a brass emblem of the Crimean peninsula, Selvinsky’s homeland; such decorations were given to participants of German campaign in the Crimean: “I made out the stamped shape/ of the executed Crimea. Oh God!/ On it, incised was the dot of Simferopol.../ (I was born there.) Sebastopol! (Here/ I learned military honor.) /
The coast of Eupatoria — coast of Muses./ Where my love and song had taken root./ I don’t remember myself, how this all happened.../ Like a somnambulist, I approached him/ And looked him in the eyes. I swear/ That I had seen them. Just seen them/ in Majdanek. And my beloved, too,/ Would have probably recognized them [i.e. the captain’s eyes] right away.” In the lyrical notes taking the poet back to his youth in the Crimea, and also to the wartime years of personal bravery and bearing witness to the Nazi atrocities in the occupied territories, Selvinsky repeats, word for word, some of the phrases from “Kerch,” the greatest achievement of his poetry about the Shoah. Selvinsky ends up ripping the brass emblem of his native Crimea off the Nazi captain’s uniform. This gives him the kind of pleasure he “had never experienced before.” But having done so, Selvinsky reads in the terrified eyes of the Nazi captain another nightmarish fantasy: eight Soviet prisoners are walking before a Nazi formation in Auschwitz, and one of the inmates suddenly comes up to him and rips off his chest—“from him, an SS member, an Aryan,/ the emblem of the subjugation of the Crimea.” But in reality, the Nazi captain stands silently. In his “furious silence” Selvinsky hears: “the hum of Red Army unfurled banners,/ the bravado of trumpets and the thunder of drums/ and the jubilation of thousands of voice/ from ashes, from poems, from night visions!” This motif of victims of the Shoah mourned, remembered, and memorialized through poetry unites Selvinsky’s finale with the conclusions of the Holocaust poems by Ehrenburg, Ozerov, and Antokolsky. This, in turn, gives further validity to the idea that in 1944-45 the excruciating historical context of the Shoah elicited something of a concordant response from different poetic sensibilities.

4.7 The Silence of the Witnesses

As we reflect on the achievement of Selvinsky, Ehrenburg, Ozerov, and Antokolsky, we should also take stock of the experiences of Jewish-Russian authors, some of them military journalists and commissioned officers during World War II, who encountered evidence of Nazi atrocities firsthand yet chose either silence or else dwelt in the comfort of Soviet non-specificity. A number of notable Jewish-Russian poets of the older generation who had written about Jewish identity in the 1920s, among them Iosif Utkin (1903-1944) and Mikhail Svetlov (b. Sheinkman, 1903-1964), worked as military journalists and witnessed the aftermath of the Shoah on the occupied territories and Nazi death camps. However, in their wartime poetry
they resorted to the nondescript pathos of Soviet patriotism. Probably following in Selvinsky’s footsteps, Utkin titled a short 1942 poem “I Saw It Myself” (“Ia videl sam”). In it he spoke of the “beasts” who killed “innocent” little children with bayonets and burned their mothers, but did not even attempt to signal what was behind his act of witnessing. In the poem “Poplars of Kiev” (“Topolia Kieva,” 1943) Utkin called for vengeance on the “executioners” yet failed to say anything specific about the murder of Jews at Babi Yar. To take one more example, the wartime career of Boris Pasternak (1890-1960) throws into relief the challenges and choices that Jewish-Russian poets faced in responding to the Shoah. Any traces of a Jewish response were absent from Pasternak’s poetry until the spring of 1944, when he was commissioned by the main Soviet navy newspaper Krasnyi flot (Red Navy) to commemorate the liberation of Odessa. Pasternak composed the poem “Odessa,” and it appeared on April 12, 1944, two days after the liberation of the city, under the title “The Great Day” (“Velikii den’”). The poem paid faint tribute not only to the victims of the Nazi and Romanian atrocities during the occupation but also to the destruction—by Soviet history and by the war—of the Jewish-Russian Odessa that had nurtured Pasternak’s parents and numerous other artists. Consider stanzas 5 and 6 of Pasternak’s “Odessa”:

But all’s not well; a skull expressively
Leers from a nearby gulch. A savage
Cudgel here has mauled aggressively;
It’s a waste Neanderthals have ravaged.
Small heads of immortalles peer cheerily
Through empty sockets, nod and caper,
Inhabit the air with faces eerily,
Those of the dead mowed down last April.

(tr. Maxim D. Shrayer and J. B. Sisson)

Stanza 6 of the poem, which very mutedly and metaphorically evoked the faces of Jewish children murdered in Odessa without identifying them as Jewish, was missing in the wartime newspaper publication of Pasternak’s poem. The examples of Selvinsky, Antokolsky, and Ehrenburg probably represent exceptions, however prominent in the Soviet mainstream, to the otherwise eerie silence about the Shoah by the Soviet poets of their generation.

Of the generation of Jewish-Russian poets born in the late 1910s and early 1920s, a number of whom entered the war as young men and were shaped by their wartime experiences, the majority avoided poetic discussion of the Shoah throughout their careers. Several poets from the generation of Lev Ozerov did not begin to reflect on the Shoah until after Khrushchev’s Thaw of the late 1950s and early 1960s. And in the few known cases—and at least in theory others have yet to come to light—the poets penned Holocaust poems for the desk drawer in the

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1940s yet deferred their submission and publication until safer times.

Consider the following representative scenarios. The poets David Samoilov (b. Kaufman, 1920-1990) and Aleksandr Mezhirov (1921[or 1923]-2009), both of them former servicemen and both dominant figures in postwar Soviet poetry and literary translation, circumvented the subject of the Shoah in their poetry, either during or after World War II.190 Yuri Levitansky (1922-1996), another visible figure of the postwar Soviet literary scene, started the war as a private and finished it in Prague as a decorated lieutenant, while also contributing to military newspapers. Levitansky avoided Jewish topics and wrote nothing about the Shoah, even though he had certainly been in the position to bear poetic witness.191 Also noteworthy is the case of the Odessa-reared Semyon Lipkin (1911-2003), something of a generational anomaly because of his age. A military reporter during the war who saw action at Stalingrad, Lipkin started publishing original verse after a long hiatus in the 1950s, but did not turn to Jewish and Judaic subjects until the 1960s. One of Lipkin’s most powerful poems, “Zola” (“Ashes,” dated 1967 and published, notably, in the Moscow annual collection Poetry Day [Den’ poezii]), speaks in the first person about a victim of the Shoah. Having been burned in the crematorium of a concentration camp, Lipkin’s poetic protagonist “whispers”: “They’ve incinerated me./ How can I now reach Odessa?”192 Another intriguing story is that of Yan Satunovsky (1913-1982). An artillery company commander at the beginning of the Great Patriotic War, Satunovsky was injured in 1941 and spent the rest of the war contributing journalism as well as political poetry to an army newspaper. Satunovsky wrote about the Shoah during the war yet did not seek the publication of his “serious” poetry, either then or subsequently, as most of his poems were much too controversial, as this poem from around 1943 shows:

Who are you, Repatriated widows? I wanted to make a caustic joke at their expense, but I choked. Mortally tired after Hitler’s raids, atrocities, killings, bombings, and rapes, they come to the officers’ club not to be lectured but loved.193

(Tr. Maxim D. Shrayer)

Having circulated in Soviet samizdat, Satunovsky’s texts were independently collected and published, in Russia and in Germany, in the 1990s.194 Also intriguing is the case of the Kiev-born Naum Korzhavin (b. 1925). Korzhavin, whose first poem was published in 1941, did not qualify for the draft and was evacuated after the Nazi invasion. He came to Moscow in 1944 and attended the Literary Institute. Korzhavin was arrested in December 1947 for having written

and publicly read poems against Stalin, spent eight months in prison and the next four years in administrative exile in Siberia and Kazakhstan, and was officially rehabilitated in 1956. His poems, after having been passed around in samizdat, began to appear in the USSR during the Thaw. They included “Of the world of shtetls/ almost nothing remains...” (“Mir evreiskikh mestecek.../ Nichego ne ostalos’ ot nikh...”) originally written in 1945 but not published until 1966. Korzhavin’s best known Holocaust poem, “Children in Auschwitz” (“Deti v Osventzime,” 1961), appeared in his collection Years (Gody, 1963).

Finally, there is the case of Boris Slutsky (1919-1986), which defies most patterns and paradigms. Born in Slavyansk (now Donetsk Province of Ukraine), Slutsky grew up in Kharkov. In the late 1930s he joined Selvinsky’s seminar at the Moscow Literary Institute and became a leading member of a circle of young poets that included Semyon Gudzenko, Pavel Kogan, Mikhail Kulchitsky, Sergey Narovchatov, and David Samoylov (poets Kogan and Kulchitsky would perish in battle). In 1941 a poem of Slutsky’s appeared in October; he waited twelve years for his next publication of poetry. Slutsky volunteered right after the Nazi invasion and spent 1942–44 at the southern fronts; in 1943 he learned of the murder of his family members in the occupied Ukraine. He wrote virtually no poetry during the front years and did not bear poetic witness to the aftermath of the Shoah. At the same time, Slutsky completed a book of documentary prose about his experiences in 1944–45 as a Soviet Jewish military officer in Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Austria. In the chapter “The Jews,” Slutsky interspersed authorial observations with survivors’ testimony. Slutsky’s book remained unpublished until the post-Soviet years. A Jewish war veteran and a party member—and an heir-designate to the 1920s Left Art—in 1956 Slutsky was lauded by Ehrenburg and became an icon of the Thaw; he remained a cardinal Soviet literary figure until the late 1970s.

Some of Slutsky’s earliest poems (1938–40) have been lost, but the surviving ones reveal that the poet’s self-consciously Jewish response to Nazism and the ensuing catastrophe of European Jewry dated to 1938. Having witnessed the immediate aftermath of the Shoah in 1944–45 and written nonfiction about it, Slutsky returned to poetry as the postwar anti-cosmopolitan campaign gained speed. Memories of the destruction of European Jewry became enmeshed in Slutsky’s acutely political imagination with the antisemitic crimes of late Stalinism, giving rise to a conflation of Jewish questions that Slutsky put in verse in the 1950s and 1960s and later revisited in the 1970s. The most outspoken of Slutsky’s poems about the Shoah and antisemitism did not appear in the USSR until the reform years, although several circulated in samizdat and appeared in the West. In the 1950s–70s Slutsky steered into print more poems where the Shoah was memorialized, the Jewish question was explicitly debated, and the word “Jew” was unabashedly used than any of his Soviet contemporaries. David Shraer-Petrov called Slutsky’s “Horses in the Ocean,” first published in 1956 and dedicated to Ehrenburg, a “requiem for the murdered Jews.” A tetrad of Slutsky’s Jewish poems appeared in Soviet magazines as the Thaw peaked and entered its downward spiral. Three of them, “Birch Tree in Auschwitz” (published 1962), “How They Killed My Grandma” (published 1958), and “The Jews” (“Mir evreiskikh mestecek...” in Den’ poezii 1966 (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1966), 169; “Deti v Osventzime,” in Korzhavin, Gody (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1963), 20–21. See also Shraer-Petrov, “Ierusalimskii kazak. Boris Slutskii,” in David Shraer-Petrov, Vodka s pirozhnymi: roman s pisateliami (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2007), 232.

1963), and “Burdened by familial feelings... .” (published 1964), following in the footsteps of Ehrenburg’s wartime writings and Vasily Grossman’s story “The Old Teacher” (1943), transgressed the unspoken Soviet taboo on singling out the Jewish Holocaust. Slutsky’s close friend and literary executor Pyotr Gorelik reported that in 1975 Slutsky had told him he had about five hundred unpublished poems—and this turned out to be a conservative assessment. Party functionaries and the KGB kept a watchful eye on Slutsky, especially in respect to his treatment of the Shoah and antisemitism, and his poems printed in the 1950s–70s reveal censorial corruptions. Slutsky, who did not bear poetic witness to the Shoah during his years at the front, returned to the themes of the Shoah and antisemitism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He was able to publish a few of the poems with Jewish themes, including “Now Auschwitz Frequently Appears in My Dreams... .” (“Teper’ Osventsim chasto snitsia mne... .”) in his collection Contemporary Stories (Sovremennye istorii, 1969). A quintessence of Slutsky’s Jewish concerns, the poem “The rabbis came down to the valley... .” (“Ravviny vyshli na ravninu... .”) was penned in the 1970s and appeared in the USSR only during the reform years; it belongs with the greatest poems about the Shoah.197

Lev Ozerov and his Babi Yar, the longest Russian-language Holocaust poem written and published in Stalin’s time, thus represents an exception to the absent or delayed response to the Shoah by representatives of Ozerov’s—and Slutsky’s—literary generation.

4.8 In Closing

To conclude: By bearing witness to the immediate aftermath of the massacre of Jews by Nazis and their allies and accomplices on occupied Soviet territories and to the murder of Jews in Nazi death camps, Jewish-Russian poets simultaneously committed acts of great civic courage and Jewish zealotry. The contributions of Selvinsky, Ehrenburg, Antokolsky, and Ozerov to Holocaust literature are so more significant because their poems appeared in the Soviet mainstream during and immediately after the Great Patriotic War and also on the cusp of the bleakest years for Jewish culture in the poets’ homeland. Jewish-Russian poets, even though working under the doubly harsh conditions of Stalinism and antisemitism, managed to respond to the Holocaust much earlier than did their counterparts in the Anglo-American world, where, a few exceptions aside, the Shoah did not become a literary topic in the mainstream until the 1960s and 1970s.

Given the dearth of official Soviet information about the Holocaust, these poems were—or immediately became—much more than literary texts. One of the challenges is to understand

precisely how Jewish-Russian poets coopted, subverted or circumvented the Soviet rhetoric on Jewish wartime losses. Another challenge is to be able to tease out historical facts from the poem’s partial truths and silences. At the same time we should not over-read these poems as historical or political documents at the expense of their artistry and aesthetics. But there are other complicating factors as well. By proceeding in a reverse chronological order, I would like to identify three such factors.

The first factor has to do with the Soviet afterlife of the Jewish-Russian Holocaust poems written and published in 1941-1946. After 1945, Antokolsky’s “Death Camp” would be reprinted a number of times during the Soviet years with small emendations, whereas “No Memory Eternal” would not be reprinted in the USSR until 1966. When it was next published in 1971, the poem’s Judaic references were either omitted or completely obfuscated, changing and confusing the meaning of the poem. After 1945, Ehrenburg’s January 1945 Novyi mir cycle has never been reprinted in its entirety. In the USSR the cycle’s opening poem was published, with some changes and omissions, under the title “Babi Yar” in 1946, 1953, 1959, and 1964, respectively. After the original publication in 1946, Ozerov’s “Babi Yar” was reprinted in 1947, after that not until 1966, and subsequently four more times during the Soviet years. With changes and emendations, after 1942 Selvinsky’s “I Saw It!” kept appearing in various editions of his work and collective volumes, becoming one of his best known texts, whereas “Kerch,” after its original newspaper publication in 1943 and magazine publication in 1945, would not be reprinted in the Soviet Union until 1984. Simplistic causal explanations based on official taboos and censorial demands, as well as on the poets’ own instincts of self-preservation, fail to do justice to these undulations and obliterations—and to the consistencies in the poems’ publication histories.

The second factor has to do with what an ex-Soviet reader of European literature might call the “the ashes of Klaas” (“pepel Klaasa”) effect. The expression comes from The Legend of Thyl Ulenspiegel and Lamme Goedzak (1867), a novel by the Belgian writer Charles de Coster (1827-1879), which became very popular in Russia and the USSR, the Russian translation apparently published in 1915, and which was further popularized by the 1976 screen adaptation by Aleksandr Alov and Vladimir Naumov. The novel’s protagonist, the young Flemish man Thyl Ulenspiegel, becomes a fighter against the Spanish invaders during the Dutch War of Independence, after the inquisition burns his father, Klaas, as a heretic. Following the auto da fé, Thyl and his mother take a bit of ashes from the execution site; the widowed mother sews a small sacket, puts the ashes into it and hangs it on Thyl’s neck, to serve as a reminder of his father’s death and of his mission as an avenger. As he fights for the freedom of Flanders, Thyl keeps repeating to himself: “The ashes of Klaas are knocking at my heart.” The ashes of the murdered Jews knocked at the hearts of Selvinsky, Ehrenburg, Antokolsky and Ozerov as they bore poetic witness to the Shoah. Both Antokolsky and Ozerov wrote the most Jewish-conscious poems of their careers in the immediate aftermath of the Nazi genocidal atrocities and would never again come close to writing something as Jewishly articulate as they did between 1940 and 1946. Not even during the Thaw, when the ideological conditions were generally more favorable, while the risk of official reprisal lower, would the main heroes of this investigation, Selvinsky, Ehrenburg, Ozerov, and Antokolsky, write new poems based on their

wartime experiences as witnesses to the Shoah.\textsuperscript{199} Selvinsky and Ehrenburg passed away within a year of each other, in 1967 and 1968, respectively, whereas Antokolsky would live until 1978, and Ozerov, who died in 1996, would even see perestroika and witness the collapse of the USSR. In the 1970s-1980s, the ageing Soviet laureates who had created and published key Holocaust poetic texts in 1942-1946 would show an indifference to the problem of the Jewish Exodus from the Soviet Union. For reasons that remain to be understood, the persecution and suffering of tens of thousands of Jewish refuseniks did not knock at these poets’ hearts or push them to howl either militant or mournful Jewish-Russian verses.

The third factor bears directly on the historical context of World War II and of the Shoah, as well as on the ideological conditions of Soviet culture in the 1940s. This factor challenges us to reflect on the price the poets paid for bearing witness to the Shoah. Selvinsky’s 1943 collection \textit{Ballads and Songs} opened with the poem “Stalin at the Microphone” (“Stalin u mikrofona”), and this dithyrambic text was reprinted in his volume \textit{Wartime Lyric}, where “I Saw It!” also appeared. In Antokolsky’s 1946 volume \textit{Selected Works}, his poem “Death Camp” was sandwiched between the poem “23 February 1944” that ends with “Long live the glorious Soviet people!/And therefore—long live Stalin” and the poem “Glory” where one finds the lines “Glory to Stalin’s word;/Inspiring in struggle./“Stalin! Stalin! To you/We give the oath of loyalty again!”\textsuperscript{200} In January 1947 Ozerov published the opening part of a projected long poem called \textit{Stalin} in the popular magazine \textit{Soviet Woman}; to the best of my knowledge, he never completed the poem.\textsuperscript{201} Ehrenburg’s relationship with Stalin has of course been a popular subject with the critics—the end of World War II and the late 1940s constituting the peak of Ehrenburg’s favor with Stalin.

What do the Stalinist dithyrams by these talented and heroic poets tell us about the literary and ideological cost of bearing witness to the Shoah? It is not to sour the mood of gratitude and solemnity, but to honor the achievement of Jewish-Russian Holocaust poetry written and published in the USSR, that I pose my final question. Was praising the dictator through poetry the price that Antokolsky, Selvinsky, Ehrenburg, Ozerov and other Jewish-Russian authors paid for being able to mourn the victims of the Shoah—to mourn them as Soviets, as Russians, and as Jews?

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\textsuperscript{199} Selvinsky revisited the subject of the Shoah in the poem “Strashnyi sud” (“Last Judgment”), which he had trouble placing in central Soviet periodicals and published in the Tajikistan-based Russian-language magazine; see “Strashnyi sud,” Guliston 3 (July-September 1960): 5-7. It was reprinted only once in Sel’vinskii, Izbrannye proizvedeniia, ed. I. L. Mikhailov and N. G. Zakharenko (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel’ [Biblioteka poeta], 1972), 310-313. The poem commemorates the victims of the Shoah yet strikes, at least on the surface of it, a stark antireligious note.

\textsuperscript{200} In Antokol’skii’s Izbrannoe (1946): “23 February 1944” (“Dvadtsat’ tret’e fevralia sorok chetvertogo goda”) (169-171) is followed by “Hatred” (“Nenavist’”) (171-173), by “Death Camp” (174-175), by “Glory” (“Slava”) (180-181).

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