

VASSILY GROSSMAN, WW2 JEWS & SOVIET ATTITUDES

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Outline

A. On our first trip to the Soviet Union in August of 1962, while in Kiev, Sally and I asked our Intourist guide to take us to Babi Yar, a ravine where 120,000 civilians, the majority of them Jews, were slaughtered over the course of a few days beginning September 29 1941. Yevgenny Yevtushenko had just published his poem Babi Yar during the Khrushchev Thaw, perhaps the first postwar recognition of the holocaust in the USSR. Babi Yar was one of the first Nazi atrocities of the war.

But our guide, a good Soviet citizen, protested, and told us that Babi Yar was now covered by an apartment complex and park. And why did we want to see just the site of an atrocity against Jews anyways when so many Russians and other nationalities had lost their lives in the war. Our request was ignored.

Vassily Grossman was one of those Ukrainian Jews who lost a parent in the Nazi killing fields early in the war, not in Kiev, but in Berdichev to the west, a city of 60,000 inhabitants, half of whom were Jews. He was born Iosif Solomonovich Grossman but quickly changed his name to the Russian Vassily Semyenovitch, spent some time in France with his mother, and studied engineering at Moscow University. Upon graduation he worked as an engineer in the Donbas or coal region of eastern Ukraine. During that time he wrote "The town of Berdichev, a story of a female commissar living with a Jewish family at the time of the Civil War, other short stories and Glyukauf, a novel of Ukrainian coal miners. His wife, Olga, recently divorced from a Soviet political prisoner, was herself put in prison, Grossman obtained her release with a letter to the then head of the NKVD, Nikolai Yezhov, pointing out that Olga was now married to a Soviet patriot.

After Nazi Germany invaded Russia in 1941, Grossman sought to bring his mother, Yekaterina, from Berdichev to Moscow. But Grossman's wife would have none of it, claiming their apartment was too small to accommodate three persons.

Soon after the invasion, Grossman entered the military as a private in the Soviet Army. Overweight, in poor condition and now a well-known member of the Soviet writers' Union, he was assigned as a correspondent for the Soviet Army's newspaper, the Red Star. He, along with two of his colleagues, Konstantin Simonov, regarded by some as a Soviet hack, but to most Russians a talented journalist and beloved lyric poet of the Soviet Army, and Ilya Ehrenberg, the flamboyant Jewish author of *The Thaw*, posted war time dispatches to the Red Star, and soon all three became household names throughout the USSR. Grossman covered the Battle of Stalingrad until victory was in sight when he was replaced by Simonov, the Battle of the Kursk Salient, and the liberation of the first extermination camps in eastern Poland. However, Simonov

again upstaged him at the discovery of the first extermination camp, Maidanek in early July 1944 with his report to the Red Star. Four months later in November 1944 Grossman wrote an in depth piece titled "The Hell of Treblinka" for the Soviet magazine "The Banner". , a piece so vivid and compelling that it was used as evidence at the Nuremburg trials.

Grossman's masterpiece, "Life and Fate" was completed and submitted to the authorities in 1959. It was rejected for publication and the NKVD seized the manuscript. However, while Grossman cooperated with the NKVD a copy remained in the hands of his friend, the poet, Semyon Lipkin. Five years later after Grossman died of stomach cancer. Lipkin with assistance from Andrei Sakharov, smuggled out of Russia microfilm copies of the manuscript, and it was first published in Russian in Switzerland in 1980.

In 2006 the British WW2 historian Anthony Bevor, in collaboration with Lyuba Vinogradov, translated some of Grossman's wartime notebooks along with his most notable dispatch on Treblinka and with added commentary published them as "A Writer at War". Also in 2006 appeared Robert Chandler's translation of the copy of Grossman 's manuscript, "Life and Fate".

B. Life and Fate is part autobiographical and one of its central characters, the husband of one of the Shashponikov sisters, is Viktor Strum, a nuclear physicist and a Jew. Strum. who is a considered the prototype of Grossman. has been temporarily evacuated from Moscow to Kazan, and in the early fall of 1941 receives an anguished and eloquent letter from his mother, smuggled out by a grateful former patient of the mother, who was an ophthalmologist. In one paragraph Strum's mother writes:

" I never used to feel I was a Jew: as a child my circle of friends were all Russian; my favorite poets were Pushkin and Nekrasov the one play which reduced me to tears together with the whole audience ... was Stanislavsky's production of Uncle Vanya. "

While Stanislavsky produced his Chekhov at the Moscow Art Theater before the October Revolution, certainly the remark of Strum's mother reflects generally accurately the situation on the eve of WW2 respecting assimilated Jews in the Soviet Union. With revolution, the Pale of Settlement was abolished, and the pogroms ceased. Jews were key players in the Revolution although some, like Zinoviev, were purged in the 1930's. In the late 1920's the Soviet Union established an autonomous area for Jews wishing to group together in Birobidzhdan, a remote corner of Siberia, and some Jews moved there. By 1940, the long serving and recently cashiered Jewish foreign minister, Maxim Litvinov, was about to be appointed Soviet ambassador to the US. He was in May 1939 replaced as foreign minister by Vyacheslav Molotov after the Soviet Union started planning for the Ribentrop-Molotov Pact and the partition of Poland. Molotov was a Russian who in turn, was married to a Jew, Polina Zhemchuzhina. After the Polish partition Soviet troops occupied in the fall of 1939 Poland's eastern half. Initially, Red Army troops were warmly welcomed by Polish Jews and Jews in German occupied Poland tried to escape to the east, with only limited success. Ironically, however, after experiencing months of harshness and arbitrariness from their Soviet occupiers, albeit without an anti-Semitic animus, many Jews tried to return to German occupied Poland.

Yiddish theater flourished in Moscow and continued to flourish throughout the war, and secular Yiddish culture, excluding Zionism, was encouraged by the authorities for a time. Grossman and his Jewish colleague Ilya Ehrenberg joined the Literary Commission affiliated with the Jewish Antifascist Committee in 1944 for the purpose of overseeing the assembly of the Black Book of Russian Jewry during WW2; two years earlier in 1943 the Committee, through financing from leftist and Communist American Jews, sent the great Yiddish actor, Solomon Mikoels, and the Yiddish poet and war time journalist, Itzik Feffer, to the US to obtain financial support from the Jewish community. There they meet Albert Einstein and, James Rosenberg, one of the leaders of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Einstein encouraged the idea of the Black Book and Rosenberg suggested to the two Russian Jews the idea of a Zionist homeland in the Crimea.

The letter of Strum's mother in *Life and Fate* goes on to describe how things rapidly changed when the Wehrmacht quickly overran the Western Soviet Union in July 1941. The Jewish mother overhears a conversation between her landlady and a neighbor just after the Germans arrive: "Well, that's the end of the Jews. Thank God for that." A neighbor, a widow with a small child, tells Strum's mother to move out of her flat and take the small room behind the kitchen so that the neighbor can displace her. When the mother refuses, she returns to find the door smashed in and her furniture piled in the room behind the kitchen. In a few weeks Strum's mother along with the other Jews is herded to the old part of the city, surrounded by barbed wire to await her fate. According to Grossman, the Germans encouraged anti-Jewish attitudes, but the majority of Ukrainians remained uncommitted in a state of fearful neutrality.

Even without the Wehrmacht, Soviet attitudes towards Jews, especially those who asserted their Jewish heritage, were beginning to change or perhaps latent anti-Semitism was reappearing. In August 1942, the head of the Propaganda and Agitation Administration sent a note to the Secretary of the Communist Party complaining that Jews, as opposed to ethnic Russians, held all the leading positions at Soviet cultural and educational institutions: the Bolshoi, the Moscow Conservatory and faculty chairs at the Moscow State University. As one Israeli scholar has written: "A brisk campaign for the purity of Russian art, never publicly admitted, was then speedily implemented."

After the Red Army re-conquered Ukraine in late 1943, Grossman returned to Berdichev to find out what happened to his mother. He learned that the 30,000 Jews of Berdichev, including his mother, had been massacred there in early September of 1941. Upon his death there were found on Grossman's person two letters he wrote to his mother after her death and two pictures, one of his mother with Vassily as a child and one of a pile of dead naked female Jews. When Grossman's US biographer visited Berdichev with his wife in May 1994, they found, four kilometers outside Berdichev, a monument to Soviet Citizens tortured by the Nazi invaders, and two long mounds along a barbed wire fence surrounding an Ukrainian military airfield. Grossman's US translator reports that this same biographer received a letter from an American Peace corps volunteer in Berdichev in the late 1990's: "She was trying to locate the massacre sites. When she asked her Ukrainian friends (and she speaks Ukrainian) for help, they looked at her blankly and denied the existence of any such massacres, or any such pits."

C. In the late spring of 1944 the Red Army crossed the Bug River and entered territory that once belonged to Poland. In early July Soviet troops approached Lublin and came upon their first Nazi concentration camp, Maidanek. Maidanek had started out in 1941 as a POW camp for both Russian and Polish POW's. In early 1942, it was converted to a labor camp and death camp. Prisoners arrived there from all over Europe, and from the nearby Lublin ghetto. Konstantin Simonov had won the assignment to file the first report with the Red Star and Grossman had to bide his time. Simonov's story described the various groups of prisoners who came to Maidanek: Polish and Soviet partisans, their families, Jews from Lublin and Warsaw, and dealt with the harsh conditions and beatings in the labor camp. The Russian born British journalist, Alexander Werth, who was accompanying the Red Army, also filed a report on Maidanek with the BBC. But the BBC refused to broadcast it, suspecting that it was based on Soviet propaganda. So the first version of the story of Maidanek in English was a translation of Simonov's report in the London Daily Worker. Thousands of Soviet soldiers were ordered to visit the camp site and learn first hand of the atrocities committed by the Germans.

The Soviets also invited Western journalists to Maidanek. Soviet motives for this may have been several fold: fear that the West might strike a deal with Germany behind their back, or diverting Western attention away from their plan to exclude the Polish London government from post-war Poland. The New York Times sent W. E. Lawrence and his story relayed by wireless appeared on August 27, 1944. By that time the Warsaw uprising had begun and the non-Communist, Polish leadership was facing annihilation. The London government was scrambling for a place at the negotiating table but was clearly losing ground to the Lublin (Communist backed) government and the Soviets.

The Times editorialized about the Lawrence report:

"No settlement of the Polish question can be considered wrong if it unites Europe in the determination that those who committed this inconceivable crime shall be punished and that never again shall any Power arise in Europe capable of such crimes. Borders and compositions of governments are of secondary importance."

Lawrence wrote of the showers at Maidanek used to open the pores of the victims so that the gas would be absorbed faster, the gas chamber, the crematorium, and the warehouse full of shoes of the victims. The story headlined that 1,500,000 victims had perished at Maidanek. Ultimately, the deaths of about 79,000 prisoners at Maidanek were confirmed, of whom about 55,000 were Jews.

In the last week of July Soviet soldiers from the 1st Belorussian Front, overran the now abandoned and gutted Death camp at Treblinka about 55 miles north east of Warsaw and Grossman got his chance. Grossman arrived in a few weeks and began interviewing local inhabitants, arrested guards, and escaped prisoners as well as examining the physical facilities, such as they were. In November he submitted his story, "The Hell of Treblinka" to the monthly magazine, Banner. His insightful writing made it absolutely clear how the Nazis, through a combination of deception, terror, and ambiguity giving rise to hopefulness, rendered it impossible for prisoners, disembarking directly from their ghastly train ride at the camp station and herded to

the showers and gas chambers, to resist or escape or even desire to do so. While the story revealed that the majority of victims in the death camp were Jews, it made no mention of the fact that the majority of guards moving them along pell mell to their doom were Ukrainians. The number of Jews who perished at Treblinka is thought to be in excess of 800,000.

In one chapter of *Life and Fate* Grossman directly addresses the moral and psychological issues involving the passivity of victims and of the observers at the death camps:

Of the victims he writes:

"it is important to consider what a man must have suffered and endured in order to feel glad at the thought of his impending execution. It is especially important to consider this if one is inclined to moralize, to reproach the victims for their lack of resistance in conditions of which one has little conception."

Of the passive observers he writes:

" Experience showed that such campaigns (whipping up the fury of the masses) make the majority of the population obey every order of the authorities as though hypnotized. There is a particular minority which helps to create the atmosphere of these campaigns: ideological fanatics, people who take bloodthirsty delight in the misfortunes of others; and people who want to settle personal scores;... Most people, however, are horrified at mass murder, but they hide this not only from their families, but from themselves."

Grossman is now talking about the continuing violence of both regimes, fascist and communist.

Finally, Grossman reinterprets his "The Hell of Treblinka" in *Life and Fate* in a fictional account of a Jewish woman, Sofia Levinton, from Moscow. Sofia, a doctor, befriends an orphan boy in the freight cars heading from Russia to a death camp. As the prisoners disembark and head towards the gas chamber, they are directed by Ukrainian guards. The guards tell them to remember the place where they put their shoes before entering the bathhouse so they can reclaim them on coming out. Ukrainian women cut the women's hair before they march through the concrete tunnel to the gas chamber. Sofia refuses to step out from the crowd of the condemned when the guards call for doctors as she wants to comfort her new "son". At the entrance of the gas chamber she loses herself momentarily and joins in an attack on a German guard. But before she is recognized, she withdraws to find her little boy. They lose each other when the crowd packs the chamber but miraculously find each other just before the Zyklon D is released and die in each other's arms.

D. One of the Jews evacuated before the Nazis overran Kiev and who returned to Kiev with the Red Army was the Yiddish poet, Dovid Hofshiteyn. Hofshiteyn in 1944 sought permission to hold a memorial service for the victims of Babi Yar. Permission was denied. Three years later Hofshiteyn was arrested after he sent a telegram to the new Israeli ambassador to the Soviet Union, Golda Meir, urging the revival of the study of Hebrew in the Soviet Union. Hofshiteyn was sent to Siberia where he was executed in 1952.

Also in 1944 the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, with the assistance of Solomon Losovsky, a Jew and deputy People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs and head of the Soviet Information Bureau, and Polina Zhemchuzhina, Molotov's wife, met with Molotov to discuss the Rosenberg idea of a Jewish autonomous Republic in the Crimea. The advantages as articulated, would be an alternative to Israel, whose independence was then being discussed, receipt of financial support from rich American Jews, and facilitating espionage in America through a Jewish line. Molotov advised sending a written memo to Stalin outlining these advantages.

While Beria was supportive as he saw an opportunity for expanding espionage in the US, at the time, Stalin was planning to replace Molotov, Beria, Kaganovch, Malenkov, and Mikoyan, his trusted inner circle during most of WW2, with Andrei Zhdanov, head of the Leningrad defense and later Soviet minister of culture and with Mikhail Suslov, another Communist hardliner. Further, Stalin was concerned about Yiddish culture flourishing independent of Soviet values and about the possibility that American Jews might infiltrate key organs of the Soviet Union. The pejorative, in Soviet usage, word "cosmopolitanism" became synonymous with anti-Semitism. The memo to Stalin calling for an autonomous Jewish republic in the Crimea backfired.

Zhdanov and Suslov required the Jewish Anti-Fascist to submit reports justifying its continued existence and conducted an investigation that resulted in criticism of its activities.. Still to be uncovered is what role the Committee had in the betrayal of atomic secrets by the British atomic physicist, Klaus Fuchs, assigned to Los Alamos and the betrayals by Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Ironically, one of the criticisms by the Suslov review committee was that the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee had not taken advantage of contacts with foreign scientists and other public figures "to obtain scientific, technological and political information that could prove useful to the Soviet state."

By 1947 as the issue of establishing the state of Israel began to boil up, Stalin jumped on the bandwagon and gave his early support to the new state. He hoped that Israel would continue to make things difficult for the British and their empire and lean politically to Moscow. And while Andrei Vishinsky was instructed to vote for the new state and to acknowledge the heavy sacrifices the Jewish people had made in WW2, when Mikoels publicly expressed his grief for the millions of Jews murdered in the Holocaust, and expressed his support for Israel, Stalin decided he should be dispensed with. In January 1948 as Mikoels traveled to Minsk to judge a Yiddish play for a Stalin prize, it was arranged for him to be run over by a truck. A state funeral was held in his honor and the Yiddish theater in Moscow was named after him before it closed a few months later.

In September Golda Meier arrived in Moscow as the first Israeli ambassador. Her attendance at the synagogue in Moscow of services on the High Holy days brought out thousands of Jews to cheer her. At a diplomatic reception in Moscow, Polina Zhemchuzhina, presaging JFK's 1961 speech in Berlin approached Golda Meier and said to her in Yiddish: "Ikh bin a yidishe tokhter" I am a daughter of the Jewish people. Zhemchuzhina, who was already under suspicion for her patronage of the former head of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, for advocating a Jewish autonomous republic in the Crimea, and for attending a memorial service for the victims of the

Holocaust in a Moscow synagogue in March 1945, was arrested and sentenced to five years exile in Siberia. Molotov, to save his skin, denounced her, but they continued to correspond and were reunited after Stalin's death. In a few months all of the 13 members of the presidium of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were arrested and placed in the Lyubyanka and some two years later secretly tried and executed.

Grossman had been working intermittently with Ilya Ehrenburg on the Black Book of Russian Jewry, a compilation of official reports, interviews, diaries, and other materials detailing the Nazi massacre of the Jews in Russia. Soviet censors tried to delete references to the anti-Jewish animus of the Nazi atrocities and the fact that Ukrainians served as policemen for the Nazis. In 1948 as the Yiddish press started to print copies of the Black Book, publication was suspended and the printed copies were confiscated along with the manuscript. Publication in Russian finally took place in Israel in 1980 and in Kiev in 1993.

While Grossman escaped the fate of his Committee colleagues, he was swept up in the anti-Jewish hysteria triggered by the Doctor's plot in 1952. The plot arose after Zhdanov's death in 1952 while attended by a Jewish doctor. Grossman's new novel about the epic struggle in Stalingrad, "For a Just Cause" published in Alexander Tvardosky's *Novy Mir* had elicited harsh criticism. *Novy Mir* had to apologize publicly for serializing the novel. Grossman was asked to attend a meeting of leading Jewish cultural leaders and on the way dropped by Tvardosky's office to complain to Tvardosky about his apology. "Go to your meeting. You still don't understand how it is. They'll explain it to you," Tvardosky shouted. At the meeting Grossman under pressure signed a letter designed to counteract Western newspaper criticism of Soviet anti-Semitic attitudes and condemnation of Soviet intellectuals who accused Jewish doctors as "murderers in white coats as agents of imperialism and Zionism and asserting that there was no anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union." Grossman's colleague, Ehrenberg resisted signing. The rebuttal letter was never published.

In one of the final episodes of *Life and Fate*, Viktor Strum, the Jewish nuclear physicist is asked to attend a meeting at his institute relative to signing a group letter of Jewish intellectuals. By this time Strum has already stood up to a lot of pressure. Having been accused in a house bulletin of "cosmopolitanism", he refuses to follow protocol and attend a self-criticism meeting at the Institute and apologize for his mistakes. He is ostracized and for weeks waits for the moment when he will be arrested. Instead, he receives a phone call from Stalin himself and Stalin lauds him for his important work. Of course, his colleagues hear of this phone call, and Strum is restored to his former status.

Now he faces the agonizing dilemma all over again. A group of English scientists have drafted a letter published in the *New York Times*, condemning the trumped up charges against two famous Jewish doctors who "confessed" to murdering Maxim Gorky and condemning Stalin's intimidation of the *intelligentsia*. Viktor is asked to sign a letter prepared for him condemning the English scientists' letter as an affront to Soviet dignity. He knows that the charges against the two doctors are trumped up, but he signs while his closest colleague resists.

As Grossman wrote:

"Viktor felt disgust at his own submissiveness. The great State was breathing on him tenderly; he didn't have the strength to cast himself out in the freezing darkness...He was paralyzed, not by fear, but by something quite different- a strange agonizing sense of his own passivity."

Today there are many monuments to those who perished at Babi Yar, Ukrainians, Orthodox priests, children and so forth, and a Menorah in memory of the Jews executed there, erected in 1992. In 1997 the menorah monument was vandalized, and it has yet be restored.

Postscript:

After completion of this paper, I came across in early October a report of a French Priest who has crisscrossed Ukraine with an interpreter, and a metal detector operator, interviewing elderly Ukrainians about the location of sites where SS Einsatzgruppen squads massacred Ukrainian Jews in the early months of the invasion. Father Patrick Desbois has had remarkable success persuading elderly Ukrainians, to open up with information about the past. Where a village fails to cooperate, he reasonably assumes that the villagers were willing collaborators with the SS.

Descending on a village in Western Ukraine Father Desbois heads to the main church to ask for help from the Village priest, whether Catholic or Uniate. He follows up going door to door asking for information. He has located hundreds of common graves, some containing as few as a dozen corpses, some containing many thousands. Father Desbois now heads a nonprofit organization, Yahad in Unum, Jews and Catholics Together. His findings area posted on a web site, <http://www.yahadinunum.org/recherches.en.html>

While Father Desbois has undermined my unstated premise that former Soviet citizens have been too conditioned by propaganda to accept that Jews suffered the most in WW2 , his work seems to underpin Grossman's premise that most gentile witnesses of the Holocaust were at worst in a state of fearful neutrality.