Around the Point:
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in Multiple Languages

Edited by

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ILYA SELVINSKY AND SOVIET SHOAH POETRY
IN THE SPRING OF 1945*

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The first poet to publish extensively about the Shoah in the occupied Soviet territories, in 1942-1943 Ilya Selvinsky (1899-1968) bore witness to the Nazi atrocities in the Crimean peninsula and the south of Russia.¹ Most significant for the experience of bearing witness to the Shoah are Selvinsky’s poems “Ia eto videl!” (“I Saw It!” 1942) and “Kerch” (1942), in both of which the poet depicted the aftermath of the execution of thousands of Jews who had remained in and around the occupied Kerch and its environs after the first retreat of Soviet troops in November 1941. In November 1943 a dramatic rupture occurred in Selvinsky’s military service, resulting from his removal from the frontlines and repressions against him, the later ranging from Selvinsky’s punitive dismissal from the army to party resolutions targeting the poet. The most devastating

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resolution was the one the Secretariat of the Central Committee issued on 10 February 1944. Titled “About I. Selvinsky’s Poem ‘To whom Russia sang a lullaby….’,” it was, apparently, the only wartime resolution of the Central Committee to single out and punish one Soviet poet. I have argued elsewhere that the ultimate goal of the repressions against Selvinsky was to intimidate writers into silence about Nazi crimes against the Jews and about Jewish military valor. A decorated military officer much admired by his military commanders and fellow officers, Lieutenant Colonel Selvinsky was thrown out of the army. A famous poet and the author of poems and war songs lyrics that enjoyed national acclaim, in February 1944 Selvinsky was officially declared a person of no status. At a time when a return home from the war front promised a respite and a semblance of a peaceful existence, Selvinsky, paradoxically, found himself a discharged officer and restless exile to wartime Moscow. He spent the late autumn of 1943, all of 1944, and the first few months of 1945 in Moscow, trying to write his way out.

As we seek to contextualize Selvinsky’s return to print in the late 1944 and 1945 and the restoration of his military rank and status, we should keep in mind that as a poetic witness Selvinsky stood apart from Ilya Ehrenburg, Pavel Antokolsky, and Lev Ozerov, the other three cardinal Jewish-Russian poetic voices of the Shoah, in three fundamental ways. Selvinsky was among a very small group of Soviet literary professionals—and perhaps the only published poet in this group—to have witnessed the aftermath of the Shoah by bullet in the first months of 1942. In this sense, Selvinsky had “seen it” and described it in verse about 2 years earlier than

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2 See Shrayer, I SAW IT, 153-186. In December 1943 the Secretariat of the Central Committee passed two resolutions in a row, in both of which Selvinsky was the only poet branded for chastisement, and Mikhail Zoshchenko the only fiction writer: “On the Control over Literary-Artistic Magazines” (2 December 1943) and “On Raising the Responsibility of [Executive] Secretaries of Literary-Artistic Magazines” (3 December 1943). See Andrei Artizov, Oleg Naumov, eds., Vlast’ i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsia: dokumety TsK RKP(b)-VKP(b), VChK-OGPU-NKVD o kul’turnoi politike, 1917-1953 gg. (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond “Demokratia”, 1999), 507-508. On 10 February 1944 the Secretariat issued a separate resolution on Selvinsky alone, “About I. Selvinsky’s Poem ‘To whom Russia sang a lullaby….’” See Artizov and Naumov, 510.

did the other Jewish-Russian poets who wrote Russian-language poems about the Shoah in 1944-1945. At the same time, following the fighting in Kuban and liberation of Krasnodar in 1943, Selvinsky stayed in the Black Sea region until his punitive dismissal from the army. From the late autumn of 1943 up until April of 1945 he was in Moscow and could not be with the troops liberating the occupied Soviet territories; he could not and did not visit the sites of the massacres such as Drobitski Yar in Kharkov and Babi Yar in Kiev. Furthermore, Selvinsky did not have the opportunity to see the Nazi death camps as they were being liberated by the Soviet troops in the summer and autumn of 1944 and winter of 1945.

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In April 1945, his rank and status restored, Selvinsky was dispatched, as a staff military journalist, to the 2nd Baltic Front at the Kurland [Courland] peninsula. According to the poet’s recollections, Selvinsky was not too happy with the assignment and told Lieutenant General Nikolai Pupyshev, the chief of staff at PUR, the Army’s Political Directorate, that “at this front I will not see that which is necessary to me as a writer.” “You asked to be assigned to the army? […] So your request has been satisfied. The rest should not be of concern to you,” the general replied. Selvinsky wanted to be in Berlin to witness the triumph of the victors. But still, as he noted in the diary, “I am leaving with an easy feeling. The editor [of the army newspaper], whom I already met (he was in Moscow) […] is a very nice person. Perhaps we won’t get into a fight.” Selvinsky was leaving for the front on the wings of the recent success of his historical verse epic The Livonian War (pub. 1946), which was enthusiastically received by leading Soviet poets, among them Antokolsky, who was then at the zenith of his official Soviet acclaim.

Also on Selvinsky’s mind was the recent controversy he had created. In several public literary discussions in the spring of 1945, Selvinsky had

4 Selvinsky, Wartime Diaries, Authorized corrected photocopy at the Selvinsky Memorial Museum, Simferopol (hereafter Selvinsky, Wartime Diaries), 7 April 1945; cf. Vera Babenko, Voina glazami poeta: Krymskie stranitsy iz dnevnikov i pisem I. L. Sel’vinskogo (Simferopol’: Krymskaia Akademia gumanitarnykh nauk; Dom-muzei I. L. Sel’vinskogo, 1994; hereafter Babenko, Voina), 5. Babenko published—and commented on—extensive excerpts from Selvinsky’s wartime diaries and letters. However, her valuable publication contains errors, including those in the dating of diary excerpts.
5 Babenko, Voina, 65.
6 Selvinsky, Wartime Diaries, 7 April 1945.
suggested that socialist *symbolism*, rather than socialist realism, was a much more suitable method for Soviet art. Selvinsky also spoke of a “crisis in contemporary Soviet dramaturgy.” As Selvinsky described it in his wartime dairies, “[Dmitry] Polikarpov raised a scream at a party meeting of the Literary Institute, that I was a revisionist of the party line in literature.” On 20 May 1945 Selvinsky would comment on what he saw as the ills of Soviet society and cultural life: “In our public [в нашеi общественности] I am dismayed by the immobility of error, if this error is made by somebody on instruction from above.” Selvinsky used as examples two public ostracisms, one from the 1920s after the publication of his novel in verse *Fur Trade*, another from the spring of 1945: “The same happened with the term ‘soc[ialist] symbolism.’ At the presidium [of the Union of Soviet Writers] they were trying to prove to me that it was a terrifying lack of literacy [on Selvinsky’s part—MDS] from the point of view of politics etc. etc. etc.—and when I pulled out an article printed in *Literary Gazette* on 10 March 1940, where Molotov says, why cannot we do creative work in the mode of soc[ialist] symbolism, nobody dared [to say anything] and they continued to insist on [my] error as though M[olotov] had never said anything [like this].” Even after all the recent troubles Selvinsky could not conform to the official line as he tried again to forecast the winds of cultural politics.

Prompted by thoughts about his new tragedy, *The Livonian War*, and the location of his service, the Baltics, in the spring of 1945, Selvinsky also recorded these painful lines about a poet’s immortality and Stalin’s role in history:

A poet’s immortality is decided not by the years to come, but by the present time. […] If my *Livonian War* had appeared already back [when it was set], in the sixteenth century, it would have become immortal. But of what importance is it today? A creation of crafty hands. Yet nevertheless I am torturously, wildly jealous of the poet who will write about Stalin in 70-100-150 years! What a huge horizon will have opened before him,

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7 See “Докладная записка заместителя начальника управления пропаганды и агитации ВКП(б) А. М. Еголину секретарю ЦК ВКП(б) Г. М. Маленкову о положении в литературе,” 3 August 1945, Artizov and Naumov, 534.
8 Selvinsky, Wartime Diaries, 20 May 1945.
what depths of ideas, times, evaluations. [...] Since never before in history had there been a greater horror than the Soviet-Fascist war, then the clash of two symbols—light and darkness—STALIN and Hitler. [...] Revealing Stalin’s image will help understand the world.¹⁰

Selvinsky arrived at the front on 15 April 1945. “I was thrown across from the Black Sea to the Baltic Sea [...]. I found myself at the Kurland turf [kurlianskii piatachok],” Selvinsky reminisced in 1967, “where real war, as it seemed to me, was no longer happening.”¹¹ “This is why, despite the fact that [...] by virtue of both my personal biography and the nature of my creativity I was, as it were, made for a war epic, I could give the reader nothing more than frontline lyrics,” the poet wrote. “This immediately became clear to me, and with this emotional trauma I arrived at the First Shock Army.”¹² Selvinsky remained in the Baltic region until August 1945, when he was demobilized again, this time with a standard honorable dismissal, and returned to Moscow. In his accounts Selvinsky greatly overstated the “quietness” of the 2nd Baltic Front, perhaps because his experience in Kurland differed vastly from that of his days of battle in Crimea, North Caucasus, and Kuban.¹³ On the Kurland (Courland) peninsula, troops of the First Shock Army blockaded Germany’s Army Group 3 (later renamed Army Group Courland).¹⁴ Selvinsky contributed to the newspaper of the First Shock Army Na razgrom vraga (For the Defeat of the Enemy) and to the newspaper Suvorovets (Suvorovite) of the 2nd Baltic Front.¹⁵

¹⁰ Selvinsky, Wartime Diaries, April 1945.
Ilya Selvinsky (first on left) with Yakov Khelemsky (center), their fellow officers and a driver. 2nd Baltic Front. May 1945. (Courtesy of Tatyana Selvinskaya)

The editorial office of *Suvorovite*, to which Selvinsky was attached with the task of mentoring younger writers working on the newspaper staff, was located in the town of Viekšniai in the northwestern corner of Lithuania near the Latvian border. While stationed in the Baltic region Selvinsky gave readings from his works before audiences of soldiers and officers, and at least in the army was treated as a living classic of Soviet poetry.\(^{16}\) The poet Yakov Khelemsky (1914-2003), who got to know Selvinsky during their service at the 2nd Baltic Front in 1945, reminisced that he and the other military journalists “knew by heart Selvinsky’s ‘I Saw It!’ ‘Ballad about Leninism,’ and ‘Taman.’”\(^{17}\) On 23 May 1945 *Suvorovite* reported on one of Selvinsky’s readings: “On 21 May the House of the Red Army [of the 2nd Baltic Front] hosted an evening with one of the most prominent [odnogo iz krupneishikh] Soviet poets, Ilya Selvinsky. […] During the evening Ilya Selvinsky spoke of his work during the days of the war and his creative plans. […] Ilya Selvinsky read […] his widely-

\(^{16}\) Khelemshkii, “Kurliandskaia vesna,” 127-128; 134-135.

\(^{17}\) Khelemshkii, “Kurliandskaia vesna,” 131.
known poems ‘I Saw It!’ ‘Ballad about Leninism,’ ‘[To] Russia,’ as well as new lyrical poems.”

Directly after the fall of Berlin and Germany’s capitulation, Selvinsky was placed in charge of a group of officer-journalists sent by way of the Lithuanian coast, via Klaipeda, “across E[ast] Prussia to Königsberg. They gave us a powerful truck, two canisters of gasoline and ten officers of different nationalities (Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, Uzbeks, Kazakhs). Goal: to bring thoughts from there. To tell, to summarize the impressions, to share forecasts, since our front is the only front remaining on our soil, and the people want to know what goes on over there.”

Selvinsky pondered the sources of Nazism as he stood on the soil of East Prussia. “Goethe, Schiller, Novalis … Kant, Fichte, Hegel … Bach, Mozart, Beethoven! What heights, what loftiness! I simply have a hard time believing that this nation could have created such geniuses. A scary, dumb nation with a one-track mind (if it thinks at all),” Selvinsky wrote down on 2 June 1945.

Yakov Khelemsky, a staff writer for Suvorovite who was with Selvinsky on the trip, recalled how en route to Königsberg Selvinsky helped the family of an injured German girl by bringing them food and flowers. Later, when they were already in Königsberg, a member of their delegation confronted Selvinsky:

“Wasn’t it a bit much, Comrade Lieutenant Colonel? Well, you helped them out with some food from your personal ration—that’s fine. But what were the flowers for? What did they do with our children! Should we be pouring gifts onto theirs?”

Selvinsky turned crimson. “Comrade Captain, you forget that we’re liberating from fascism not only our land, but also Germany. […] The ditch outside Kerch still haunts me in my dreams. So does this mean that I should respond to it with a Königsberg ditch?”

After explaining to his colleagues that “here today is not the right place and time for vengeance. Especially when we’re talking about old people, women, children,” Selvinsky suggested that the Soviet officers look for the grave of Immanuel Kant. The principal journalistic output of Selvinsky’s trip to East Prussia was the fatigued essay “Königsberg Today (Travel Notes),” which speaks with about an equal passion of Kant and of the

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19 Selvinsky, Wartime Diaries, 20 May 1945.
20 Selvinsky, Wartime Diaries, 2 June 1945.
Soviet victory. Selvinsky also composed during the trip to East Prussia, reads like a faint echo of Selvinsky’s fabulous song lyrics from 1942-1943. Selvinsky again has a hard time praising Stalin with verve and conviction: “And [the wave of heroic warriors] speaks with holiness/ Of military events—/Of the young falcon-soldier/ And of Stalin-eagle.”

As Tatyana Selvinskaya recalled, at home her father would pace back and forth in his study and “talk to Stalin all the time. He was proving to him that he was loyal…. He was constantly proving something to [Stalin].” In his Kurland diary entries for early May 1945, Selvinsky writes at times with astonishing self-awareness, at other times with self-delusion, and sometimes also with the kind of political loyalty that he could never muster up in his literary works. On 2 May 1945 Selvinsky writes down: “Today Berlin fell. And again, as I often have in recent times, I am thinking of Russia, of the astonishing destiny of this incomparable country.” Eventually he comes to the subject of Nazism and fascism and of the initial success of the German invasion:

Those were days of horror because everything incomprehensible horrifies. Incomprehensibility was the strength of fascism. Where was it coming from? Why are the people symbolizing evil, openly saying in the face of every nation [or people] that they despise it and will make it their slave—why were these people so strong, that actually for a period of time they had managed to enslave Europe? “If fascists live in this world, then there is no god...,” one old woman said [this is in fact a direct quote from Selvinsky’s “I Saw It!”—MDS]. But god will not take offense at this statement, and to prove his existence he will not punish the Germans, and the fascists will not become weaker from this. And suddenly “the miracle on the Volga.”

Thoughts of Stalingrad—and inevitably of his own years at the war fronts in the Black Sea region—summon Stalin’s image in the poet’s mind:

And again, as always, appearing before me and striking my consciousness, is Stalin’s image. There is a person at whose pedestal all my skepticism evaporates. Believing in Stalin I become taller. Stronger. With this faith my life becomes easier. Every person has his Stalin, just as every person

22 Sel’vinskii, “Kenigsberg segodnia (Putevye zametki),” Na razgrom vraga 1 June 1945.
24 Tatyana Selvinskaya, Personal interview, Simferopol, 15 December 2011.
25 Selvinsky, Wartime Diaries, 2 May 1945.
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has his god. Perhaps this is why it would be hard for me to see Stalin in
daily life [v bytu], to talk to him. [...] I have written twice about Stalin: in
_Arctic_ (part III, ch. I [Selvinsky is referring to _Chelyuskiniana_, the prewar
version of would eventually become _Arctic_] and in the poem “Reading
Stalin” [Selvinsky omits several other wartime poems and an article]. This
is the best of what the poets have written about Stalin. But it is too little
not only for Stalin’s image, but also in comparison with what I could and
should say about him. But I cannot write for the “desk drawer.” This
would kill the quality of a contemporary in me. [...] I want to write about
Stalin. 26

While in the Baltics Selvinsky reflected at length on what had become, in
his mind, a nexus of historical and literary anxieties: the war and the
horrors he had personally witnessed, the price of survival and victory,
Soviet history, Stalin.

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Was Selvinsky thinking of Latvia and the nearby Lithuania as lands where
the Nazis and the local murderers had annihilated the Jewish
communities? Was he seeing parallels between the Shoah in his native
Crimea and the Shoah in the Baltic lands? It is unclear whether in April-
May 1945 Selvinsky saw Libava (Liepāja) or Ventspils, the sites of mass
executions of Latvian Jews in 1941, or stopped at the killing sites and
mass graves in the villages and small towns which he passed through or
was stationed in, or made the point of visiting the Dondangen (Dundaga)
concentration camp. We know that the map of his travels in the north of
Lithuania included Viekšniai, Mažeikiai, and Žagarė, whose ancient
Litvak communities had been massacred in the summer and autumn of
1941. Selvinsky also visited Kretinča, Palanga, and Klaipeda on
Lithuania’s coast. Finally, we know that in early June he was stationed
outside Riga, although we do not know whether he saw the site of the
Rumbala massacre, in which about 25,000 Jews of Riga were murdered in
late November and early December 1941, the same weeks as the Jews of
Kerch were being massacred at the so-called Bagerovo anti-tank ditch.
Selvinsky did not write poems about the devastation of Latvia’s and
Lithuania’s Jewish communities. 27 One possible explanation behind

26 Selvinsky, Wartime Diaries, 2 May 1945.
27 Yakov Khelemsky’s cycle of poems “Gulf of Riga” includes the poem “On the
outskirts of Riga a ghetto died out...” (October 1944), in which the poet writes:
“Here every stone was the Wailing Wall” and describes the trucks carrying victims
to the execution site in the Biķernieki Forest, but does not identify the victims as
Selvinsky’s poetic silence about the devastation of Latvia’s and Lithuania’s Jewish communities is that in the spring of 1945 he could not have written—could not feel that his knowledge of the scene qualified him to write—poems of bearing witness in the vein of “I Saw It!” and “Kerch.” But there are other, more speculative and politically motivated explanations as well. In Selvinsky’s Baltic diaries from the spring and summer of 1945 one finds no information on the area’s Jewish past, no reflections on the Shoah in Latvia and Lithuania.

At the same time, we know that Selvinsky continued to reflect on his first-hand experiences of the Nazi atrocities against the Jews going back to his military service in 1941-43. The proof is Selvinsky’s long poem *Kandava* (1945), which was in fact composed outside Riga in June 1945 and marked with the place of its composition, “Dzintari,” an area of the resort of Jūrmala. The poem *Kandava* is especially important in Selvinsky’s career as a Jewish-Russian poetic witness to the Shoah because it bridges what he saw and witnessed in Crimea, North Caucasus, and Kuban in 1941-1943 and what he learned about the Nazi camps in the spring of 1945. In *Kandava* Selvinsky deliberately linked the murder of Jews in Crimea in 1941-42 with the murder of Jews in the death camps in Poland, thus bringing together the Shoah by bullet and the so-called “Final Solution” into a single history.

When Selvinsky’s *Kandava* appeared in the January-February 1946 issue of the Moscow monthly *Oktiabr’* (October), it was printed as part of “Vesna 1945 goda” (“Spring of 1945”), a selection of four poems composed in the Baltic area in the spring of 1945. Selvinsky would include these poems in *Crimea, Caucasus, Kuban* (1947), the first book he published after the 1943-1944 party resolutions. In October Selvinsky’s selection immediately preceded three texts by Mikhail Isakovsky, inviting a comparison. The magazine version of *Kandava* was shorter than the one published in *Crimea, Caucasus, Kuban*, where Selvinsky added one long passage and one short passage to the poem and also made a number of smaller changes. At the heart of the narrative lies a fusion of Selvinsky’s recorded nightmare with his first-hand account of the surrender of a Nazi division at Kandava (Kandau).

Selvinsky’s diary offers invaluable material toward a reconstruction of the poet’s artistic laboratory during the “Kurland spring”; it is indispensable

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28 See Khelemskii, “Kurliandskaia vesna,” 159-160.
for the understanding of how the personal and the historical, the Soviet and the Jewish, the witnessed and the imagined, coalesced in the poet’s psyche. On 5 May 1945, Selvinsky wrote down the contents of a nightmare which has, among its literary sources, Vasily Grossman’s “The Hell of Treblinka” and also, perhaps, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*:

Today I had a dream that Berta [Selvinsky’s wife] and I found ourselves at a death factory [na fabrike smerti] in Majdanek or Treblinka. We walked side by side with the other victims along an asphalted path, and on both sides, forming two lines, there stood the Germans and looked at us with the eyes of people who are entertained by the sight of those condemned to die now walking toward their execution. [...] The most terrifying thing in my nightmare consisted not in the fear of dying, but in the fact that I had a whole lot of time to picture it in my mind. I walked with B[erta] for a long time and thought of *where* I was going and *what* exactly awaits us there? What tools of execution? What devices?

Selvinsky writes of seeing lines of German soldiers who were his “enemies” and who “stared with curiosity at him in anticipation of his execution.” He wakes up from his nightmare “no longer feeling anything but horror, horror, horror.” Then comes the poet’s interpretation of the dream, in which his experience as a witness to the Shoah finds cogent expression—as do also his two earlier poems, “I Saw It!” and “Kerch”:

I woke up. That is, I passed from one state of being into another the way one passes from life into death. Unfortunately, I don’t believe in disintegration—and therefore I dare not make conclusions. But here is the thing: we judge a person on the basis of what his life was like. We say: a person’s character is defined by the fact that they had murdered his three children, his wife hanged herself, and he was kept rotting in jail for five years. Or something of the sort. Yes? Clear. This is biography. An occurrence which one simply cannot disregard. But what about a life of [night] dreams? Do we not have, besides our official biography, a second one? One of dream-visions? In my life, the sight of 7000 corpses in the Bagerovo ditch at Kerch in 1942 played a huge role. Those who would want to study my character would need to take this into account. I experienced through that what victims of Majdanek and Treblinka experienced. I could describe this in bright colors and with all the details. My nervous system is oblivious to the fact that this did not happen with comrade Ilya-Karl Lvovich S., 45 years of age, white-collar worker, party member, never sentenced, never tried, never this and that. With him this never happened, but with them, with all of you it did happen! Therefore it also happened with him. [...] Was I in Treblinka? If you ask my

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29 Selvinsky, Wartime Diaries, 5 May 1945.
memory—no. If you pose this question to my nerves—undoubtedly yes I was.  

For days Selvinsky remained under the spell of his nightmare. On 7 May 1945, as a follow-up to his previous diary entry, he recorded that “in early childhood [he] used have a dream about a cart harnessed with a white horse, and on the cart—my father’s corpse. […] This was in 1906, after a Jewish pogrom. My father died seventeen years after that, when I was already a 4th-year [university] student. […] And yet this dream, which I subsequently had two more times—in Odessa (1910) and in Eupatoria (1911)—stayed in my consciousness like a trauma.”  

On 12 May 1945, on the heels of his harrowing dream, Selvinsky wrote down the following account of events:

General Vasiliev (Commander of the 1 Corps [Lieutenant General Ivan Vasiliev, who in 1944 had distinguished himself during the liberation of Crimea] and commander of the 306 Division [Major General Mikhail Kucheryavenko drove to the Germans to accept the capitulation of a division. I went with them. It was somewhere beyond the town of Kandava. […] We drove into some sort of a clearing beside a forest—the division’s platz. The generals disappeared into some little house, to which the German obersts [literally “colonels,” but Selvinsky probably uses it to mean “top commanders”], who had been expecting them, had driven up; I stayed outside. Before me, formed into a tetrangle, there stood a division, about 4000 or 5000 people. […] These SS [men] […]—everything I had seen on the screen, in photos and also on posters—all of this was real. I was drawn, with irresistible force, to stride before this formation. It was that very nightmare of 5 May, which had struck me literally five days ago…. I walked on a stomped-out path … and 10,000 eyes that belonged to the vilest enemies of my people (both Russian and Jewish) stared at me from the formation. […] Miracles! O miracles…. 5000 fascists, who had carried out that which cannot be erased from memory, the museum of horror in Majdanek and Treblinka, do not dare touch with a finger a Jew who strolls before them.

In the structure of the resulting poem, Kandava, Selvinsky’s recollected, personal nightmare occasions a lengthy documentary-like description of the surrender of Nazi troops. The description, in turn, prompts an opportunity to imagine a Nazi officer’s nightmare of revenge by Soviet soldiers and by Jewish voices of the Nazis’ victims.

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30 Selvinsky, Wartime Diaries, 5 May 1945.
31 Selvinsky, Wartime Diaries, 7 May 1945.
32 Selvinsky, Wartime Diaries, 12 May 1945.
Page of Ilya Selvinsky’s wartime diary entry for 12 May 1945, with a description and a drawing of the capitulation of a Nazi division at Kandava. (Courtesy of Ilya Selvinsky Memorial Museum, Simferopol.)
Selvinsky opens the poem with a nightmarish dream transformed into the lyrical hero’s recollection:

мне снился накануне сон: иду
с женой рядом где-то в Освенциме
или в Майданеке. Иду пред строем
фашистских серо-голубых солдат,
и тысячи оледенелых глаз,
презрительных, насмешливых, злорадных,
а то и просто любопытных, смотрят
на то, как мы идем на гибель.

(I had a dream just on the eve: I walk/ with my wife somewhere in Auschwitz/ or Majdanek. I walk 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.)

Soon thereafter the mode shifts from oniric vision to reconstructed reality, and the tone changes accordingly as Selvinsky describes being in a group with a Soviet general and seven Soviet officers as they accept the surrender of a Nazi division. As Selvinsky’s eyes scan the rows of soldiers and officers, his thoughts drift to his recent nightmare about being murdered, alongside his wife, at a Nazi concentration camp:

[...] мне вспомнился вчерашний мой кошмар...
Вот! Вот они, те самые глаза,
что на меня со спутницей глядели,
когда мы шли на гибель. Я узнал
вот этого! И вон того! И тех,
что во второй... что во второй шеренге...
Скажите им: “Майданек”, “Освенцим”,
“Треблинка” или “Керчь”. Они поймут.
Они оттуда! [...].

([...] I recalled my yesterday’s nightmare.../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

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33 Sel’vinskii, Kandava, Oktiabr’ 1-2 (1946): 3-6. I am deliberately quoting from the shorter, magazine version of Kandava as it appeared in Oktiabr’ as part of the selection of Selvinsky’s poems titled “Vesna 1945 goda” (“Spring of 1945”). A longer version of the poem appeared in Krym Kavkaz Kuban’ (209-217) and in subsequent editions. However, in the longer version Selvinsky left intact all the references to Nazi atrocities and the Shoah.
row.../Were I to say to them: ‘Majdanek,’ ‘Auschwitz,’ ‘Treblinka,’ or ‘Kerch,’ they would understand./ They are from there! [...]”

Yakov Khelemsky, a native of Kiev like his childhood friend Lev Ozerov, devoted a long memoir to Selvinsky, which reads as a novella in its own right. Penned in 1980 and titled *Kurland Spring*, Khelemsky’s memoir fleshed out some of the details of the events that inspired and informed Selvinsky’s *Kandava*. Khelemsky unearthed Selvinsky’s previously unpublished letter to his wife, dated 10 May 1945, in which he described the nightmarish dream he would later capture in *Kandava*:

[…] I never got to see the very torments of death, because I finally managed to wake up, but one odd sensation has stayed with me: “two lines of Germans, and between them down a paved path you and I are walking alongside the other condemned ones [...]” Yesterday I saw the very same sight. And all the while, as I walked behind the general, I felt your presence beside me—and this awareness that it’s the *day of our wedding anniversary*, and precisely on this day Kandava, and not Majdanek, defines our life together, made me absolutely giddy with happiness.

Having previously written and published two key poems about the Shoah in Crimea (“I Saw It!” and “Kerch”), Selvinsky placed the Bagerovo massacre in the same category as three Nazi death camps in Poland; Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek, and Treblinka. But the poem did not stop with the surrender of the Nazi troops and Selvinsky’s superimposed nightmare of dying in a camp. In a particularly powerful, cinematic twist of imagination (or was this, too, a factual reconstruction?), Selvinsky describes how he noticed that a Nazi captain wore a brass emblem of the Crimean peninsula, Selvinsky’s homeland. Such “Crimean shields” were given to the German participants of the Crimean campaign from 21 September 1941 to 4 July 1942:

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34 In “Conversation with a POW,” a poem of 1944, Selvinsky argues that a German soldier has no right to say that he was forced to fight after having walked “across cities,/ Disregarding ditches filled with corpses [Nevziraia na rvy v trupakh]./ From mass executions and mobile killing vans.” See Sel’vinskii, “Razgovor s voennoplennym,” in *Krym Kavkaz Kuban’,* 183.

35 Selvinsky, letter to Berta Selvinskaya, 10 May 1945, quoted in Khelemskii, “Kurliandskaia vesna,” 158.

Я разглядел чеканку очертаний расстрелянного Крыма. Боже мой!
На нем оттиснут пунктом: Симферополь...
(Я там родился.) Севастополь! (Здесь я обучался воинскому долгу.)
Евпаторийский берег — берег муз, где занялась любовь моя и песня.
Я сам не помню, как это случилось...
Я, как лунатик, подошел к нему и посмотрел в глаза. Готов поклясться, что я их видел. Видел накунуне в Майданеке. И спутница моя, наверное, узнала б их мгновенно.

(I made out the stamped shape/ of the executed Crimea. O god!/ On it, incised was the dot of Simferopol…/ (I was born there.) Sebastopol! (Here/ I learned military duty.)/ 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 right away.)

In the longer version of the poem, Selvinsky added the city of Kerch to the landmarks of Crimea incised on the Nazi “Crimean shield”: “And finally, gray from ancient age,/ overwhelmed with ashes like Pompeii,/ splattered over with blood and brains,/ the peak of all my torments—‘Kerch’!”

In the lyrical notes taking the poet back to his youth and to the Judaic and Graeco-Roman roots in Crimea, and also to his wartime years of personal bravery and eyewitnessing, Selvinsky repeats some of the phrases from “Kerch” (1942). Selvinsky describes himself as moving “как лунатик” (“like a somnambulist)—exactly the way a survivor of the Bagerovo ditch execution is said to amble in the text of “Kerch.” The versification of Kandava, its blank iambic pentameter, also points to Selvinsky’s earlier masterpiece. In reflecting on the unity of Selvinsky’s wartime poetry, Khelemsky, a Jewish-Russian poet from the younger generation who spoke guardedly of the Shoah in poems published in the late 1940s, proposed that a number of Selvinsky’s wartime poems, including “I Saw It!” and “Kerch,” formed a cycle of epic proportions.

“[…]It turns out,” Khelemsky wrote in 1980, that ‘Kerch’ and Kandava,

37 Sel’vinskii, Krym Kavkaz Kuban’, 216.
38 Khelemskii was, I believe, the first to note a philological kinship of “Kerch” and Kandava; see Khelemskii, “Kurlianskaia vesna,” 172; Shrayer, I SAW IT, 210-211.
similar in their texture of verse and also forming an internal dialogue, apparently frame [Selvinsky’s extensive epic] narrative.” In the Soviet (Jewish) game of understatement and code-speaking, Khelemsky gave the reader a number of clues that a principal unifying factor of Selvinsky’s wartime poetry was the recurrent subject of the Shoah in Crimea.

To return to the narrative of Kandava, Selvinsky ends up coming up to the SS officer and ripping the brass Crimean emblem off the captain’s uniform. This gives him a feeling of “bliss” (“blazhenstvo”) of a kind he “had never experienced before.” But what is more, now 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 Soviet prisoners suddenly comes up to the captain and rips off from his chest—“с него — эсэсовца, ария—/ эмblemu покореня Крыма“ (“from him, an SS member, an Aryan./ the emblem of the subjugation of Crimea”). The phrase “покореня Крыма“ (“[of] the subjugation of Crimea”; exactly in the genitive singular) echoes a famous line from Woe of Wit (1824), Aleksandr Griboedov’s play in verse, where the protagonist, Chatsky, says in Act 2, Scene 5:

А судьи кто? — За древностию лет
К свободной жизни их вражда непримирима.
Суждения черпают из забытых gazet
Времен Очаковских и покоренья Крыма.

(And who are the judges?—In their ancient age/ Their enmity toward free life has no end./ They draw their judgments from forgotten newspapers/ From the times of [the siege of] Ochakov and the subjugation of Crimea).

In Kandava Selvinsky emphasized his deep grounding in not only Russian modernism, but also the Golden Age of Russian poetry. The reference to the outspoken intellectual Chatsky of Woe of Wit cut both ways. On the one hand, it alluded to both the time when Crimea and parts of the Black Sea coast became part of the Russian Empire (in the course of two Russo-Turkish wars) and the then-recent Nazi occupation of Crimea. On the other hand, it hinted at Selvinsky’s own Soviet “judges” and at the poet’s refusal to let go of the topic of the Nazi atrocities in his native Crimea. In fact, “forgotten newspapers” point to Selvinsky’s dismissal of “newspaper columns” in favor of the poet-witness’s first-hand knowledge of Nazi atrocities in “I Saw It!”—yet another way of linking Kandava and Selvinsky’s Shoah poems of 1942-1943.

40 Khelemskii, “Kurliandskaia vesna,” 172.
In reality, as opposed to the dream within the poem’s reality, the surrendering SS captain stands silently, “paralyzed by the law of collapse,/ crushed by the downfall of Vaterland.” In his “furious silence” (“iarostnom molchan’e”) Selvinsky hears:

[…].] шум красноармейских стягов, браваду труб и грохот барабанов и ликованье тысяч голосов из пепла, из поэм, из сновидений!

([…] the hum of Red Army unfurled banners,/ the bravado of trumpets and the thunder of drums/ and the jubilation of thousands of voices/ 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 Shoah poems by Ehrenburg, Ozerov, and Antokolsky. This, in turn, gives further validity to the idea that in 1944-1945 the historical context of the Shoah elicited a concordant response from the different poetic sensibilities of the poet-witnesses.

Works Cited


42 I discuss this issue in “Jewish-Russian Poets Bearing Witness to the Shoah, 1941-1946: Textual Evidence and Preliminary Conclusions.”


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