Mirror of the abyss

KATHARINE HODGSON

Maxim D. Shraer
I SAW IT
Ilya Selvinsky and the legacy of bearing witness to the Shoah
978 1 61811 169 2

From January 1942 Selvinsky wrote and published a number of poems which refused to conceal the truth about the mass shootings of Jews in Nazi-occupied territory, going against the official line, never formulated as policy, but evident in practice, that played down both Jewish military heroism and Jewish victimhood. Shraer shows in painstaking detail how the Soviet press reported the massacre. While local newspapers stated that the majority of the victims were Jewish citizens ordered by the occupying forces to assemble in Kerch, accounts in the national press obscured the facts and gave the impression that the victims were Ukrainian, Russian, and Jewish targets of indiscriminate enemy violence. Despatches written for the foreign press were far more explicit about the way that Jews were singled out by the enemy, while reports for domestic consumption mostly adhered to the principle of not dividing the dead, dropping little more than hints about the victims’ identity.

Against this background, carefully researched by the author using a wide range of contemporary resources, some of which are reproduced in the text, Shraer sets Selvinsky’s wartime poems about the mass killings in Crimea in late 1941. Translations of two of the poems, “I Saw It!” and “Kerch”, are provided in the appendix, alongside the original Russian. It is these two poems which are discussed in most detail. Both stand as evidence of Selvinsky’s efforts to convey what he had seen, as a Jewish poet and a loyal Soviet writer working within the constraints of externally and self-imposed censorship. “I Saw it!” draws attention to the inadequacy of language to express what the poet has witnessed. “Kerch” portrays a survivor of the massacre who reports to the poet and his fellow journalists, in “caveman’s speech of Stone Age intentions”, how he fell unharmed into the ditch, followed by his dead wife, children and mother; the reporters visit the site and, for all that their trade is the manipulation of words, fail to come up with anything beyond the word zversvo (an atrocity, or, in Shraer’s translation, “beastliness”, signalling the word’s derivation from “wild beast”). Selvinsky, as Shraer demonstrates, was not lost for words, describing Kerch as “the mirror in which the abyss has been reflected”, and evoking the Jewish identity of the dead through allusions to biblical texts and the Hebrew poet Hayim Nahman Bialik, whose Tales of a Pogrom (1904), widely translated into Russian, is echoed in “I Saw It!”

It was Selvinsky’s persistent reminders of Jewish victimhood, even when he does not explicitly identify the dead as Jews, that Shraer argues, led the Soviet authorities to make an example of him.

The final chapter of Shraer’s study addresses the complex topic of Selvinsky’s legacy in relation to the Soviet Shoah poetry that followed, and particularly to Jewish poets of the next generation, such as Boris Slutsky and David Samoilenko, who had both been his students before the war at the Literary Institute in Moscow. Compared with the preceding chapters, which are packed with a wealth of closely observed detail, this one seems too compressed to do complete justice to its subject matter. It does, however, succeed in offering a tantalising outline for further exploration, including the prospect of a thorough re-examination of much Soviet war poetry, in which atrocities against Jews may have been represented simply as attacks on Soviet citizens. To judge from Shraer’s own work, and recent studies by Harriet Murav and Marat Grinberg, the Soviet cultural response to the Shoah is an area of investigation which is now coming into its own.

Through the example of Ilya Selvinsky, Maxim Shraer has made an important contribution to our understanding of the workings of Soviet literary life at the intersection of poetry and policy. While the aims pursued by the Party leaders may not have been formulated explicitly, the evidence to be found in documents such as the draft Central Committee resolutions concerning Selvinsky, and the poet’s own diary accounts of his appearance before the Central Committee Secretariat, combined with a firm grasp of the historical context and the nature of Selvinsky’s poetry, allows Shraer to put forward an intelligent interpretation of the otherwise somewhat baffling attacks on the poet in 1943. In recovering Selvinsky’s story, Shraer has himself served as a witness to a hidden past.

If Symptoms Persist

I recognise but no longer entirely comprehend
the interest strangers take in the bodies
of strangers who are like themselves.

Mine was the life of the body and because
the body was strong, I was bored by doubt;
ignorant as only the robust can be.

For years I thought I saw people as they were
when all I was doing was reading
in a face the impression I made.

What did I know of a world
where you learn something new
from dizziness or a pillow damp with sweat

or just feeling not quite right
at 3 a.m. in the kitchen, gripping
a glass of water with both hands?

IAN HARROW

Princeton University Press congratulates

Michael Cook

Winner of the 2014 Holberg Prize

Michael Cook is the author of
Ancient Religions, Modern Politics: The Islamic Case in Comparative Perspective