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ISAAC BABEL: COGNITIVE INSIDER vs. SOCIAL OUTSIDER AS SEEN THROUGH THE PRISM OF HIS WRITINGS AND HIS 1920 DIARY

While it is difficult, if not impossible, to ignore the powerful Jewish currents running through virtually all the works of Isaac E. Babel, for decades, it was not only Soviet scholars but also those living in the West¹ and not under the scrutiny of the Soviet censors, who did precisely that.

The combination of Babel's arrest and repression, his silence in the years prior to his arrest, and the fact that Babel was known to weave fact with fiction when writing about his own life² makes it difficult to identify the man and his persona with any real precision. Based on research conducted of early reactions to his work, his stories, and the two most personal and intimate items that Babel left us — his 1920 Diary and the letters to his family abroad — it is clear that Babel was a multifaceted persona and that Judaism played a key role in his person and writing.

The following is a synopsis of a far longer analysis in Russian.

Uncovering Judaism's Powerful Role in the Work of Isaac Babel

Isaac Emmanuilovich Babel, whose fame rests on 70 short stories and two plays, was born in 1894 in Odessa, the Ukrainian port city on the Black Sea, where, from the 1880s to 1920s, the Jewish community was the second largest

¹ For example, see one of America's leading literary critics of the twentieth century in the *Collected Stories of Isaac Babel / Introduction* by Lionel Trilling, Meridian Press, 1960. In his introduction, while acknowledging Babel's Jewish education and interest, Trilling writes, "It was not really clear how the author felt about Jews; or about religion; or about the goodness of man". (P. 11).

² "Babel's contribution about his youth and the beginning of his literary career, is characteristic of the artist who wove fact into fiction and fiction into fact." Pisateli. *Avtobiografii i portrety sovremennykh prozaikov*. Moskva, 1925; also in: *Mastera sovremennoy literatury*. Academia, 1928.

in all of Russia (after Warsaw, Poland's capital, then within Czarist Russia), with considerable influence on the Jews of the country³.

According to official statistics, Jews represented approximately 35% of the Odessa population in 1897; of particular importance was the Jewish communities' rapid growth and influence and its extensive activity in Odessa's economic, political, educational and cultural development⁴. Prior to World War II, there were 200,962 Jewish residents, representing 33.62% of the overall population; between the years 1941 to 1944, in a systematic and horrific attempt to decimate all of the Jewish of Odessa, the Jewish population decreased in size and influence⁵ slowly reviving and reasserting itself following the War.

At Babel's birth, the Jewish community of Odessa was notably the most "Westernized" in the Pale of Settlement, with Jews who were gathered from all regions of Russia and from abroad (particularly from Brody in Galicia and from Germany during the 1820s and 1830s). Serving as a major link between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean seaports and trading centers from the early 19th century, Jews, who were restricted, at times quite severely, in other regions of the Russian Empire as potential competitors to their Christian counterparts, were tolerated, if not fully accepted, business partners and colleagues in Odessa. Given their ability to freely and quite effectively interact in trade with other Jewish communities across the Russian Empire's western end and the sizeable Jewish communities living in the Pale, Odessan Jewry became "critical middlemen in commerce"⁶, dominating industrial and trading companies, and transforming Odessa, in the words of Charles King, into the "preeminent port of the Yiddish-speaking world"⁷.

Unlike other regions of the Pale, Odessa had a far less rigid Jewish religious environment and education. The rise of the popular Zionist movement in Odessa gained significant influence, attracting throngs of intellectual youth from small towns of the Pale and impressive numbers of outstanding personalities. Ahad Ha-Am, M. M. Ussishkin, M. Dizengoff, V. Jabotinsky, H. Tchernowitz, H. Rawnitsky, Mendele Moikher Sforim, S. Dubnow, S. Tchernichowsky and many others were among those who took part in the Zionist organization's activities and publications; their influence on the secularization of previously 'closed' Jewish communities and the spread of Zionism as an important symbol of pride for the Jewish nation (and perhaps an alternative to traditional Jewish values), Western literature and world culture expanded far beyond Odessa.

³ See Encyclopedia Judaica, 1971. Vol. 12. P. 157.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Kholokost na territorii SSSR. Moskva: Rospen Publishers, 2011. P. 672–677. The publication details the grisly systematic murder of Odessa Jewry, providing specific dates, locations, and methodology used to murder Jews. There were also heroic and at times successful attempts by the local population to save Jews from death.

⁶ See Introduction to: *Charles King*, Odessa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams. W. W. Norton & Co.

⁷ Ibid, Introduction.

Many of Odessa's Jews were *maskilim* (followers of the *Haskalah*, Enlightenment Jews) whose approach to religious Judaism was secular in nature⁸. It should be noted, however, that for Odessan Jewry in those years, 'assimilation' did not infer a complete break with their Jewish past; full-time religious Jewish schools (*heder*), mostly serving the poor population; more modern Jewish day schools with a Russian curriculum; important Jewish newspapers, Zionist organizations, numerous Jewish study classes and Yeshivot (which produced such luminaries as Hayim Nachman Bialik and J. Klausner) abounded. Yiddish was spoken in the street and customs and rituals of Jewish holidays observed.

'Assimilation' into wider society was therefore often defined by a strong Jewish identity and education that ran through the veins of almost all of Odessa's 'secular' or 'assimilated' Jews. Many of those who joined the ranks of even the 'most assimilated' were Jewishly educated, at the very least in their formative years; many were proficient in Yiddish and often Hebrew and active Jewish cultural activity lived side-by-side with the thirst to break free of the ghetto and intimately discover — and often acclimate — into general Russian society.⁹

This attempt to integrate into wider society was shaken to the core, however, with the anti-Jewish outbreaks (pogroms) that occurred on five occasions (1821, 1859, 1871, 1881 and 1905) in Odessa, as well as numerous attempted and successful attacks against the Jewish community¹⁰. As Jews were "deprived of rights" and limited in their business dealings in other regions, wealthy Russian and Greek merchants, nationalist Ukrainians, and Christians were threatened by the Odessan Jewish communities' growing influence and commercial success. In addition, the Jewish communities acculturation and, at times, acceptance in non-Jewish society was viewed as an "exploitation of Christians and masters at the hands of heretics and foreigners." (pogroms of 1871; 1881).

For their part, government officials often did little to restrict anti-Jewish violence, favoring pogroms as a means of punishing Jews for their participation in revolutionary movements and as an effective mechanism of diverting the attention of angry masses from opposition to the government (1881, 1905)¹¹. The sever-

⁸ Ibid. P. 159.

⁹ Ibid. P. 161.

¹⁰ Descriptions of the social environment and impact of the pogroms in Odessa are largely based on the work of Zvi Gitelman's (*Zvi Y. Gitelman*, *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present*. Indiana University Press, Second Edition (2001) as well as on *Jonathan Frankel*. *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism and the Russian Jews 1862–1917*. Cambridge University Press, 1981. Introduction and P. 51, 54, 73, 135, and 149.

¹¹ *Edward Radzinsky*, *Nicholas II: Life and Death*. (Russ.). P. 89. According to Radzinsky, Sergei Witte, who was appointed Chairman of the Russian Council of Ministers in 1905, noted in his *Memoirs* that he found that some proclamations inciting pogroms were printed and distributed by the police.

est pogrom took place in 1905, with the collaboration of the government, with hundreds murdered and thousands injured and maimed¹².

Beyond this travesty and horror, blood libel accusations would further trigger anti-Jewish sentiment at best and massacres at worst. The most famous of these was the case of Menahem Mendel Beilis, accused of ritual murder in Kiev (then part of the Russian Empire) in 1911¹³. As he waited two years in prison for a trial that accused him of murdering a 13-year-old Ukrainian boy who disappeared on his way to school, vicious anti-Semitic campaigns were launched in the Russian press with accusations against the Jews of blood libel and ritual murder of Christian children. Though Maxim Gorky, Alexander Blok and many others wrote or spoke out against the false accusation — and international criticism of the anti-Semitic policies of the Russian Empire continuously appeared in the Western Press — it was not until key witnesses were discredited and the prosecutions' case fully undermined that Beilis was set free. Despite his exoneration, the wounds of the "Beilis Case" stayed open, causing continuous murderous harm to the Jewish villages and towns in the Russian Empire¹⁴.

This was the Jewish landscape into which Isaac Babel was born. His was an assimilated family¹⁵ and Babel imbibed Russian and Western culture from an early age, learning German and French and writing his first stories in fluent French¹⁶. At the same time, horrors of the pogroms and decrees against the Jews, while never documented to have touched his family directly¹⁷, could not have escaped his conscious. In addition, the Jewish limitations on higher education resulted in his enrollment in a business school, rather than a prestigious university, in Kiev

¹² In Babel's story *My First Love*, he would make reference to the pogrom of 1905, in which his fathers store was ransacked and his grandfather (or great-uncle) Grandpa Shoyl viciously murdered. Babel vividly described the murder in *The Story of My Dovecote*.

¹³ As will be noted later, during these two years, it is almost certain that Babel lived in Kiev as a student and was aware of the Beilis trial and the anti-Semitic atmosphere that accompanied it. 1913 was also the year that Babel's first story, *Old Shloyne*, which described an old Jew who hung himself rather than give up the religion of his fathers, was published.

¹⁴ *Maurice Samuel*, Blood Accusation: The Strange History of the Beilis Case. Alfred A. Knopp, 1966.

¹⁵ While Babel's assimilated family is mentioned in virtually every contemporary introduction, please see: S. Levin, Chuzhoy Sredi Svoikh: K Probleme samoidentifikatsii Lutova // *Philologicheskiye zapiski*. Vol. 27. Voronezh, 2008. P. 88. There he writes: "While Babel... was educated among the *maskilim*, nevertheless [Babel] considers himself as a part of his people and strives to acquire a spiritual sense in the traditions and customs of his faith."

¹⁶ Please see footnote 36.

¹⁷ Whether or not the pogroms affected the Babel family directly is arguable; in Babel's *The Story of My Dovecote* and *First Love*, a reference is made to the Cossacks looting a store very similar to Babel's fathers and the murder of a member of the family. Beyond this, Babel notes (in *First Love*) that his family was not touched. With Babel's mixing fiction and fact in his literature, it is difficult to know which of the versions is true but there is little doubt that Babel and his family were greatly affected by the pogroms even if they did not suffer directly.

in 1911 (from which he graduated in 1915) and it is almost certain that he lived in the city during the infamous Beilis Affair, another factor that could not have evaded the ever-curious Isaac Babel¹⁸.

Babel's Early Years: Warmth of a Closed Jewish Home vs. Attempts to Break Free of Moldavanka

While his stories would often fantasize and create myths, here is what Babel wrote, in his own words, regarding his childhood and formative years:

“I was born in 1894 in Odessa in the Moldavanka district, the son of a Jewish shopkeeper. My father insisted that I study Hebrew, the Bible, and the Talmud until I was 16. My life at home was hard because from morning to night they forced me to study a great many subjects. I rested in school. The school was called the Nicholas I Commercial School of Odessa. The school was gay, rowdy, noisy and multilingual. There, the sons of foreign merchants, the children of Jewish brokers, Poles from noble families, Old Believers, and many billiard players of advanced years were taught. Between classes, we used to go off to the jetty at the port, to Greek coffeehouses to play billiards, or to the Moldavanka to drink cheap Bessarabian wine in the taverns. The school remains unforgettable for me because of the French teacher there, a Monsieur Vadon. He was a Breton and, like all Frenchmen, possessed a literary gift. He taught me his language. From him, I learned the French classics by heart... at the age of fifteen I began writing stories in French. I gave this up after two years; my present characters and my various reflections as an author turned out to be colorless. I was successful only in dialogue”¹⁹.

“He taught me his language” Babel writes, and he points to the multicultural make-up of his school, with many children from homes far different than his own. It is as if Babel, from early on, wants to make it clear to his readers that he was a man of the world, yet a world clearly tethered to the Jewish environment in which he lived²⁰. “Born into the Jewish enclave of Moldavanka,” he writes, a son of a Jewish shopkeeper, made to learn Jewish subjects, apparently outside the walls of the school with private tutors. In almost the same breath, he tells us of his exhaustion with the educational pressures placed on him by his parents, that he

¹⁸ *Efraim Sicher*, *Jews in Russian Literature After the October Revolution*. Cambridge University Press, 1995. P. 76.

¹⁹ Pisateli. *Avtobiografii i portrety sovremennykh prozaikov*. Moskva, 1925; also in: *Mastera Sovremennoy Literatury*. Academia, 1928.

²⁰ According to Simon Markish, while Babel could not be called a practicing religious Jew, “*no religioznyye traditsii byli neotdelimoy chastyu ego natury vseгда*”, *Simon Markish*. *Russko-evreskaya literatura i Isaak Babel // I. Babel, Detsvo i drugiye rasskazy*. Biblioteka aliya, 1989. P. 327.

“rested in school” and that his greatest admiration was for a non-Jewish, culturally unfamiliar teacher of French. A teacher, it seems, who introduced him to the world of French literature, lifting him from the Moldavanka Jewish neighborhood of his birth, from his “Bible and Talmud” and thrusting him into the arms of authors whom Babel admired, especially Guy de Maupassant. Babel stresses that French did not provide him with the power of the pen and that he had to return to the language and landscape he knew best, to those Jewish characters who for him were far closer and more intimate, in order for them to achieve, after great toil, literary value.

“Also in 1915”, Babel continues, “I began to take my writing around editorial offices, but I was always thrown out. All the editors (the late Ismailov, Posse and others) tried to persuade me to get a job in a store, but I didn’t listen to them. Then, at the end of 1916, I happened to meet Gorky. I owe everything to this meeting, and to this day I speak the name of Alexei Maximovich with love and reverence. He published my first stories in the November 1916 issue of *Letopis*. (For these stories, I was charged under Article 1001 of the criminal code.) Alexei Maximovich taught me extremely important things and sent me out into the world at a time when it was clear that my two or three tolerable attempts as a young man were, at best, successful by accident, that I would not get anywhere with literature, and that I wrote, incredibly badly²¹.

We see Babel once again turning to an unfamiliar world, not that of his Jewish past, perhaps even equating the lessons taught by Gorky to those of his teacher of French, emphasizing that it must be the non-Jewish world that would enable him to breath freely as an author. Beyond these reflections of escape, Babel also paints a portrait of himself as a writer under the direct influence of Gorky, the future Soviet Union’s premier literary star, a relationship that was not only one of protection but which enabled the ever-clever Babel to enter the Russian literary scene and associate himself with the most respected and admired authors of the time.

Babel’s daughter Nathalie would write, “Babel imaginatively distorted autobiographical facts, partly because he needed to depict a past appropriate for a young Soviet writer who was not a member of the Communist party. (For example, my mother told me that his service for the Cheka was pure fabrication.) The problem is compounded by Babel’s usual delight in playfully mixing fact and fiction, as though the power of poetic language was more than sufficient to make things real”²². On October 14, 1931, Babel himself would write to his mother, “I asked...

²¹ Ibid.

²² Nathalie Babel’s introduction (pp. xi-xiii) in: *Isaac Babel, The Lonely Years, 1925–1939: Unpublished Stories and Private Correspondence*. Farrar, Strauss and Co., Inc., 1964 and 1995.

that copies of the magazine *Molodaya Gvardia* [be sent to you]. In it, I make my debut, after several years of silence, with a small extract from a book that will have the general title of *The Story of My Dovecote*. The subjects of the stories are all taken from my childhood, but, of course, there is much that has been made up and changed...²³

In fact, in the collection to which Babel refers, *In The Basement*²⁴, Babel paints a portrait of the difference between his own hilariously sad family and that of the brighter and wealthier Mark Borgman, whose father was the director of the Russian Bank for International Trade. He begins spinning his tale with an almost a word-for-word opposite of the autobiographical recollections cited above: “I was a boy who told lies,” are Babel’s opening words, “This came from reading. My imagination was always aroused. I read during class, between classes, on my way home, and under the table at night. Reading books, I missed out on everything the world around me had to offer: skipping classes to go to the port, the coming of billiards to the coffee shops along Grecheskaya Street, swimming at Langeron. I had no friends. Who would have wanted to spend time with me?”

So which Babel are we to believe?

Despite the difficulty in capturing the man, there are aspects of Babel’s autobiography that seem to be indisputable. With regard to his interest in Yiddish, Babel met Mendele Moikher Sforim prior to the death of the “grandfather of Yiddish literature” in 1917²⁵. Babel translated Sholom Aleichem into Russian and in the 1920s he wrote the subtitles for Gricher’s film adaptation of Sholom Aleichem’s Menachem Mendel stories, Jewish Luck, starring Babel’s friend the famous Yiddish actor Solomon Mikhoels. Babel’s film script of Sholom Aleichem’s Wandering Stars appeared in 1926²⁶; in 1936, Babel was commissioned by Academia Publishers to edit the Sholom Aleichem’s stories, a task that he had also worked on previously for Semyon Hecht’s two-volume translation²⁷. As evidenced by his letters to his mother and sister, he spent many hours reading and translating Yiddish literature, particularly the stories of Sholom Aleichem, for pure pleasure. On March 1, 1936, in a letter to his mother, Babel wrote, “...Academia has

²³ Ibid. P. 189

²⁴ *V Podvale*. First published in *Novyy Mir*. 1931. Vol. 10, under the heading “From the Book *The Story of My Dovecote*.” Dated 1929.

²⁵ Babel, quoted in: *Ia. Eidelman*, Mendele Moikher-Sforim: Na torzhestvennom zasedanii v Dome soyuzov // Literaturnaya gazeta. 1936. 5, March.

²⁶ *Bluzhdaiushchiye zvezdy*. Moskva: Kinopechat, 1926. Republished in: *Babel*, Sochinenia. Vol. II. P. 447–494.

²⁷ *Izbrannye proizvedeniya* / Trans. by S. Hecht. I. Babel (ed.). Moskva; Leningrad: Zemlya i fabrika, 1926–1927.

entrusted me with the editing of Sholom Aleichem's works. I read him in my spare hours and roll around with laughter; it brings my young years back to me"²⁸.

Further, though he had been exempt from military service in 1914, Babel volunteered for the army in October 1917. He was thus able to "go out into the world," the advice that Gorky had given the young author after appreciating Babel's talent yet limited life experience. Babel served on the Romanian front until 1918, contracted malaria, and was evacuated back to Odessa²⁹.

In April 1920, carrying documents that indicated his name as Kirill Vasilyevich Lyutov, a name that was non-Jewish in every respect, Babel began his assignment as a reporter for Semyon Budyenny's First Cavalry army. Scholar Gregory Freidin³⁰ notes that Babel's family did not know of his plans to join the First Cavalry; "afraid that they would prevent him from going, he left home without saying goodbye and returned some six months later, after his father had been informed of his death and while his wife was looking for him among the wounded. According to Babel's sister, her brother concealed from his family his plans to join Budyenni. His schoolmate and lifelong friend Isaac Livshits, then also a figure in the Odessa literary scene, was to come along but his parents locked him in a room as soon as they found out and Babel may have feared a similar reaction from his parents"³¹.

Why then did Babel return to the front in 1920? From what we can gather, it seems that Babel's wish to escape from his Jewish home into the world of "the other" would become a continuously sought-after goal. He wanted to learn of the "other" more closely, for the "other" to become his own, for the unfamiliar world outside of the intimately known Moldavanka alleys and courtyards to become his. Given the horrors of the pogroms during Czarist times, he may have also, at least at the outset, sincerely believed in the messianic hope that the Revolution would bring to his people, enabling them to live freely and to achieve the dream of dreams: a Jews full integration into Soviet society.

The Wars Raging Within: To Say Yes to the Sabbath Or to the Revolution. A Battle Without Victory

"[Babel] was fully aware, at the age of nineteen, [when publishing his first story *Old Shloyme* in 1913³²] that where the Jewish theme was concerned,

²⁸ *The Lonely Years, 1925–1939*. P. 302. (Akademia was preparing a complete edition of Sholom Aleichem's works for the 1939 celebration of the eightieth anniversary of Sholom Aleichem's (1859-1916) birth and asked Babel to edit the stories.)

²⁹ *Ibid.* Nathalie Babel's introduction, p. xii.

³⁰ *Gregory Freidin, The Enigma of Isaac Babel*. Stanford Univ. Press, 2009. P. 24.

³¹ *Sergey Povartsov, Podgotovitelnyye materialy dlya zhizneopisaniya Isaaka Babelya*; cited in Freidin's book in a footnote on page 224.

³² *Staryy Shloyme*, First published in *Ogni*. 1913. No. 6.

the most important thing was to speak to Jews and Russian readers at the same time, and the only way to achieve this was through a reconciliation and simultaneity of external viewpoint and internal feeling and experience” notes scholar of Russian literature Zsuzsa Hetenyi³³. At the same time, speaking to Babel’s Jewish conscience, Hetenyi writes, “In retrospect — from the vantage point of the later works — it can be clearly seen that even at that time (Hetenyi refers to Babel’s *At Grandmother’s*³⁴) Babel’s artistic character was practically already ‘ready’. The key is the duality and the alternation between internal and external viewpoints (which, in this story, is the child’s). The boys yearning to break free from his stifling, closed world is repeated three times. Of the sentences that are most important: “all... made me want to flee from it and yet remain forever”³⁵. Hetenyi further notes that in Babel’s well-known *The Story of My Dovecote*³⁶ (1925) and *First Love*³⁷ (1925): “the child is able to look at the Cossack horsemen threatening his father with admiration, and notice the beauty of physical power in the young peasant destroying his uncle’s house”³⁸. An insider, outsider view.

In *Awakening*, published a few years later³⁹, Babel paints an escape of a different order. The protagonist in the story, a young boy, who previously did not notice the world outside of his Jewish environment but knew that there must be a world outside his own, rebels against his Jewish parents and their desire for him to become a brilliant violinist like other young Jewish prodigies of Odessa and escapes to the sea. He takes swimming lessons from a Russian athlete and newspaper proofreader, learning the names of trees and flowers and showing his first writings to him, a person both in identity and character far outside Babel’s familiar world. He attempts to break free and enter a new foreign world, unfamiliar yet one that Babel desperately seeks to conquer. A true *Awakening*...

One of the finest examples of the contradiction raging within Babel this can be found in Babel’s *Gedali*⁴⁰, a three-page story that emphasizes the battles raging within:

³³ Zsuzsa Hetenyi, In A Maelstrom: The History of Russian-Jewish Prose (1860–1940). Central European University Press, 2008. P. 179.

³⁴ *Detstvo. U Babushki*. First published in Literaturnoye nasledstvo. Nauka, 1965; dated: Saratov, November 12, 1915.

³⁵ Ibid. Pp. 180-181.

³⁶ *Istoriya moyey golubyatni*. First published in Krasnaya gazeta. 1925. May 18, 19, 20. Evening edition. Dated 1925.

³⁷ *Pervaya lyubov*. First published in Krasnaya gazeta. 1925. May 24, 25. Evening edition. Dated 1925.

³⁸ Hetenyi, ibid. P. 181.

³⁹ *Probuzhdeniye*. First published in Molodaya gvardiya. 1931. No. 17-18 under the heading “From the Book The Story of My Dovecote. Dated 1931.

⁴⁰ *Gedali*. First published in Krasnaya nov. 1924. No. 4. Dated: Zhitomir, June 1920 (the references made in Babel’s Diary of June 6th and July 7th).

“On the eve of the Sabbath,” Babel begins, “I am always tormented by the dense sorrow of memory. In the past on these evenings, my grandfather’s yellow beard caressed the volumes of Ibn Ezra⁴¹. My old grandmother, in her lace bonnet, waved spells over the Sabbath candle with her gnarled fingers, and sobbed sweetly. On those evenings my child’s heart was gently rocked, like a little boat on enchanted waves.” Babel then describes his “wanderings”: “I wander through the streets of Zhitomir looking for the timid star⁴²...Here lies before me the Bazaar, and the death of the Bazaar.”

The protagonist finds old ‘Gedali’⁴³ an owner of a stall not yet shut before the Sabbath in the market. Gedali questions him: “So let’s say we say ‘yes’ to the Revolution. But does this mean that we are supposed to say ‘no’ to the Sabbath?” — “The sun cannot enter the eyes that are squeezed shut⁴⁴” the response

⁴¹ Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164), one of the most distinguished Jewish men of letters and writers of the Middle Ages. In Babel’s context, it is worthy of note that outside of Ibn Ezra’s important commentaries on the Hebrew Bible, he was also a distinguished poet and thinker, reputed for his outstanding knowledge in the fields of philosophy, astronomy/astrology, mathematics, poetry, linguistics and exegesis. Baruch Spinoza, the famous 17th century Dutch philosopher and author of *Ethics*, who was ostracized by his native Jewish community of Amsterdam, and whom Babel describes vividly in his story *In The Basement* (dated 1929 but first published in 1931), used Ibn Ezra’s opinions in the beginning of the book of Deuteronomy to support his conclusion that the Bible was written much later than the time of Moses, a heretical position for mainstream Jewish thought. Whether Babel was referencing Ibn Ezra in this context (*In The Basement* noted Spinoza’s excommunication) or, rather, a memory from Babel’s youth, is questionable but it is clear that his use of Ibn Ezra, rather than more common commentators, was done with intention. It should also be noted that Babel refers to the commentary of Ibn Ezra three times in his play *Sunset* and also adds note of the far better known Biblical commentator “Rashi” (an acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040–1105) in *Sunset* as well.

⁴² According to Nathalie Babel and Peter Constantine, in *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*. W. W. Norton & Co., 2002. P. 227, they indicate the “timid star” to be referring to “The Star of David”; I believe, however, that they are mistaken. Given the context of the story, Babel must be referring to the star the appearance of which would indicate the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath on Friday evening (technically, three stars); *S. Levin*, in his paper p. 100 agrees.

⁴³ It must be noted that Babel could not have used the name “Gedali” by accident; almost certainly the name must be a reference to Gedaliah, a righteous governor of Judah who was appointed by Babylonian King Nubachadnezzar when he conquered Jerusalem. Many Jews returned to Judah with his appointment but he was assassinated by a delegation of a hostile neighboring king in around 582/1 BCE. His assassination would end Jewish rule following the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem (Jer. 40 and 2 Kings 25). The Talmud (Rosh HaShana) concludes that the one-day fast that was established to commemorate Gedaliah’s murder teaches that the death of a righteous person is on par with the destruction of the Temple, the holiest site for the Jewish nation. Babel must have used this name intentionally.

⁴⁴ Babel is clearly making a Biblical reference here and there are a number of passages in the Bible and Prophets which this quote can be alluding to. From all those that I checked, the following, from the admonishing of a sinning Jewish people: “They know nothing, they understand nothing;

comes: “but we shall rip open those eyes!” Old Gedali then speaks of the massacring Pole who “has shut his eyes” by “ripping out his beard⁴⁵” and the marvelous fact that the Revolution is going to get rid of the murdering Poles. But wise Gedali immediately adds, “But then the same man who beat the Poles says to me, ‘Gedali, we are requisitioning your gramophone!’ But gentlemen,” Gedali responds, “I love music!’ And what does the Revolution answer me? You don’t know what you love, Gedali! I am going to shoot you, and then you’ll know, and I cannot *not* shoot, because I am the Revolution.”

In a literary tour-de-force, Babel goes on to solidify the two sides warring within him⁴⁶; the voice of old Gedali: “The Pole did shoot because he is the counterrevolution. And you shoot because you are the Revolution. But Revolution is happiness. And happiness does not like orphans in its house. A good man does good deeds. The Revolution is the good deed done by good men. But good men do not kill. Hence, the Revolution is done by bad men. Who is going to tell Gedali which is the Revolution and which is the counterrevolution? I have studied the Talmud. I love the commentaries of Rashi and the books of Maimonides, and there are also other people in Zhitomir who understand. And all of us learned men fall to the floor and shout with a single voice, ‘Woe unto us, where is the sweet Revolution?’”

Gedali falls silent, pronouncing solemnly, “The Sabbath is coming. Jews must go to the Synagogue.” He asks his visitor to bring “a few good men to Zhitomir” and then all will accept the Revolution. With his second voice, Babel makes his character reply, “With gunpowder... seasoned with the best blood.” Babel seems himself to pierce through the veil that covers the Revolution and her bloodthirsty army. What is the difference of one from the other, Pole or the Russian, when there are no good men?

And then the Sabbath descends. The Revolutionary man, who has come with arguments against the old life and with admiration of the virtues of the Revolution, asks: “Where can I find some Jewish biscuits, a Jewish glass of tea, and a piece of bread of that retired God in the glass of tea?” He can’t. As the good people running the tavern next door no longer serve Jewish tea. The whole of Zhitomir is ‘weeping.’ And Babel closes this masterpiece with, “The Sabbath begins. Gedali, the founder of an unattainable International, went to the synagogue to pray.”

There is no way out. It is all done for. A gun of a Pole and the gun of a Russian, they are all the same. Wreaking havoc, destroying lives, killing Jewish communities. And Babel knows it.

their eyes are shut [plastered over, like a wall with mortar] so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand” (Is. 44:18).

⁴⁵ A beard, customarily worn by observant Jews, certainly of those times, represents the Poles desire not only to maim the Jew physically but also to kill Jewish religious observance.

⁴⁶ This is actually a quote from Babel; with a handwritten inscription on the back of a photo of himself that he sent to his sister in Brussels in July 1930, Babel wrote, “My life is spent fighting with this man”.

A number of Babel's other stories in this cycle follow the same route. *The Rabbis Son*⁴⁷ that at one point closed the *Red Cavalry* stories⁴⁸ opens with similar memories of the warmth of Sabbath in Zhitomir. Once again recalling Gedali, Babel leads us into the prayer room of Rabbi Mottele Bratzlavsky and introduces us to his son Ilya, describing him as "the last prince of the [Rabbinic] dynasty." The story then turns when the Revolutionary protagonist, fighting the power of the Polish warriors, throws Trotsky's leaflets as his only remaining weapon against those who do not understand. One hand reaches out for them, the shaking, dying hand of Ilya, the last prince. Lying naked, with the girls staring "coolly at his sexual organs, the withered, curly manhood of the emaciated Semite" — an euphemism for the death of the Jews and their religious practices — Babel then masterfully describes the protagonist gathering all of Ilya's things: "Portraits of Lenin and Maimonides lay side by side... and crooked lines of Ancient Hebrew verse huddled in the margins of Communist pamphlets." Pages torn from Biblical texts⁴⁹ and "revolver cartridges" were also among Ilya's possessions. Speaking to the dying young prince, the protagonist questions Ilya's new party affiliation, only to find that even during their initial meeting, Ilya was already involved in the Communist party, not being able to "leave his mother" — his faith — behind. Sent off to fight for the Revolution, Ilya had no choice but to let his faith confront his political allegiance. And both now lay dying.

Babel describes Ilya's death: "He died, the last prince, amid poems, phylacteries, and foot bindings. We buried him at a desolate train station. And I, who can

⁴⁷ *Syn Rabbi*, First published in *Krasnaya nov.* 1924. No. 1.

⁴⁸ The *Red Cavalry* stories, initially appearing in magazines and newspapers between 1923 and 1926, were published in book form in 1926 under the title "Konarmia" and contained thirty-four stories, beginning with *Crossing the River Zbrucz* and closing with *The Rabbis Son*. The book, which quickly went into eight editions and was translated into English, French, Italian, Spanish and German turned Babel into an international literary persona. Due to censors, a later edition (1933) added the story *Argamak*, in which Babel describes successfully blending into the Cossack environment, as the books' last to ensure that closure would end on a positive, pro-Revolutionary note (This view is supported by *Gregory Freidin*. *The Enigma of Isaac Babel*. P. 37.) Seven additional stories, most of which appeared in newspapers and magazines in the late 1920s and 1930s followed the 1926 publication (with two, *And There Were Nine* and *And There Were Ten* not published in Babel's lifetime) were added to the *Red Cavalry* cycle in later years.

⁴⁹ Babel specifies that the torn pages are from "The Song of Songs" (also known as The Songs of King Solomon). Taken from the last section of the Jewish Bible (Tanakh), the Song of Songs (or Canticles) describes the relationship of a woman and a man, moving from courtship to consummation. While not containing explicitly religious content, and one of the shortest books in the Bible consisting of only 117 verses, according to Jewish tradition, the Song of Songs is a parable of the relationship of God and Israel as a husband and wife and an allegory of Gods love for the Children of Israel (in line with the interpretation of Rashi and the Midrash). Babel's early education must have made him aware of its meaning and significance.

barely harness the storms of fantasy raging through my ancient body, I received my brother's last breath." Babel powerfully closes the *Red Cavalry* stories with the death of his "brother", his Jewish traditions, found within his "ancient body" that will always be tied to his Jewish past. The Revolution killed Babel's hope of synthesizing his two internal worlds. Maimonides and Lenin are not able to lie side by side and the world that Babel dreamed of with the coming of the Revolution, represented by Ilya, is dead.

In *Dolgushov's Death*⁵⁰ Babel's strikingly points to his inability, on the one hand, to leave the moorings of his Jewish home and the external resistance that he faced in wanting to become one with the Cossacks, on the other. The story, yet another description of a losing battle of his Cavalry regiment to the fighting Poles, who have outsmarted the military intelligence of the Cossacks, opens with Babel's repeated admiration of the Cossacks. Describing a "disgraced commander" of the fourth division, Korotchaev, Babel speaks of him with envy: he "fought alone and rode out seeking death... with eyes of coal." Even a disgraced Cossack had more strength and power than a 'bespectacled' Jew. But the real power and sign of Babel/Liutov's estrangement from both worlds comes later.

In the midst of battle, a fellow Cossack, Dolgushov, is maimed and lies in agony, "he lay with his legs far apart, his boots pointing in opposite directions. Without lowering his eyes [from Liutov], he carefully lifted his shirt. His stomach was torn open, his intestines spilling to his knees, and we could see his heart beating." Babel saw the Cossack inside out, literally in the flesh, an internal view of the Cossack's innards working.

Dolgushov instructs Liutov to kill him: "you'll have to waste one [bullet] on me," the Cossack says so that the Poles are prevented from "hav[ing] fun kicking me around" when his body is discovered. The Pole was the enemy of both the Cossack and the Jew. For the Cossack, fighting a battle on behalf of the newly formed Bolshevik army, this was an enemy who internally did not represent evil. The Poles had not slaughtered the Cossacks nor brutally maimed their brethren; they were an enemy to win in war without a bloody personal history that motivated them to want the Poles dead. They were an enemy in *this* war, but there was no history of enmity, they were not *his* enemy.

For the Jew, on the other hand, it was both the Cossack and the Pole who represented a murderous, hated foe. One as bad as the other, both pillaging Jewish villages and businesses, torturing, burning them alive. Though enemies on the battlefield, the Poles and Cossacks were united in their hatred toward the Jew. Without a second thought, Liutov/Babel should have shot the feeble,

⁵⁰*Smert Dolgushova*. First published in *Izvestiya Odesskogo gubispolkoma*. 1923. May 1. Dated: Brody, 1920. Korochayev, mentioned in the story, was demoted by Budyonny from the position of provisional commander of the Fourth Cavalry Division to one of the brigade commanders of the Sixth Cavalry Division.

unarmed, vulnerable Dolgushov, a representative of generations of Cossacks, including the infamous Bogdan Khmel'nitsky and his henchmen whom Babel would recall in other stories⁵¹. As a Jew, Liutov/Babel should have killed Dolgushov in retribution for his entire nation, perhaps a small but nonetheless meaningful act of revenge for the generations of brutality of the Cossacks. As a Cossack, Liutov/Babel should have killed Dolgushov as part of the silent brotherly agreement that the Cossacks had with each other, as we would witness in this story. A comrade shoots you quietly, and writes to the Cossacks mother "where, what, why." Babel should have acted both or either as a Jew or a Cossack but he could do neither.

"No" Liutov/Babel replied. He could not shoot, he could not maim and he could not kill. Not as a Jew — or perhaps precisely because he was a Jew — and not as a Cossack, whom he could never become. The barrage of insults came instantly, "Dolgushov placed his blue palms on the ground and looked at his hands in disbelief." Fully aware that the disguise Babel was attempting was a ruse, Dolgushov remarked, "Running away?" he muttered slumping down. Then run you bastard."

It would still get worse. "Sweat slithered over my body," Babel writes, with sweat representing the outward, physical expression of the internal battle raging within and the hatred that he felt. And then, once again in the turning of the lock that displayed Babel's literary mastery and his penetrating understanding of his unenviable and impossible position, Babel's pen gives birth to an angelic Cossack: "Afonka Bida came galloping toward us, encircled by the halo of the sunset." A "halo" placed above the Cossacks' head by a Jew, by Babel himself. Witness to the grizzly Cossack murderers, he nevertheless loses his grip on reality, loses it all, in his throbbing yet failed desire to unite with the Cossack. He is stuck between two conflicting worlds, not being able to leave one nor enter the other.

Afonka, bearing no such qualms and being a true Cossack, slips Dolgushov's papers into his boot — the same boot used to kick his Cossack horse and the weak Shtetl Jew — and shoots Dolgushov in the mouth.

Liutov/Babel tries to appease him: "Afonka, I said, riding up to him with a pitiful smile. 'I couldn't have done that.'" "Pitiful smile" — Babel fully understood that everyone understood. Ignoring Liutov/Babel's pleas and attempts at brotherly camaraderie, Afonko biting replies, "Get lost, or I'll shoot you!.. You bespectacled idiots have as much pity for us as a cat has for a mouse. And he cocked his trigger" ready to kill the "bespectacled" Jew as he deserved.

⁵¹ For example, Babel's short but powerful *The Cemetery in Kozin*, in which, in describing the cemetery in a shtetl, he would unite generations of pogroms against his people: "To one side, below an oak tree cleft in two by lightning, stand the vault of Rabbi Asriil, slaughtered by Bogdan Khmel'nitsky's Cossacks. Four generations lie in this sepulchar..."

And later, in *After the Battle*,⁵² a story that pits Cossack against Cossack as they fight against one another for different sides in the war, Liutov/Babel is once again confronted with a choice that could win him the assimilation that he continues to passionately seek. With the Cossacks who are fighting on behalf of the Poles winning the battle, all five thousand men in Liutov's Sixth Division make a run for it. Liutov's military commander, addressing Liutov directly, says, "Get those fighters to turn around or I'll rip your soul out." The word "soul" is key as the Commander does not simply threaten to kill Liutov, he makes it quite clear that if Liutov is not able to take control of the men, of the Cossacks, of winning their trust, he will rip out Liutov's "soul." The decision is placed in front of Liutov/Babel for his future fate — the fate of his "soul."

As Liutov unsuccessfully tries to convince the men to turn around and head back into a losing battle, Gulimov, one of the Cossacks, calls Liutov/Babel's bluff. As he grabs Liutov strongly by his shoulder, his saber becomes stuck as he tries to unsheathe it and he hisses, "Your [horse] first...and mine will follow." Liutov/Babel does not know what to do, what decision to make. Emotionally, Babel writes, "I felt a wave of nausea from death's closeness and its tight grip." Here was a stark expression of Babel's in-born Jew unable to transform into the other; as much as he would like the strength of the Cossack to take power, death scares him as it scared his parents and others fleeing and hiding from the murderous Cossacks swinging their sabers against his people.

Liutov/Babel runs, his horse, his "tormented friend trotting slowly." Indecision and he knows what the indecision will mean to his standing among the Cossacks. But Babel is not yet done. He places Akiniev, an epileptic and "former vehicular driver of the Revolutionary Tribunal" — mentioning Akiniev's "former" position twice in the short story, an odd occurrence for Babel who would not waste a word, perhaps pointing to the fact that this was a driver, a former, sickly one at that but nevertheless one who drove for the judicial system of the Revolution and who would now, even in his lowered status, be passing judgment on Babel with Akiniev now placed at very center of the story. As Akiniev forgives a nurse for not going to battle without weapon, he swings his attention and disgust toward Liutov/Babel.

"No one is blaming you," Akiniev tells the nurse. "I blame those who get mixed up in battle and forget to load cartridges in their revolvers!" What worse sin can a military man be accused of? "Your rode in the attack" he shouted at me. 'You rode in the attack but didn't put any cartridges in! Why?'"

And to make matters worse, Akiniev continues, "The Pole shot at you, yes, but you didn't shoot at him," the epileptic accuser screams, strengthening his argument and forcing the deathly accusation of treason. "Why?" Liutov/Babel admits that

⁵² *Posle Boya*. First published in *Prozhektor*. 1924. No. 20. Dated: Galicia, September 1920.

the accusation is true. “So you’re a wimp, right?” Akiniev responds. Once again an affirmative answer, this time said with more confidence by the man on trial. “What I want is for you to be aware, Akiniev screamed in wild triumph” — he is handing down his sentence, getting ready for the damning verdict of capital punishment, “aware that you’re a wimp, because in my book all wimps should be shot dead, they believe in God.”

The two worlds collide. Liutov/Babel is banned from being a Cossack, condemned to death due to his internal ethos. There is nowhere to run. Liutov/Babel has no place to go. The only future possibility for Babel would be silence.

Babel’s 1920 Diary

Isaac Babel was twenty-five years old, soon turning twenty-six, when the first entry to his diary was made on June 3, 1920⁵³. Written by hand in an accounting book, with the first fifty-four pages missing, and apparently left with Babel’s friend, M. Ia. Ovrutskaya, the Diary escaped the confiscation of the rest of Babel’s papers when he was arrested by the NKVD on May 15, 1939. A. N. Pirozhkova believes that the Diary was left, together with other papers, with Ovrutskaya in 1927, when Babel moved from his first wife’s home after the death of her father and her mother’s emigration. Babel’s own family had left their Odessa home in 1924, when his father died and his mother and sister, who, too, would soon emigrate, came to Moscow. The Diary lay in obscurity until the mid-1950s, when it came into the possession of the writer’s widow⁵⁴.

Another thirty years passed. In 1987, with the winds of Glasnost blowing, four major Russian journals were approached with the offer to publish Babel’s 1920 Diary. They all refused, fearing the repercussions of State authorities; another editor cited fear that the Diary would damage Babel’s reputation, “implying that his treatment of the political and human landscape in the aftermath of the Revolution showed him to be too concerned with the Jews”⁵⁵. Galina Belaya records her efforts to have the Diary published, titling her memories “*Nenavizhu Voinu*”⁵⁶ (“[I] Hate War”); fragmentary excerpts had been published in 1965⁵⁷

⁵³The text of the diary is the one printed in *Isaac Babel*, Sochineniya. Moskva: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1990. Vol. I. P. 362–435. In his writing, Babel used bits of French, German, Hebrew and Yiddish.

⁵⁴1920 Diary / Introduction by Carol J. Avins. Yale University Press, 2002. P. XVII and notes on page LV

⁵⁵Ibid. P. XVII.

⁵⁶*Nenavizhu voynu*: Iz Dnevnik 1920 goda Isaaka Babelia: in *Druzbbba Narodov*. 1989. No. 4. P. 238–252; No. 5. P. 247–260 (both article containing excerpts).

⁵⁷Fragmentary excerpts from the Diary in *I. A. Smirin*, Na puti k ‘Konarmii’ (Literaturnyye iskaniya Babelya) // Literaturnoe nasledstvo. Moskva: Nauka, 1965. P. 467–482, and to Smirin’s notes to the stories in the same volume (P. 497–98).

and in the West in 1978⁵⁸. The complete Diary would not appear in print until 1990⁵⁹.

In his Diary, the young author was clearly seeking to find a synthesis between his Judaism and his wish to become a fully acculturated Russian author. In his travels and observations, the Diary notes how horrified Babel becomes by the savagery of the Cossacks in the name of the Revolution and his sorrow at the torture of his people. As he jots his thoughts in his journal, he makes repeated, open and descriptive references to Jews and Judaism and his kinship with his people. “He was torn between Judaism and Communism, alienated from his past and unable to come to terms with the future”⁶⁰.

Much, if not most, of the fighting which Babel observed took place in the heart of the former Pale of Settlement where Jewish communities, synagogues, schools, communal institutions and Jewish markets abounded. Despite the Russian identity he would take on in *Red Cavalry*, Babel’s 1920 Diary reveals his empathy and close kinship with his Jewish brethren, many of whom became victims at the hands of the Cossacks.

For those who claim that the Babel’s 1920 Diary is a memorial document without any real, direct connection or basis for the *Red Cavalry*, Babel himself, in 1938, claimed that the *Red Cavalry* stories were fully based on the Diary, much of which he lost and refined based on memories of the events that he observed⁶¹.

The Diary’s first entry notes the pogrom by the Poles in Zhitomir, where 43 Jews were murdered and two buried alive. Babel had no illusions that the Jews would receive any better treatment from the Cossacks: “The Zhitomir pogrom was initiated by the Poles, later, of course, by the Cossacks. After the appearance of our advance guards the Poles came into town for 3 days, Jewish pogrom, cut off beards, that’s usual, they assembled 45 Jews on the market square, led them away to the slaughterhouse, tortures, they cut off their tongues, wailing all over the square.” (1920 Diary, dated: “Zhitomir, 3 July 1920”).

Babel’s diary records anti-Jewish pogroms as part of the fabric of reality, not just isolated incidents or the price one pays in war. Babel’s agony is palpable as he was fully aware from his personal history of what the Cossacks were capable of. On July 18, 1920 Babel writes, “The Jewish cemetery outside Malin, hundreds of years old,

⁵⁸ Selections would first appear in English in *Isaac Babel, Forgotten Prose / Nicholas Stroud* (ed. and trans.). Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1978. P. 120–143.

⁵⁹ Complete text of the 1920 Diary first appeared in *Isaac Babel, Sochineniya*. Moskva: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1990. Vol. 1. P. 362–435.

⁶⁰ *Lonely Years*. P. 84–86

⁶¹ Transcript of an address to young writers from the national republics, 30 December, 1938, in the archives of A. N. Tolstoi, Institut Mirovoi Literaturi i Iskusstva, fond 43, opis’ I, edinitsa khraneniya 944, 2b, l.33. I. Smirin has noted the transfer of Diary material to the stories in his *Naputi k “Konarmii”* P. 467–482. Credit for this source is *Efraim Sicher, Jews in Russian Literature After the October Revolution*. P. 240, notes.

gravestones have toppled over, almost all the same shape... the cemetery is overgrown with grass, it has seen Khmelnitsky, now Budyonny, unfortunate Jewish population, everything repeats itself, now that whole story — Poles, Cossacks, Jews — is repeating itself with stunning exactitude, the only new element is Communism.”

Paradoxically, on the same day, he described the murdering Cossacks with admiration: “Splendid comradeship, solidarity, love of horses, a Cossack’s horse occupies a quarter of his day.” And then, on July 19, noting the arrival of Budyonny and Voroshilov, Babel writes with envy, “Battle picture, the cavalry return, dust-stained, sweating, red-faced, no trace of excitement after their butcher’s work, professionals, it’s all done perfectly calmly — that’s what makes them special, their self-assurance, hard work...”

A few days later: “Every house remains in my heart. Clusters of Jews. Their faces — this is the ghetto, and we are an ancient people, exhausted, but we still have some strength left...” Notice the “we”, the “people”, Babel’s strong identification, despite his hidden identity, with the Jews. The story is not over: “Cossacks yelling, swearing, climbing over shelves.” His comrades have ransacked the store and its proprietor, whom minutes before Babel was “pour[ing] balm on the soul of.” A paragraph later, describing the town Jews, Babel writes, “An old Jew — I like talking with my own kind — they understand me...”

Babel walks the alleys of this old Jewish town, even enters a synagogue, and is distraught in his anguish. “Dubno synagogues. Everything destroyed... I go into the Hasidic synagogue. It’s Friday. Such misshapen little figures, such worn faces, it all came alive for me, what it was like three hundred years ago... I pray, or almost pray... A quiet evening in the synagogue, that always has an irresistible effect on me... There are no adornments in the building... everything is fleshless, bloodless, to a grotesque degree, you have to have the soul of a Jew to sense what it means. But what does the soul consist of? Can it be that ours is the century in which they perish?” Is it possible that this is the end?

Babel then speaks to his loneliness, his erotic desires. He switches back and forth from crying as he observes the death knell of the Jewish town to the sexual desires evoked in him by observing a woman of attraction. Yet days later, on July 24, 1920, he is confronted by his worst fear: the inability to save the Jews of the town, watching defenseless Jews brutally tortured: “A Jewish town. I’m on guard. Jewish scattered about on the outskirts, everything has been destroyed... with Cossacks on the loose all around.” “...And I keep quiet,” Babel writes, “because I’m a Russian.”

The two sides of Babel rage within him exactly in the same manner as they would be expressed in the *Red Cavalry*.

“It’s the 9th of Av.⁶² The old woman sobs sitting on the floor, and her son, who worships his mother and says he believes in God just to please her... tells the story of

⁶² A day of intense mourning and the second most important fast day in the Jewish calendar that commemorates the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem.

the destruction of the Temple. The terrible words of the prophet — they eat dung, their maidens are ravished, their menfolk killed, Israel subjugated, words of wrath and sorrow... Demidovka at night, Cossacks, all just as it was when the Temple was destroyed...” And when a fellow Cossack wants to seduce a Jewish woman and she is in agony, Babel writes, “who understands her soul better than I? Pitiful Demidovka...”

In his entry of July 26, Babel finally comes out with it, he is forever an alien, “I am an outsider” (“*ya chuzhoi*”) he writes, he can never fit in. He could not stop thinking about his own destiny and the Diary makes it clear that his sought-after goal of acclimating into becoming either a Cossack or a Russian was impossible.

As the Diary proceeds, one does not sense a Babel that seeks to learn how to kill, to become heartless in the pursuit of ones goal; we observe a Babel who is suffering because he does not fit in, understands the meaninglessness of the battles being waged and the cruel, boorish, uncultured and uneducated personalities of his own men doing the killing. And yet he is now stuck, has no place to go.

On August 21, 1920, Babel finally admits it, “...our army is out to line its pockets, this isn’t a revolution, it’s a rebellion of Cossack wild men.” And then he meets two other Jews in the Cavalry army, both from Odessa. “Distressing news from Odessa. They’re being suffocated. What’s happening with my father? Have they really taken everything away from him? I must think about things at home.” Home is never far from Babel’s thoughts.

On August 28, 1920, as Voroshilov and Budyonny are desperately trying to salvage the losing situation, Babel describes the town of Komarow where they had just arrived: “Indescribable terror and despair.” He does not stop; he needs to at least tell his Diary: “...Cossacks were here yesterday. A pogrom. The family of David Zys, a naked, barely breathing prophet of an old man, an old woman butchered, a child with fingers chopped off, many people still breathing, stench of blood, everything turned upside down, chaos, a mother sitting over her sabered son... filth, blood under a black beard, just lying there in their blood... The rabbi hid, his whole house was taken apart... 15 people killed, the Hasid Itska Galer, aged 70, David Zys, the synagogue caretaker, 45, his wife, his daughter aged 15, David Trost and his wife — the ritual slaughterer.” His mind’s eye records it all, he makes sure to note the individual names, a sign of love, a sign of never wanting to forget.

He goes to the home of a Jewish rape victim. He spends the Jewish Sabbath with a religious Jewish family, who would not cook until the Sabbath was over. But for Babel, the pogrom against his kinsmen or the following lines against those whom he wanted to become his kin, were equal in their tragedy: “The worst of it is,” he writes, “our men nonchalantly walk around looting wherever possible, stripping mangled corpses. The hatred is the same, the Cossacks just the same, the cruelty the same, it’s nonsense to think that one army is different from another...”

August 29, 1920: ‘Our men were looting last night, tossed out the Torah scrolls in the synagogue and took the velvet covers for saddlecloths...’ The Torah, the most precious possession of the Jewish people, and the horse, the most precious for the Cossacks, have interchanged in the same sentence, in one breath. Subconsciously, Babel may have been trying to make a statement of the death of the old and its transformation into the new but he understood, how well he understood, that this was not a trade he wanted any part in. The army men steal vodka from a local distillery and drink despite the ban; the Cavalrymen, whom Babel now calls “Russians” continue to loot wherever they can.

In an old castle, Babel finds “priceless books, old French novels” — this is the revolution that Babel had wanted. He wanted free air to breathe and instead he plunged himself into a world of thievery and murder. “I want to run away from these vandals,” he writes, “their foul language, their faces...” Babel falls sick, could hardly move, has terrible nights of suffering. On the same day he writes, “...my body is covered with scratches and bites, itching, bleeding, nothing I can do... the command...is nonexistent.” On September 6th, 1920, he hears the words that once again make him shiver to the core, “yells of ‘Smash the Yids, Save Russia! ...that’s Budyonny’s warriors for you.”

On September 9, 1920, the twenty-six-year-old Babel, from an assimilated home, writes, “The synagogue. I pray, bare walls, some soldier goes around appropriating the light bulbs.” The Jewish Sabbath falls on the morrow, a Friday: “they’re already preparing for it,” Babel says of his Jewish hosts. “They say it’s better to go hungry under the Bolsheviks than to eat fine bread under the Poles.” Babel knows better. And he is praying — no longer “almost prays” as he wrote in the Diary on July 23rd — but beseeching the Almighty. Yet what could Babel have prayed for? The Revolution? The synthesis of the two worlds that he once so desired would merge into one, wholesome, complete, peaceful, meaningful society? Or perhaps he understood that he must return to the cobblestone, old narrow streets of his native Moldavanka. As is typical of Babel, even in the Diary, he does not respond. Silence. Playing games with the reader — and, ultimately, with himself.

Undoubtedly, Babel’s 1920 Diary points to a closely-felt love and identification with his people and the atrocities of the Cavalry soldiers who were, in his vivid and horrifying descriptions, charged to pave the way for an expanded Revolution. And though he initially harbored the naïve hope that being a Jew in a Cossack regiment would enable him to identify with and eventually become part of the “other” what the experience ultimately help produce was a brilliant writer who would become homeless everywhere.

At the end of his short life, the deafening, terrifying silence of a man who understood. A man who due to his penetrating insights into the world that he observed was never given the opportunity to finish.

David E. Rozenon

Isaac Babel: Cognitive Insider vs. Social Outsider as Seen through the Prism of His Writings and His 1920 Diary

Abstract: Isaac E. Babel was undoubtedly a literary genius. For decades, scholars have battled to understand, analyze, and at times reject the role that Babel's Jewish roots played in his literary oeuvre. In his article, David Rozenon analyzes the Jewish currents in Babel's work as well as Babel's inner battle, and the ultimate failure, to synthesize his Jewish roots with his desire to become a fully integrated Russian writer.

Key words: Isaac Babel; The Red Cavalry Cycle; The Odessa Stories; Babel's 1920 Diary; Russian Revolution; Cossacks; Russian Literature; Judaism; Jewish literature; Pale of Settlement; pogroms; Civil War.

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