The Holocaust:
Memories and History
Dedicated to the Memory of
Maria (Musia) Brovarnik
and her sons
Victor and Anatolii Brovarnik,
killed by the Nazis
in Rostov–on–Don in August 1942
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... ix

Introduction ...................................................................................................................... xi
Victoria Khiterer

**Chapter One: Holocaust by Bullets and Extermination Camps**

Holocaust by Bullets: “Hitler’s Hidden Holocaust”? .................................................. 2
Peter Black

Rethinking the Elimination of Traces of Mass Murder at the Treblinka
Extermination Camp........................................................................................................ 43
Tomas Vojta

**Chapter Two: Visualizing the Holocaust**

Is Seeing Believing?
Photographs, Eyewitness Testimony, and Evidence of the Holocaust ..... 64
David Shneer

Jewish Ghetto Photographers ....................................................................................... 86
Judith Cohen

**Chapter Three: In the Shadow of the Holocaust**

Testimonies of Jewish Holocaust Survivors: Characterizing the Narratives of Resistance and Resilience ................................................................. 106
Judith Kaplan-Weinger and Yonit Hoffman

The Double–Edged Sword of Remembering the Holocaust:
The Case of Jewish Self–Identity .................................................................................. 133
Eric D. Miller

Babi Yar:
The Absence of the Babi Yar Massacre from Popular Memory.............. 143
Jacqueline Cherepinsky
# Table of Contents

## Chapter Four: Representation of the Holocaust in Russian Literature

Lev Ozerov as a Literary Witness to the Shoah in the Occupied Soviet Territories ........................................................................................................ 176
Maxim D. Shrayer

Art from Agony: Vasily Grossman and the Holocaust ........................... 188
John and Carol Garrard

Life and Fate of Soviet Jews in Aleksandr Galich’s Play
*Matrosskaia Tishina* and the Film *Papa* ................................................. 208
Victoria Khiterer

## Chapter Five: The Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide in Film

Early Holocaust Cinema: Jews under the Sign of the Cross ................. 232
Stuart Liebman

Non–Belated Trauma: Jean–Pierre Melville and the Beginnings of Holocaust Cinema .............. 263
Marat Grinberg

The Armenian–Jewish Connection: The Influence of Holocaust Cinema on Feature Films about the Armenian Genocide ............................. 289
Lawrence Baron

Dehumanization and the Achievement of *Schindler’s List* ................. 311
Dan McMillan

Holocaust Fantasy Films and Historical Considerations ......................... 335
Michael W. Rubinoff

## Chapter Six: Teaching the Holocaust

Remembering the Architecture of Death: Teaching the History and Psychology of the Holocaust ................................................................. 356
Kevin Simpson and Jon David K. Wyneken

Utilizing Holocaust Films in the College Classroom: One Instructor’s Insights ............................................................................................... 371
Valerie S. Thaler

Notes on Authors and Editors ........................................................................ 389
The story of Jewish–Russian poets’ bearing witness to the Shoah reached its apogee with the publication Lev Ozerov’s long poem “Babi Yar”, in 1946. Ozerov visited his native Kiev after its liberation in November 1943. His article “Kiev, Babi Yar,” which was partially based on collected eyewitness testimony, opened Part 1 (“Ukraine”) of the Ehrenburg–Grossman (derailed) “Black Book”. Ozerov composed his “Babi Yar” in 1944–45, and it first appeared in the April–May 1946 issue of the Moscow monthly “October” (Oktiabr’). A remarkable clarity of diction combined with a historical reconstruction of the September 1941 Babi Yar massacre of over 33,000 Jews makes this poem invaluable for historians of the Shoah and of Jewish–Soviet literature.

Jewish–Russian poets paid a price for being able to tell the world about the Shoah (Holocaust) in the occupied Soviet territories. In the wartime years, as the official Soviet position shifted from a partial obfuscation of the Shoah 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. For example, in Ilya Selvinsky’s 1942 landmark poem “I Saw It!” (Ia eto videl!), arguably the earliest Shoah literary text by a poet–witness, murdered “Jews” and “Slavs” were described as lying side by side in the Bagerovo ditch outside Kerch, a site where thousands of Jews were murdered by bullet. So more exceptional is the contribution of Lev Ozerov (1914–1996) to Shoah literature—and Ozerov’s place as a witness to the Shoah in the occupied Soviet territories. The story of Jewish–Russian poets bearing witness to the Shoah reached its apogee with the publication Lev Ozerov’s long poem Babi Yar, in 1946.

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 throughout the Nazi occupation.³ The extensive cultural legacy of Babi Yar has received previous critical attention.⁴ We should 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, a 1944 article and a subsequent 1947 story written in Yiddish by Itsik Kipnis, and episodes in the Yiddish–language epic War (Milkhome, first complete book edition 1948) by Perets Markish.⁵ In the postwar years, the commemoration—or, rather, the official non–commemoration—of the Babi Yar massacre became a cause célèbre of Soviet culture, while 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 Symphony No. 13 (1962), based in part on Evtushenko’s poem, and, to a lesser degree, to Anatoly Kuznetsov’s docunovel Babi Yar (1966).

Ilya Ehrenburg’s record was to publish the first Russian–language poem about Babi Yar in January 1945, in the flagship Moscow monthly Novy mir (New World).⁶ While Lev Ozerov, Ehrenburg’s younger contemporary, composed his Babi Yar, a long and detailed account of the September 1941 massacre at Babi Yar, in 1944–45, it was not published until the spring of 1946.⁷

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 (MIFLI) in 1934–39.⁸ Peers identified his aesthetics of the time with the Lakes School of English romanticism (ozernaia shkola), hence his flight in 1935 to the (illusive) safety of the non–Jewish pseudonym Ozerov (literally “of the lakes”). Ozerov’s first collection, Environ of the Dnieper (Pridneprov’e) appeared in Kiev in 1940. Soon after the Nazi invasion, Ozerov was dispatched to North 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 to 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 Maxim Gorky Literary Institute.

Ozerov apparently visited his native Kiev soon after its liberation in November 1943.⁹ His article “Kiev, Babi Yar,” which was based on collected eyewitness testimony and other documents, opened Part 1
Lev Ozerov as a Literary Witness to the Shoah

("Ukraine") of the Ehrenburg–Grossman (derailed) Black Book. Ozerov composed his Babi Yar in 1944–45, and it first appeared in the April–May 1946 issue of the Moscow monthly October (Oktiabr’), a journal in which Ozerov served as poetry editor in 1946–1948; he was fired as the anti–cosmopolitan campaign gained speed. In 1947, it was reprinted in his collection Liven’ (Downpour), edited by Pavel Antokolsky. 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 large swaths of the occupied Soviet territories, Ozerov’s Babi Yar owed its creation not only to Ozerov’s greatest moment of Jewish self–awareness and his private connection to Kiev, but also to Ozerov’s literary pedigree and his greater reliance on the experience of teachers and mentors, among them Ilya Selvinsky and Pavel 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 (smutnoe iskusstvo).

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 Ilya Selvinsky (1899–1968), Ilya Ehrenburg (1891–1967), and Pavel Antokolsky (1896–1978), the other three principal Jewish–Russian poetic witnesses to the Shoah, had all belonged. Although a student and disciple of the poets of the Russian Silver Age and of the early Soviet modernists, Ozerov, in his Shoah poem, 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 Shoah poems of 1944–1945, Ozerov’s Babi Yar employs a non–classical, 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 выстрели.
Выстрели.
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?!12

(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?!).

Subsequently in the 1947 publication of Ozerov’s collection *Downpour*, this section appeared as follows:

И выстрели.
Выстрели.
Звезды внезапного света.
И брат обнимает последним объятьем сестру …
И юркий ээсовец лейкой снимает все это.
И залпы.
И тяжкие хрипы лежащих в Яру.13

(Literally: And shots./ Shots./ Stars of sudden light./ And a brother embraces a sister with a final embrace … / And a furtive SS man keeps taking snapshots with a Leica./ Volley [of fire] after volley./ And heavy gasping of those lying in the Yar).

The deletion of “God,” while by itself a tribute to the censorial climate of *zhdanovshchina*, also obliterates Ozerov’s reference to *Skazanie o pogrome*, Vladimir (Ze’ev) Jabotinsky’s translation of Hayyim Nahman Bialik’s long poem *Tale of a Pogrom* (The original Hebrew title was *Be Ir HaHarigah* [*In the City of Slaughter*], 1904).

The tri-partite structure of Ozerov’s poem corresponds to the three principal tasks the poet’s persona undertakes: to visit Babi Yar so as to bear witness to the aftermath of the massacre, to attempt a poetic reconstruction of the massacre, and to give the victims a voice to speak...
their last will and testament. In the first section of the poem, set in 1944, the key note is one of breaking the silence, especially significant following a general shift toward silencing the Shoah that had become unwritten Soviet policy by the spring–summer of 1943, when Soviet troops went on a broad offensive and began to liberate the occupied territories in Ukraine and the south of Russia:

Я пришел к тебе, Бабий Яр.  
Если возраст у горя есть,  
Значит, я немыслимо стар.  
На столетья считать — не счесть.

Я стою на земле, моля:  
Если я не сойду с ума,  
То услышу тебя, земля, —  
Говори сама.

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—  
Break your silence.\(^14\)

(here and hereafter tr. Richard Sheldon)

This protest against unremembrance would become a leitmotif in post–Stalinist 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.
Today they keep coming down Lvovskaya 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 those massacred at Babi Yar:

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 Lvovskaya Street from Pavlovskaya and Dmitrievskaya, from Volodarskaya and Nekrasovskaya. After Lvovskaya [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.¹⁵

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 — мужчин закопали живыми в яму.
Но вдруг из земли показалась рука
И в седых завитках затылок …
Фашист ударил лопатой прямо.
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 Ozerv’s poem recall Ehrenburg’s essay “Nationkillers” (“Narodoubiitsy”), 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?’”\(^{16}\)

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 decades. Among the voices of the dead calling for both memorialization and revenge are the poet’s intimates:

Мой племянник захочет встать,
Он разбудит сестру и мать.
Им захочется руку выпростать,
Хоть минуту у жизни выпросить.

My nephew will want to get up.
He will awaken his sister and mother.
They will want to work loose their arms,
And beg life for just a minute.

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 fulfill. This motif of victims of the Shoah mourned, remembered, and memorialized through poetry unites Lev Ozerov’s finale with the conclusions of the key 1944–1945 Shoah poems by Ilya Selvinsky, Ilya Ehrenburg, and Pavel 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 vastly different poetic sensibilities.

As we reflect on the achievement of Ozerov as a literary witness to the Shoah, we should also take stock of the experiences of Jewish–Russian authors. Some of them were military journalists and combat officers during World War II, who encountered evidence of Nazi atrocities firsthand yet either chose silence or dwelt in the comfort of Soviet non–specificity. A number of Jewish–Russian poets born in the late 1910s and early 1920s entered the war as young men and women and were shaped by their wartime experiences. Yet the majority of these authors avoided poetic discussion of the Shoah throughout their careers. David Samoilov (b. Kaufman, 1920–1990), Aleksandr Mezhirov (1921[or 1923]–2009), and Yuri Levitansky (1922–1996), all three of them former servicemen and 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, even though they had certainly been in the position to reflect on the Shoah. Several poets from the generation of Lev Ozerov—especially Boris Slutsky (1919–1986)—did not begin to bear witness to 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 Shoah poems for the desk drawer in the 1940s yet deferred their submission and publication until safer times.

Lev Ozerov and his Babi Yar, the longest Russian–language Shoah poem written and published in Stalin’s time, thus represents an exception to the largely absent or delayed response to the Shoah by representatives of Ozerov’s literary generation. By bearing witness to the immediate aftermath of the massacre of Jews by Nazis and their allies and accomplices in the occupied Soviet territories, Lev Ozerov simultaneously committed acts of great civic courage and Jewish zealotry. His contribution to Shoah literature is so more significant because his Babi Yar appeared in the Soviet mainstream immediately after the Great Patriotic War and also on the cusp of the bleakest years for Jewish culture in the
poet’s homeland. Given the dearth of official Soviet information about the Shoah, Ozerov’s Babi Yar was—or immediately became—much more than a literary text. One of the challenges is to understand precisely how Ozerov and his fellow Jewish–Russian poets circumvented the Soviet rhetoric on Jewish wartime losses. At the same time, we should not overread Ozerov’s Babi Yar as a historical document at the expense of its artistry and aesthetics.

In closing, I would like to reflect on the legacy of Lev Ozerov as a witness to the Shoah in the occupied Soviet territories. After the original publication in 1946, it was reprinted in 1947, after that not until 1966, and subsequently four more times during the Soviet years. Having written the most Jewish–conscious poem of his career in the immediate aftermath of the Nazi genocidal atrocities, Ozerov would never again come close to writing something as Jewishly articulate as he did in Babi Yar. Not even during the Thaw, when the ideological conditions were generally more favorable and the risk of official reprisal lower, would Ozerov publish new poems based on his wartime experiences as a witness to the Shoah.

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Notes

Anglicized 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 U.S Library of Congress transliteration system is used. In some cases, preference is given to literary, not literal English translations of poetic texts. 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.

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5 The poetic cycle “Kirillovky Ravines (“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.


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. The historical record was scantly established in the margins of Ozerov’s own writings and of the reviews of his collection Downpour (Liven’, 1947), where Babi Yar was published; see, for instance, Il’ia Sel’vinskii, “Poeziia L. Ozerova [rev. of Liven’ by Lev Ozerov], Oktiabr’ 8 (1947): 178.


Ozerov, Babii Iar, Oktiabr’, 161.

Ozerov, Liven’, 28.


