INTRODUCTION

Over fifteen years ago I wrote Russian Poet/Soviet Jew: The Legacy of Eduard Bagritsky. Published in 2000, it explored the political and cultural anxieties of a major Jewish-Russian poet living and working in the Soviet 1920s and early 1930s. Eduard Bagritsky and the protagonist of the present book, Ilya Selvinsky, were close in Moscow in the middle to late 1920s. Both were Jews originally from the coast of the Black Sea; both were members of the Literary Center of Constructivists, over which Selvinsky presided until its dismantlement in 1930; and both were talented poets famous on the early Soviet literary scene. It was Bagritsky who, in a poem of 1927, laid Selvinsky, along with Nikolai Tikhonov and Boris Pasternak, on the altar of the 1920s Soviet modernism: “To the alien West/ rushing over [fields of] harvested crops/ Tikhonov, Selvinsky, Pasternak....”

The career of Ilya Selvinsky (1899-1968) is emblematic of the experience of Jewish-Russian poets during World War II and the Shoah (Holocaust). Selvinsky spent roughly the first two and a half years (summer 1941-autumn 1943) and the last month of the war (April-May 1945) at the frontlines. Serving as a staff writer and editor of army newspapers and also participating in combat, Selvinsky contributed only about twenty prose items during the wartime years. Poetry, not journalism or essayism, was Selvinsky’s principal medium of writing and publishing about the events he witnessed and participated in. His poetic contributions to army newspapers ranged from lyrical, patriotic, or political poetry to rhymed captions to anti-Nazi cartoons. He composed longer and shorter poems with references to the Shoah, several of them explicit in their articulation of Jewish losses.

Selvinsky was able to steer his Shoah poems into print during and immediately after the Great Patriotic War (as the war against Nazi Germany and its allies became known in the Soviet Union), although he made compromises, some of them negotiating the official Soviet
views of Jewish victimhood. During the war, he experienced political repression, paying a high price for his poems about the war and Shoah.

This book explores the dynamics of Selvinsky’s wartime career by placing it first in the historical contexts of World War II and the Shoah, and subsequently in the cultural and ideological contexts of postwar Stalinism. The book’s final section investigates Selvinsky’s legacy as a poet-soldier and a witness to the Shoah in the occupied Soviet territories.

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As I wrote and revised this book, and especially after I came upon tiers of new evidence during a research trip to Crimea, I had to remind myself that I was not writing a poet’s biography. I wanted to tell the story of Soviet poetry of the Shoah through the prism of one poet’s life and work. I did not set out to create a history of Shoah literature in the USSR, nor had I initially intended to write either a history of the Shoah in Selvinsky’s native Crimea or a study of the cultural legacy of the Shoah in the Soviet Union. These topics, absorbing as they are and understudied as they still remain, left a lot still to be discovered and investigated. Such are, to a degree, the pains of interdisciplinary study, and these challenges are rendered more complex when the subject “Soviet Union” is coupled with the heading “Jews” and placed in the time frame of World War II and the Shoah.

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Since my Moscow youth, both Eduard Bagritsky and Ilya Selvinsky have been among my favorite poets. My views of Bagritsky’s poetry and Jewishness have evolved over the years, and I hope to revisit them before long. Having completed a book about Ilya Selvinsky as a principal Jewish-Russian poetic voice of the Soviet 1940s, I now realize that this volume is in a number of ways a sequel to my earlier book about Bagritsky and
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Jewish-Russian poetic identity. It is, perhaps, fitting that this book not only tells the story of Selvinsky as a witness to the Nazi atrocities but also includes English translations of Selvinsky’s major Shoah poems.

M.D.S

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Brookline, Massachusetts

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

i. Anglicized, reader-friendly spellings of Russian names are used in the main text; if a name has already gained a common spelling in English, this spelling is then used (e.g. Ehrenburg, not Erenburg; Novy Mir, not Novyi mir). In rendering the Russian-language bibliographical references, a slightly simplified version of the US Library of Congress transliteration system is used.

Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from the Russian are mine. As a general principle, literary translations of verse are printed as verse, whereas literal translations of verse are printed as prose with indications of the line boundaries. In some cases, preference is given to literary, not literal, English translations of poetic texts. Even though the literary translations I quote are metrically precise and relatively close to the Russian originals, one cannot rely on the English texts alone to draw accurate conclusions about the poem’s structure, meaning, and significance.

Unless noted otherwise, I reference only the publications I have examined de visu, the latter circumstance being particularly significant in the case of original wartime publications in regional or army newspapers, some of which are extremely difficult to locate even in Russian and Ukrainian libraries or even in Crimean libraries and archives.

ii. As an example of Selvinsky’s cartoon captions, see, for instance, “Fashisty—oblaidarnost’ sud’be...” Syn otechestva 20 October 1941.

iii. I have previously discussed Selvinsky’s experience as a Shoah poet; see Shrayer, “Jewish-Russian Holocaust Poetry in Official Soviet Venues: 1944-
CHAPTER ONE

SELVINSKY ON THE SHOAH BY BULLET

1. Selvinsky before the War: Poetics and Politics

Before turning our attention to the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, let us briefly consider aspects of Selvinsky’s prewar career while taking stock of the treatment of Jewish and Judaic questions, of Selvinsky’s place on the prewar Soviet literary pantheon, and of official repressions against the poet. A poetic virtuoso and an innovator of Russian versification, Selvinsky was born in 1899 in Crimean capital Simferopol, the grandson of a Krymchak. (Krymchaks are Crimea’s indigenous, rabbinate non-Ashkenazi Jews, who speak a Turkic language.) Selvinsky grew up in Simferopol and in Evpatoria in the family of an entrepreneurial tailor who later became a furrier. As an adult, Selvinsky indicated that Russian was his native language, remembered some Hebrew, and retained some knowledge of spoken Yiddish (and also the Krymchak language). 1 Whenever possible, Selvinsky listed “Krymchak” as his nationality in his Soviet documents. At the same time, Selvinsky clearly regarded the Krymchaks as a subgroup of the broader category of the Jewish people, and spoke of both the Jewish and the Russian people as “my own.” As a young boy, Selvinsky was given instruction in the Torah and into his early teen years attended services with his father at both Ashkenazi and Krymchak prayer homes and synagogues. 2 In 1905, in response to the wave of pogroms then sweeping over parts of the Russian Empire, Selvinsky’s father sent him, his mother, and his younger sister

1 On Selvinsky’s command of Yiddish, Tatyana Selvinskaya, Personal Interview, Simferopol, 15 December 2011.
2 Vera Katina and Marina Novikova recently investigated Jewish aspects of Selvinsky’s childhood and early youth. See Katina, “Kazhdyi chelovek imeet pravo....”; Novikova, “Zagadki biografii Il’ia Sel’vinskogo.”
to Constantinople, Turkey, where Selvinsky briefly attended school at the French Catholic mission. As a young man Selvinsky had his share of adventures, ranging from wrestling in the circus and working as a sailor, a longshoreman, and an itinerant actor to participating in the Civil War (first, briefly, in an anarchist troop, later in the the Red Army). He published his first poem in 1915, and in the 1920s experimented with the use of Yiddishisms and thieves' lingo in Russian verse. In 1923, Selvinsky graduated in law from Moscow University.

Selvinsky was the leader of the Literary Center of Constructivists (LTsK), an early Soviet modernist group, from 1924 until its derailment in 1930, and edited landmark anthologies by constructivist authors.

1. Ilya Selvinsky (center) with fellow members of the Literary Center of Constructivists. Moscow, 1925. From left to right: Vladimir Asmus, Aleksandr Kvyatkovsky, Eduard Bagritsky, Kornely Zelinsky, Nikolay Aduev, Ilya Selvinsky, Boris Agapov, Vladimir Lugovskoy, Grigory Gauzner (standing), Vera Inber, and Evgeny Gabrilovich. (Courtesy of Russian State Archive of Literature and the Arts, Moscow.)

In the mid- to late 1920s, with the publication of the collection Records (1926), the epic poem The Lay of Ulyalaev (1924, pub. 1927), the narrative poem Notes of a Poet (1927), and the novel-in-verse Fur Trade (1928;

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pub. 1929), he achieved national Soviet fame. The poet Aleksandr Revich recently suggested that “The Lay of Ulyalaev, alongside And Quiet Flows the Don [by Mikhail Sholokhov], is probably the best literary work about the Civil War, having most shockingly portrayed its horror.” 4 The Lay of Ulyalaev and especially Fur Trade remain unsurpassed masterpieces of Russian epic and narrative poetry. Soviet leaders who took a keen interest in the new letters, among them Lev Trotsky and Nikolai Bukharin, expressed admiration for Selvinsky’s poetry. Lazar Fleishman, in whose study of Boris Pasternak in the 1930s Selvinsky makes numerous appearances, highlights a characteristic episode. At an event hosted by Lev Trotsky in 1926, which brought together editors of leading Moscow “thick” journals Aleksandr Voronsky (Krasnaia nov’ [Red Virgin Soil]) and Vyacheslav Polonsky (Novy Mir [New World]) and the poets Boris Pasternak, Semyon Kirsanov, and Ilya Selvinsky, Trotsky singled out Selvinsky and asked him to recite a section of The Lay of Ulyalaev for the second time. 5 Vyacheslav Polonsky (1886-1932), one of the dominant literary critics of the 1920s, lauded Selvinsky’s contribution:

The Lay of Ulyalaev, long poems and a whole range of shorter works speak of Selvinsky as a rising star of Russian poetry. [...] At that Selvinsky is from head to toe a creation of our epoch. He grew up in the Revolution. Revolutionary is not only the material he uses; revolutionary is his very approach to literary mastery. The least traditional of the contemporary poets, one who disregards all of the existing or past canons, [a poet] heavyish and difficult, in the development of Russian poetry Selvinsky represents a step forward from the marvelous intimate art of Pasternak and from Mayakovsky’s achievements. [...] Selvinsky is one of the poets who not only has a past, but also has a future. 6

5 Lazar’ Fleishman, Boris Pasternak v tridtsatye gody, 12-14 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press/Hebrew University, 1984). Fleishman quotes from the memoirs of Mariia Ioffe.
6 Viasheslav Polonskii, Ocherk literaturnogo dvizhenia revolutsionnoi epokhi, 2nd ed., 46 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, 1929).
Selvinsky’s polemic and rivalry with Vladimir Mayakovsky was one of the highlights of the Soviet literary scene in the late 1920s, while his grudging recantation of the Constructivist program in 1930-1931 did not earn him much trust from the regime.

The wreath of sonnets Bar Kokhba (1920, pub. 1924) occupies a special place among Selvinsky’s works. While perhaps influenced by both the Yiddish drama Bar Kokhba (1887) by Abraham Goldfaden and by Vladimir (Ze’ev) Jabotinsky’s Russian-language poem “In Memory of Herzl” (1904), Selvinsky’s Bar Kokhba has no equivalents in early Soviet writing. Against the backdrop of a growing campaign against traditional Jewish life and Judaism in the Soviet Union, the work became a powerful monument to Jewish—and Judaic—survival. Selvinsky’s other major Jewish works of the pre-World War II years included “Mot’ka Malkhamoves” (“Motke the Angel of Death,” 1926; from the Hebrew and Yiddish “Malech-hamovess”), “Anecdotes about the Karaite Philosopher Babakai-Sudduk” (1931), The Lay of Ulyalaev, and Fur Trade. Selvinsky’s poem “Portrait of My Mother” (1933) contained a bitter comment about Jewish assimilation in the USSR: “Henceforth her son’s face will remain defiled/Like the Judaic Jerusalem,/Having suddenly become a Christian holy site.” In 1930, trying to redeem himself after the onslaught against the independent literary groups of the 1920s, Selvinsky composed the opportunistic poem “From Palestine to Birobidzhan”(1930, pub. 1933).

In 1939 Selvinsky created the play The Tushino Camp, known in manuscript as A Version of False Dmitri II and set in the 1600s, during Russia’s “Time of Troubles.” In the introduction, Selvinsky turned to Shakespeare in order to explain his motivation in giving literary credence to theories of the Jewish origin of the impostor-tsar False Dmitri II (who came to be known as tushinskii vor—the Tushino thief). “Shylock is an entirely different matter,” Selvinsky argued. “The depth of this image is not only in his being a father fighting to avenge his daughter’s seduction, but also in his being a Jew, avenging his national oppression. Here one could not change any significant shadings. Othello’s national particularity is a color; Shylock’s national particularity is an idea.”7 Not surprisingly, The Tushino Thief was officially dismissed as lacking “un-

derstanding of history,” and remained unpublished until 2000, when Selvinsky’s daughter, the visual artist and poet Tatyana Selvinskaya, unearthed it from the archive and offered it to a Russian-Israeli journal for publication. One of the play’s principal subtexts is S. An-sky’s *The Dibbuk* (1911-1919), which in and of itself is a remarkable fact for a Soviet play written in 1930 for the stage. In a short appreciation of Selvinsky that appeared as a preface to *The Tushino Camp*, the Russian-Israeli critic Aleksandr Goldshtein noted:

[... A]bove all, let us stress that obvious eye-catching [feature]: the high class of the writing. Classics write this way (and those avant-gardists who have become classics). And one more, equally important point: if Ilya Lvovich’s attempts to perceive the epochal tempo-rhythm tended, as a rule, to be successful, he only succeeded every other time to embrace the ideological tenets mandatory for all. An enthusiastic appeal to rebellious values and a Jewish-Messianic substratum of a foreigners’ invasion was in 1939, at the time of the forming of a new, post-revolutionary, national-state mythology, absolutely out of place.⁹

Throughout his literary career, Selvinsky had his share of official chastisement and ostracism, denunciations and near-misses.¹⁰ In the words of Arlen Blium, starting with the mid-1920s, “Selvinsky constantly remained on the radar screen of the organs of censorship.”¹¹ On 20 May 1945, as Selvinsky looked back at his rollercoaster prewar literary career

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⁸ See Selvinsky, Wartime Diaries, 27 April 1942; cf. Babenko, *Votna*, 42. Selvinsky recalled in his diary that Aleksandr Shcherbakov scolded him and thrust a middle school textbook of history “under [his] nose.” Wartime Diaries, Authorized corrected photocopy at the Selvinsky Memorial Museum, Simferopol (hereafter Selvinsky, Wartime Diaries). Throughout this book, whenever possible, I will cross-reference Selvinsky’s published diaries and letters with their manuscripts. In many cases, diaries and letters have been published with errors, omissions, lacunae, and editorial/censorial intrusions, most of which can only be clarified by going directly to archival sources.


¹⁰ For a useful overview of Selvinsky’s troubles with Stalin’s regime, see Babenko and Gavriliuk, 91-107.

while already anticipating the postwar ambush of creative artists by the Stalinist regime, he reminisced in his diary:

When in 1928 my Fur Trade came out, Kerzhentsev raised a scream in the newspapers [Platon Kerzhentsev was at the time Deputy Chief of the Directorate of Propaganda and Agitation of the Central Committee of the Communist Party], that it was supposedly the intelligentsia's claim to power. All newspapers picked up this scream and turned it into a call for action. Then I wrote a letter to Komsomolskaya Pravda [Komsomol'skaia Pravda]—“A Reply to Comrade Kerzhentsev”—in which I strenuously objected to his thesis. [...] Naturally Komsomolskaya Pravda did not print the letter but forwarded it to Kerzhentsev.”

What followed, according to Selvinsky’s diary, was an invitation to become Chairman of the Union of Writers. After Selvinsky repeatedly turned down Kerzhentsev’s invitation, this exchange took place:

—Why are you refusing? [Kerzhentsev asked]—Odd question. You have just done everything to undermine my reputation as a writer in the eyes of the society, and now this “thrashed” wise man is to become Chairman of the Union!—We shall restore your reputation, Kerzhentsev said, unperturbed.—And Fur Trade?—We shall find a formula for it, too.

I did not expect such cynicism and was literally stunned. I said many insolent things to K. and then left.

In his public conduct and in his writings, Selvinsky remained a proud poet—and a proud Jew—despite rounds of direct official ostracism. Due to his personal bravery, chutzpah, and competitive nature, and also his hubristic ambition to be a tribune and voice of the people, Selvinsky periodically attempted to articulate in poetry what he thought might

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12 Selvinsky, Wartime Diaries, 20 May 1945.
13 Selvinsky, Wartime Diaries, 20 May 1945.
influence or at least inform official Soviet rhetoric. Selvinsky’s ideological bets with history, some of which in retrospect appear both naive and miscalculated, did not serve him well with Stalin and his henchmen.

Throughout the 1930s, Selvinsky’s official status proved to be precarious while he continued to enjoy great literary acclaim. The (founding) First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers, which convened in August-September 1934 in Moscow, offers ample evidence of Selvinsky’s position. In the proceedings of the congress, Selvinsky’s name was the fourth-most-frequently evoked of all the living Soviet poets, trailing Boris Pasternak’s and Nikolai Tikhonov’s, and closely competing with Nikolay Aseev’s. At the congress Nikolai Bukharin, one of the leading Bolsheviks and editor-in-chief of the daily Izvestia, delivered a long speech about poetry. At the time Bukharin, whose career had entered a downward spiral in 1928-1929 and would eventually end with his purging in 1938, still wielded much influence, not least in the realm of literary politics. To “Tikhonov, Selvinsky, Pasternak,” the three poets fatedly conjoined in a poetic line by Eduard Bagritsky, Bukharin added Nikolay Aseev, labeling Pasternak, Selvinsky, Tikhonov, and Aseev as the four living Soviet poets of “the very highest caliber” who influenced the poetic scene in “the most decisive fashion.” Bukharin praised Pasternak’s originality and mastery most highly, yet favored Selvinsky’s longer and shorter poetry with an almost equal enthusiasm: “I. Selvinsky is to a certain measure B. Pasternak’s antipode. He is a poet with a big poetic voice, seeking to burst out to the expanses of wide roads, mass scenes, where one hears screaming, where horses stomp their hooves, where a dashing song is pouring out, where enemies fight, where a living life is boiling and where history kneads its tough dough.” Bukharin also chided Selvinsky, if gently, for sometimes “failing his own directive” and substituting “rhymed factory wall newspaper” for “attempts [...] at vast canvasses.” Bukharin closed the Selvinsky section of his speech by calling him “an undoubtedly revolutionary, very big, real—and at that cultured—master of verse.”

A number of Soviet poets, most memorably Selvinsky’s coeval Aleksey Surkov, took umbrage at Bukharin’s position and at his being partial to Pasternak and Selvinsky and short-shifiting (rightfully, one might add)