An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature

Volume 2: 1953–2001

Two Centuries of Dual Identity in Prose and Poetry

Maxim D. Shrayer, Editor
An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature
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Edited, selected, and cotranslated, with introductory essays by
Maxim D. Shrayer

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BORIS SLUTSKY

Boris Slutsky (1919–1986), poet, translator, and essayist, was born in Slavyansk (now Donetsk Province of Ukraine) and grew up in Kharkov. Slutsky attended the literary seminar (lito) at the Kharkov Palace of Young Pioneers. Succumbing to pressure from his father, who had trouble imagining (Russian) poetry as a career (for a Jew), Slutsky entered the Moscow Institute of Law in 1937. The following year Slutsky was accepted to the Moscow Literary Institute on the recommendation of Pavel Antokolsky (in vol. I). He combined reading law with the study of creative writing. Slutsky joined the seminar of Ilya Selvinsky (in vol. I) and became a leading member of a circle of young poets that included Semyon Gudzenko, Pavel Kogan, Mikhail Kulchitsky, Sergey Narovchatov, and David Samoylov (Kaufman); poets Gudzenko, Kogan, and Kulchitsky perished in World War II. In 1941 a poem of Slutsky’s appeared in the monthly October (Oktyabr’); he waited twelve years for his next publication of poetry.

Slutsky volunteered right after the Nazi invasion in 1941, serving initially as a military jurist and in 1942 switching to the track of a political officer. Slutsky spent 1942–44 at the southern fronts; in 1943 he learned about the murder of his family members in the Kharkov ghetto. Slutsky joined the Communist Party in 1943 and was promoted to deputy head of the Fifty-seventh Army political department. Slutsky wrote virtually no poetry during the front years. He completed a book of documentary prose about his experiences in 1944–45 in Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Austria. In the chapter “The Jews,” Slutsky interspersed authorial observations with survivors’ testimony. Lacking the pathos of Ilya Ehrenburg’s essays about the Shoah published in the 1940s (in vol. I), Slutsky’s book combined harsh truths about marauding Soviet troops with ideological window dressing and remained unpublished until the post-Soviet years. The complete text appeared in Notes about the War (2000), edited by Slutsky’s longtime friend Pyotr Gorelik.

Slutsky ended his service in August 1946 as a decorated Guards major. Having been twice seriously injured, Slutsky spent two years in and out of hospitals. He returned to Moscow during the darkest years for Soviet Jewry. Receiving a small disability pension, he did hack literary work. An avant-gardist writer at the time when experimentation was deemed “formalist,” “decadent,” and “bourgeois,” Slutsky had a perilous time. “Memorial,” apparently his second published poem for adult readers, appeared in August 1953, after Stalin’s death.

In July 1956, Ilya Ehrenburg lauded Slutsky in Literary Gazette (Literaturnaia
Slutsky became an icon of the Thaw, an enemy of the entrenched Stalinists, and a hero of the liberal intelligentsia then overcome with the palliative optimism of the Twentieth Party Congress. Slutsky's first collection, *Memory*, selected by the critic Vladimir Ognov from a "suitcase of manuscripts," appeared in 1957 to include elegantly rough-hewn, street-smart, colloquial, factographically lyrical poems about the war and the shedding of illusions. Slutsky bridged "the generation of 1940" and the one entering the Soviet literary scene during the Thaw. Poets as different as Joseph Brodsky, Genrikh Sapgir (both in vol. 2), or Yevgeny Yevtushenko acknowledged Slutsky's impact. Slutsky's Thaw poems, such as "Horses in the Ocean" (published 1956; text below) and "Physicists and Lyricists" (published 1959), gained national fame. Speedily accepted to the Writers' Union, in 1957 Slutsky traveled to Italy with a delegation of Soviet poets that included, as a calculated gesture, Jews (Slutsky and Vera Inber [in vol. 1]) and victims of Stalinism (Nikolay Zabolotsky).

In the poem "I grew up under Stalin . . ." (published 1965), Slutsky articulated a transformation from faith to questioning to outright rejection of Stalin: "With sadness over his [i.e., Stalin's] having croaked/I didn't soil my soul./I took off, like a rumpled shirt/Him, who ruled and severely punished." A Jew, a Communist, and a war veteran, an "official dissident," and heir-designate to the 1920s Left Art, Slutsky solidified his position as a leading anti-Stalinist poet with the publication, in 1962 in *Literary Gazette*, of the poems "God" and "The Boss." Some critics pigeonholed Slutsky as a "frontline poet," but he and his poetry were always about more than war or Stalinism: a Janus-like visionary, whose actions enforced the official Soviet rhetorics that many of his poems subverted.

G.S. Smith, whose book of Slutsky's translations with commentary, *Things That Happened* (1999), introduced Slutsky to the Anglo-American reader, called Slutsky "the most imporant Soviet poet of his generation." Given the magnitude of his talent and influence, a reckoning of Slutsky's career can be frustrating. The episode that most tarnished Slutsky's reputation was his speech against Boris Pasternak (in vol. 1) during a meeting of Moscow writers on 31 October 1958, which "unanimously" passed a resolution to "expel" Pasternak from the Union of Soviet Writers. Smith characterized Slutsky's opprobrious conduct as "an act that was honest and sincere but that tormented Slutsky for the rest of his life." Apologism does no justice to the complexity of Slutsky's nature and ambitions. Referring to the pressure that the Party's central committee exerted upon him, Slutsky claimed that he spoke with "the least indecency." In agreeing to attack the author of *Doctor Zhivago*, Slutsky apparently regarded Pasternak as a sacrificial lamb—"the price"—of the Thaw. The translator of Italian writers into Russian Lev Vershinin related in his 2002 memoir how after his speech Slutsky "rushed to Peredelkino to see Pasternak [. . .] and not figuratively but literally fell on his knees and begged forgiveness [. . .]."

In the post-Soviet mythology, Slutsky has emerged as both a calculating idealist and a romantic realist. The lives and oeuvres of such Western left-wing avant-gardists as Pablo Picasso, Louis Aragon, and Bertolt Brecht loomed before Slutsky's eyes, but
he was living in a Soviet totalitarian state. Slutsky attempted to intercede on behalf of underground writers and visual artists, arguing that revolutionary art demanded radical experimentation. He promoted gifted Russian poets, some of them from the provinces, among them Igor Shklyarevsky (b. 1938), and openly helped Jewish-Russian poets and encouraged them to fight antisemitism using official Soviet means. Yet the fact that one of his closest Russian protégés, poet and essayist Stanislav Kunyaev (b. 1932), in the late 1970s became a leader of the then emergent Russian ultranationalist literary movement suggests that Slutsky had deluded himself into believing he could rear poet-disciples in his own, as he may have hoped, internationalist image.

Few poets of the postwar Soviet era were Slutsky’s equals in making lofty poetry out of the polluted idiom of Soviet daily living. During two decades of peak form, 1957–77, Slutsky published a new or selected volume nearly every other year. Titles of his collections augment a penchant for both philosophical lyricism and inflation of prosaisms: Time (1959), Today and Yesterday (1961), Work (1964), Contemporary Stories [or Histories] (1969), The Year [Clock] Hand (1971), Day’s Kindness (1973), Unfinished Debates (1978), Hand and Soul (1981), Terms (1984), and others. Slutsky published many translations from languages of the Soviet republics and the Eastern Bloc. He produced exemplary renditions of Nazim Hikmet (1902–1963), the Turkish poet living in exile. Slutsky translated Yiddish poets, including Shmuel Halkin, Aron Kushnirov, Leyb Kvitko, and Aron Vergelis. In 1963, when the USSR still had diplomatic relations with Israel, the anthology Poets of Israel appeared in Moscow and comprised Russian translations, some expurgated, of works by Hebrew, Yiddish, and Arabic poets living in Israel, a number of whom were identified in the biographical notes as “Communists” or “progressives.” Slutsky was listed as the volume’s editor but not the author of the tendentious introduction, signed “From the Publisher.”

In February 1977, Slutsky’s wife, Tatyana Dashkovskaya (1930–1977), died of cancer. They were childless, and Slutsky loved his wife beyond any words—and any poems. Slutsky wrote for three months after his wife’s death, creating piercing love poems and several texts with Jewish themes, but then severe depression set in. After spending some time in mental institutions, Slutsky moved to Tula, a city south of Moscow, where he lived in his brother’s family. He wrote no poetry for the rest of his life and died there in 1986.

Pyotr Gorelik reported that in 1975 Slutsky had told him he had about five hundred unpublished poems—and this turned out to be a conservative assessment. Party functionaries and the KGB kept a watchful eye on Slutsky, especially in respect to his treatment of the Shoah and antisemitism, and his poems printed in the 1950s–1970s reveal censorial corruptions. Largely through the devotion of Slutsky’s executor, the critic Yury Boldyrev (1934–1993), numerous magazine publications and a number of books appeared during the reform and the post-Soviet years, including Slutsky’s three-volume Collected Works (1991).
Some of Slutsky’s earliest Jewish poems (1938–40) have been lost. In 1938 he wrote “The Story of an Old Jew (Story from Abroad),” his first known response to Nazism; it appeared fifty-five years later in Israel. After witnessing the immediate aftermath of the Shoah in 1944–45 and writing nonfiction about it, Slutsky returned to poetry as the anticosmopolitan campaign gained speed. Memories of the destruction of European Jewry became enmeshed in Slutsky’s acutely political imagination with the antisemitic crimes of late Stalinism, giving rise to a conflation of Jewish questions that Slutsky put in verse in the 1950s and 1960s and later revisited in the 1970s.

The most outspoken of Slutsky’s poems about the Shoah and antisemitism did not appear in the USSR until the reform years, although several circulated in samizdat and appeared in the West, some anonymously. (Pyotr Gorelik included a selection in Slutsky’s volume Now Auschwitz Often Appears in My Dreams . . . [St. Petersburg, 1999].) Some of Slutsky’s poems published in the USSR treated Jewish themes by employing Aesopian language and allegory. In his memoir “A Jerusalem Cossack” (1991), David Shrayer-Petmv (in vol. 2) called Slutsky’s “Horses in the Ocean” (see below) a “requiem for the murdered Jews.” In the 1950s–1970s Slutsky steered into print more poems where the Shoah was memorialized, the Jewish question was explicitly debated, and the word “Jew” was used unabashedly than any of his Soviet contemporaries. Slutsky the legalist proceeded as though the official rhetoric on the Jewish question and antisemitism protected Soviet Jews. A tetrade of Slutsky’s Jewish poems appeared in Soviet magazines as the second Thaw peaked and entered its downward spiral. Three of them, “Birch Tree in Auschwitz” (published 1962), “How They Killed My Grandma” (published 1963), and “Burdened by familial feelings . . .” (published 1964), following in the footsteps of Ehrenburg’s wartime writings and Vasily Grossman’s “The Old Teacher” (in vol. 1), transgressed the unspoken taboo on singling out the Jewish Holocaust.

In this selection of Slutsky’s Jewish poems from the 1950s, only two, “Horses in the Ocean” and “Prodigal Son,” appeared in the USSR in Slutsky’s lifetime (see Bibliography of Primary Sources for Volume 2). Of the other four, two (“Oh, but we Jews had all the luck . . .” and “Of the Jews”) circulated as a pair in the Soviet underground and appeared abroad in the 1960s–1970s. The other two, “These Abrám, Isák, and Yákov . . .” and “Puny Jewish children . . .” (cf. the opening of Isaac Babel’s “Awakening” [in vol. 1]), languished in Slutsky’s desk drawer until 1989. (See additional poems in the section “The Late Soviet Empire: 1964–1991.”)
These Abrám, Isák and Yákov
Have inherited little or none
From Messrs. Abraham, Isaac,
and Jacob—
Gentlefolk of worldly renown.

In esteem travels the father of nations,
Wise Abraham; at the same time,
Goes Abram like a poor relation.
Praise to Abraham—a plague on Abram.

They sing hallelujas for Isaac
From the generous altars on high.
But they scrutinize Isak through the eyehole
And don’t let him inside their homes.

Since the time Jacob wrestled with God
Since that time,
    when God had prevailed,
Jacob’s known as Yakov.
This wretched Yakov
Always stands in everyone’s way.

Oh, but we Jews had all the luck.
With no false banner to mask its presence,
Plain evil threw itself on us,
Seeing no need in noble pretense.

The loud disputes had not begun
Across the deaf, triumphant country.
But we, pressed to the corner with a gun,
Discovered solid ground.
Of the Jews

The Jews don’t push on a plow,
The Jews, as a rule, are loud,
The Jews rip you off at the market,
The Jews take a good thing and muck it.

The Jews are dangerous people,
Don’t ask a Jew to do battle;
Ivan lies down for his country,
Abram stands behind the counter.

I’ve heard this since childhood,
Now my hair is graying.
“Jews! Jews!” the incessant holler
Will hound me into the grave.

I never stood behind a counter,
I’ve never stolen anyone’s purse,
But I carry this race lie a curse:
And I’m quartered according to quota.

The Nazi bullet had spared me,
So neighbors could truthfully intone:
“None of the Jews perished!
All of them returned home!”

Horses in the Ocean

for I. Ehrenburg

Horses weren’t made for water.
They can swim but not too far.
"Gloria" means the same as "glory"—
You will easily remember this part.

Braving the sea, a transatlantic vessel
Raised its flag above the stormy waves.

In its hold stood a thousand horses,
Four thousand feet stamping night and day.

A thousand horses! Four thousand horseshoes!
Not a single one could bring good luck.

In the middle of the stormy ocean
A torpedo tore the plates apart.

People piled into rafts and lifeboats,
Horses had to swim as best they could.

Boats and dinghies weren't made for horses—
What else could the poor creatures do?

A floating herd of reds and bays, a real
Island in the blue-green sea.

And at first they thought it was a river,
And it wasn't difficult to swim.

But the river before them was unending.
As they reached the limit of their strength

The horses raised a neigh, protesting
Against those who pulled them into the depths.

Horses neighed and drowned and drowned,
All went down, to the very last.

That's all. But I often think about it:
Drowning red horses, far away from land.
Prodigal Son

In the ragged robes of need,
In the exhaustion of toil,
The prodigal son finds his childhood home.
He taps at the windowpane softly:
"May I?"
"Son! My only one! Certainly!
Please, come in! Do whatever your heart desires.
Wet your father's old cheek, chew the calf's fragrant meat.
It's a blessing to have you around!
Oh, son, won't you settle down and stay here a while?"
With a thick wooly beard he's wiping his mouth
As he puts away the stew,
As he drinks the cold clear water,
Beads of sweat glittering on his brow
From such unfamiliar labors.
Now he's eaten as much as he could,
And he goes
To the room where the clean bed awaits him.
How long has it been since he rested!
Then wakes up and puts on his clothes,
Finds his staff,
And without a word, goes.

1956

* * *

Puny Jewish children,
Bespectacled and bookish,
Who triumph on the chessboard
But can't do a single push-up.

Consider this suggestion:
Kayaking, boxing, sailing;
Take on the barren glacier,
Run barefoot in the grasslands.
The more you come to punches,
The fewer books, the better.
Keep turning where the wind blows,
Keep marching with the ages,
Try not to break formation,
Leave the boundaries in place.

The terrible twentieth century
Still has a few more years.

1957–58

Translated from the Russian by Sergey Levchin and Maxim D. Shrayer

Boris Slutsky, “U Abrama, Isaka i Iakova. . .”, “A nam, evreiam, povezlo. . .”, “Pro evreev,”
“Loshadi v okeane,” “Bludnyi syn,” “Evreiskim khilym detiam. . .” Copyright © by the Estate
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