In memory of Slava Levina, David Nakhimovsky, and

Dr. Hanna Bruskin, whose lives passed under this shadow

Contents

A Note on Transcription

Yiddish transcription is YIVO. But two different systems are used to transliterate Russian. References are Library of Congress. But in the text, for general readability, Cyrillic is transliterated as follows:

Initial
E is Ye (Yevsektsia)
Ia is Ya (Yakir)
Iu is Yu (Yury)

Final
ia is ya (Nadya)
ii is y (Lozovsky)
iia is ia (Yevsektsia)
aia is aya (Ulanovskaya)

Stressed e is yo (Ogonyok)

Preface

A long time ago—and still, some thirty years after the events described in this book—my mother-in-law, Slava Levina, came on a visit to the United States. She looked around at my parents' apartment and said—not because she was rude, but because she was overwhelmed: "Look at what you have! And all I have seen is revolution and war." The poignancy of her observation came from a historical truth: they were the same people, with the same roots. My mother-in-law's native language was Yiddish, just like my mother's. What my parents had—despite the Depression, despite the fact that my father himself had fought in World War II—was luck.

The bad moral luck of the title refers to the characters in the book, who bought into an ideology that began in hope and ended with entrapment. The situation of my in-laws, and our family's—everybody's—beloved aunt, was different. They were born where they were born; their luck was that they survived. Through it all, they persevered.

I have many people to thank, above all my husband, Alexander Nakhimovsky. Irina Paperno and Achsah Guibbory were as generous and astute with the manuscript as they are in real life. Yankl Salant and my friend and past coauthor Roberta Newman checked the Yiddish translations. In St. Petersburg, Anatoly Nakhimovsky and Vera Knorring were indefatigable researchers. Natalia Lozovsky's generosity opened a door to materials I never would have seen; Ala Zuskin-Perelman provided empathy and perspective, both through her book about her father and through conversations. Anna Shternshis and Sasha Senderovich answered questions and sent materials. Mieka Erley was a perceptive reader, and Elizabeth Dobbs a perceptive early listener. David McCabe always has ideas: I was privileged to be a beneficiary. Columbia's Harriman Institute (special thanks to Xan Faber) hosted me as a visiting fellow for two years. The preparation and publication of the book were supported by the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture.

Colgate is uncommonly supportive of research. I am grateful to Dominika Kotter, head to Colgate's Research Council, and to my colleagues in Jewish studies and Russian and Eurasian studies. Special thanks to Dean and Provost Lesleigh Cushing, astute listener and bringer of food in a time of Covid, and to Colgate's president, Brian Casey, for steering the institution, accepting dissent, and above all, for being a reader.

At Academic Studies Press, Maxim Shrayer, Alessandra Anzani, and Ekaterina Yanduganova were outstanding. The reviewers, they know who they are, corrected numerous errors (the remainder are my fault). Thanks to my family: John Stone and Barbara Schaefer, and all of the Stones, Nakhimovskys, Rokhinsons, Lamsters, and Ramalingams. Isaac, Chitra, and Sharon are incomparable companions in addition to being awesomely accomplished, courageous, and wise. To Maya, Ashwin, Dina, and Manny: this is for you, sooner and later. Read and don't repeat.

Introduction: The Soviet-Jewish Historical Calendar and Moral Decision-Making, 1890 to 1953

The Jewish lives at the center of this book unfolded in the romance of the Russian Revolution and ended in serial catastrophe. Sometimes the catastrophes left no way out for anybody but, more often than you would think, people could make decisions. The book looks at eight individuals who bought into the revolutionary dream and asks what they decided when things went bad. Under what circumstances did they bow to political pressures antithetical to the ideas they professed, and under what circumstances did they resist, even heroically? Political cowardice is a constant theme, but so, remarkably, is moral resistance that had no point beyond an individual's conscience.

The social justice promised by the Russian Revolution had a Jewish angle: it would bring an end to antisemitism. Religion, suppressed by the state, was no longer a factor. Jews who wanted no part of being Jewish—the majority of our subjects, at the outset—could pursue their Soviet lives. But those who still identified had a number of new options. They could, in the early postrevolutionary years, self-transform as Jewish farmers in Birobidzhan, the newly founded Yiddish-speaking Zion on the Chinese border. They could take part in the Soviet-Yiddish culture that flourished for some time, though with ever expanding restrictions.

Then came the catastrophes: the Terror (a general Soviet phenomenon); the war (general Soviet); the Holocaust, and the crackdown on Jews in science, medicine, education, and the arts that began during the war years but reached a crescendo right before Stalin's death in 1953. Even Jews who saw the Soviet state as liberating them from being Jewish could be targeted as Jews, if not by Nazis then—if for the most part less lethally—by their own Soviet government.

Like other Soviet Jews who came of age with them, the subjects of this book saw it all. Some were introspective and some not, but for a variety of

reasons—their closeness to the center of events in some cases, their experience outside the Soviet Union in others—they reflect on what happened.

The eight characters of my book group together or stand alone in various ways. Five are women and three are men. Leyb Kvitko and Vasily Grossman were famous writers; Grossman still is. Solomon Lozovsky was a high-placed government administrator who in a moment of political threat wrote some autobiographical fiction. Lina Shtern was a formidable scientist; Nadezhda Ulanovskaya was a spy. Mary Leder and Lilianna Lungina spent their childhoods outside the Soviet Union before their parents, deluded or entrapped, took them to Birobidzhan (Leder) or Moscow (Lungina). Kvitko, Lozovsky, and Doba-Mera Medvedeva grew up in the kind of poverty particular to Jewish shtetls. None of them remained there. But while the two men flew high, Medvedeva—the most improbable memoirist of the group—lived the life of most people.

All eight were either Party members or lived in harmony with Party directives for many years. When things turned ugly, their paths forward were limited, even in their own minds. Rethinking a belief system is hard for any human being, reflecting our reluctance to walk away from "sunk costs." But that economic metaphor presumes an environment in which people can sink some new costs in another place. For the subjects of this book, there was no other place. Participating in society, they could not avoid being complicit; every sphere of life was run by the state. And there was another problem related to the belief system that they had joined when they were young. The Soviet language of universal justice was always one of binary division, with some groups regarded as "us" and others as "them." In the revolutionary period, with its Marxist focus on class, Jews could see themselves, largely, as "us," deserving of just treatment in the new social order. In the postwar period, with its focus on nationality, their classification abruptly switched.

This switch, abundantly evident in newspapers in the postwar years preceding Stalin's death, was not one that people could fight. It was hard even to confide in others: finding like-minded friends meant taking conversations to dangerous places. Capitulation was always possible—a Jew could agree that all Jews were at fault—though it was not necessarily protective. As with earlier crises like the Terror, some of our subjects self-censored or maintained a red line of their own devising, and a few eventually broke free.

A pivotal moment for Kvitko, Lozovsky, and Shtern was the 1952 secret trial of the Jewish Antifascist Committee. Stalin had assembled the Committee at the start of the war to fundraise abroad; after the war, he turned on it. The defendants—initially fifteen of them, including the three who figure here—faced charges of anti-Soviet activity, defined as Jewish

nationalism and espionage. They understood that the trial would likely end in their execution. They then faced an existential moment: reframe their lives as they understood them or agree with the prosecution? They could, of course, agree through calculation, trying to save themselves against all odds. That kind of desperate betrayal was such an obvious move, it was amazing that not everybody pursued it. But not everybody did.

The fact that our eight subjects left records of their thinking, either written or transcribed from speech during the trial, is unusual. People didn't speak, even to relatives; if they said something in a letter—rarely—the reference was cryptic. The persistence of that reluctance even past Stalin's death explains the silence of Lina Shtern, the trial's sole survivor. At the trial, facing death, she was heroically outspoken. After her return from exile, she unburdened herself, as far as we know, twice. The first occasion was to a fellow research physician and former prisoner (he took notes, which turn out to be quite accurate). The second was to her personal secretary, whose recollections remain unavailable. But Shtern herself committed nothing to paper.

Vasily Grossman and Leyb Kvitko are at the other extreme. They definitely left records: they wrote for a living. Kvitko's Yiddish poetry and Grossman's Russian prose respond to their time in ways that are both confessional (failures, tragedies, heartbreak) and sometimes prescriptive (a vision of what society should be). Kvitko started out as a modernist, when that style was the political and artistic vanguard. Later, he shifted a lot of energy to children's verse, which enabled him—not always, though—to concentrate on the miniature dimensions of a child's world. Grossman evolved differently. A generation younger than Kvitko, he had his roots in socialist realism, which combined a realistic, comprehensible style with a politically mandated worldview. Grossman kept the style but emancipated himself from the worldview. His masterpiece *Life and Fate* embodies the kind of all-encompassing belief system one might expect of socialist realism. It's just that by the time Grossman wrote the book, he had discarded what was officially sanctioned for a principled system of his own devising.

A touchstone for both men was the Holocaust. They addressed it with uncommon directness—Kvitko in a series of poems in which he carefully exonerated the Soviet Union, Grossman in two searing sections of *Life and Fate.* Neither work was publishable at the time of writing. But for the purposes of this book, the miracle that the manuscripts survived at all is less important than what is in them. Examining these texts in their political and personal contexts gives us an idea of what mattered to the writers. Poetry and fiction are not memoirs, but they are keys to the thinking of their creators. We can see what

obsessed them; we can see when they wrote what was expected, and when and how they took liberties.

A different window on thinking is trial testimony. The speeches of Kvitko, Shtern, and Lozovsky before the judges and their fellow defendants are breathtakingly direct. Kvitko bares his soul as though, he says, to God—if he believed in God, which he doesn't. Shtern and Lozovsky say things that could only hinder their defense. For Lozovsky, in addition, we have the set of short stories preserved in a family archive. Lozovsky the writer was hardly in the league of Grossman or Kvitko. But his stories, which celebrate his revolutionary past and imagine a triumphant restoration of justice in the present, are equally a key to his inner world.

Our remaining subjects all left memoirs, written or oral. A variety of circumstances freed them from the constraints that kept their fellow Soviets quiet. Nadezhda Ulanovskaya, the former spy, wrote her memoirs after her release from the Gulag. By that point, well into the "vegetarian" times that followed Stalin's death, nobody much cared.

Mary Leder wrote her life story from New York. Lilianna Lungina spoke hers in a blockbuster TV series that aired in liberal 2009, at which point she had already died. As for Doba-Mera Medvedeva, she was simply unknown. She wrote because she was proud of her literacy, and she wanted to tell her story. She wrote in notebooks for her children and grandchildren—and then took out the most incendiary pages and destroyed them.

It goes without saying that writing of any kind needs to be examined in the light of what the writer's purpose was and—especially in the Soviet environment—how the writer shaped his or her story in response to prevailing ideology and political danger. Our characters had multiple motivations for examining their lives, sometimes overlapping. Self-justification and ideological rebranding were part of the mix, but so was the establishment of a historical record and moral rethinking in the face of death.

This returns us to the two themes that, in the retrospect possible now, pervade these lives as we will be reading them. One is the desperate oscillation between cowardice and courage. Another is the adoption of belief followed by its retention, modification, or renunciation. These themes are neither original nor, unfortunately, outdated.[1] Ideological allegiance and the allied problem of

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1 They were examined by some witnesses who are not part of this book, like Mikhail Bulgakov in *The Master and Margarita* (written 1928–1940, but not publishable until much later) and the Western essayists of the collection *The God that Failed,* published in 1949. Those books were both conceived under Communism or in response to it.

political cowardice is not specifically a problem of Communism. It remains current even in places where the consequences for speaking out are, by comparison, trivial.

Beyond the big questions, the lives of our eight subjects reflect important aspects of the Soviet-Jewish experience. Lozovsky, Kvitko, and Medvedeva saw revolution as a triumphant way out of the poverty that defined their childhoods. Lozovsky became a powerful official. Kvitko's surpassing talent as a Yiddish children's poet gave him a huge audience in Russian translation. Nothing of the sort transpired for Medvedeva, who loved her children and grandchildren but otherwise saw little in her life but constriction, danger, and disappointment. None of the three had any schooling past early childhood. Kvitko's lack of education would be a source of anguish for him throughout his life. The same was true for Medvedeva, though it also freed her from ideological constraints—her picture of the shtetl, however clumsy its writing, outdoes Kvitko's in its complexity. Lozovsky, in contrast to both of them, was a classic autodidact. His Marxist erudition was impeccable, and he knew it. He argued with Lenin.

Nadezhda Ulanovskaya and Lina Shtern grew up in bourgeois families but cast their lot with the revolution. Ulanovskaya joined early, as a pistol-wielding teenager. In the 1920s, she was a spy in Shanghai, Hamburg, and New York. The brilliant Lina Shtern chose medicine and biochemistry. Unable, like many Jews, to study in Imperial Russia, she went to Switzerland, where she became the first woman to be named professor at the University of Geneva. Geneva was a hotbed of Russian revolutionaries-in-exile (for a time, Shtern boarded with the family of the Marxist theoretician Georgy Plekhanov). Her Marxist friends and the promise of building science in a just Bolshevik society led her to repatriate. The international adventures of both women came to abrupt ends. Ulanovskaya was sucked into the Gulag on the pretext of associating with foreigners. Shtern was saved from execution for a still unknown reason—perhaps her promises, made in the Lubyanka prison, to work on a cure for cancer.

International associations like Shtern's and Ulanovskaya's, a feature of Jews generally, are accompanied in these lives by remarkable linguistic and cultural adaptiveness. Lozovsky, fomenting revolution in France, spoke French like a Parisian (or so he says; he was, in any case, not caught). French was Shtern's preferred language, though she was brought up in a German-speaking home and went to a German-language preparatory school before making her career in Geneva. Grossman and his mother, who spent some time in Switzerland when Grossman was a schoolchild, used French as a private language. Kvitko and Medvedeva grew up speaking Yiddish; so did Lozovsky, but he forgot it.

Another multirooted cosmopolitan was Lungina, whose father was a Soviet trade representative. When the family was in Germany, Lungina was, she says, a little German girl; when her father returned to Moscow and her mother stayed with her in Paris, she was a French adolescent who shared the lives and interests of her fellow students at her lycée. Her mother, like so many Jews, faced a decision of where to go next. It was 1933. America was a possibility, but instead the two returned to Soviet Russia. In a haunting moment in the memoir, Lungina remembers herself in her French overcoat, exiting the train after the final border had been crossed. People in rags were sleeping on the platform floor. This was not the Soviet Union pictured in the postcards sent by her father. But she and her mother were now irrevocably part of it.

Lungina's mother miscalculated badly, though all she sought was to reunite her family. The parents of Mary Leder, Yiddish-speaking American leftists, sought transformation. The destination that drew them was Birobidzhan, the putative Yiddish Zion in a place where Jews were actually rootless. Things did not work out and they left. Leder's newly acquired Soviet passport meant that she could not follow them, and so she remained in the USSR for thirty years—to be sure, in far more habitable Moscow. She ended up working as a translator under Lozovsky. Her position, fortunately, was far enough below Lozovsky that she was not tried and executed, like two other women who worked in the same office. She also spent a brief stint in spy school, under the tutelage of Ulanovskaya's husband.

Four of our subjects—Ulanovskaya, Shtern, Kvitko, and Lozovsky—were arrested. Kvitko and Lozovsky were executed. Like Leder, Lungina, and Medvedeva, Grossman remained at liberty, but just barely. He had been one rung down on the Jewish Antifascist Committee from Shtern and Kvitko, and two down from Lozovsky, who was not a member but politically and administratively in charge. Grossman ran meetings. The experiences he had as a war correspondent and some personal failures tormented him. He sought redemption and truth through fiction.

Grossman's final, then unpublishable novels *Life and Fate* and *Forever Flowing* were meant both as a personal reckoning and a reckoning of an entire generation, both Jewish and not. In these books, Grossman creates characters who behaved the way he himself did, equivocating and succumbing to pressures that were both private and public. He finds them guilty. But on what basis? Is his assessment applicable to others?

The philosopher Thomas Nagel makes the point that people can't be assessed for what is not their fault.[2] A person made to work in a Nazi concentration camp is a victim of bad moral luck, forced to make choices that never would have presented themselves in a more ordinary environment. Lungina comes to the same idea, noting that an individual "who in a normal society would never bring evil upon anyone" would become "a true scoundrel in the atmosphere of the early 1950s." She concludes that "it took heroism to remain a decent person."[3]

This book is not a work of moral philosophy, nor does it pass judgment on its characters. Its purpose is to see how this specific set of people weighed their beliefs and their choices. Bad moral luck is a metaphor for the situation that entrapped them. Yet neither for Nagel nor for any of them is that bad luck completely exculpatory.

For Nagel, the contradiction between bad moral luck and our perception that we are moral agents is an unresolvable paradox. Grossman, writing some twenty years earlier, leans toward personal agency. In *Life and Fate* and *Forever Flowing*, he tries out the idea that circumstances wipe out a person's ability to act and recoils from it over and over. He applies that idea to himself and, while he is unspecific about the charges—a reader would have to know his life—he declares himself guilty. But he reserves for himself, and therefore anyone, the possibility of change.

Nagel makes another point that is fundamental to this book. He says, in effect, that we can't know when we start out what the effect of our conduct will be. None of our characters, as they joined the Communist Party or worked in accord with it, had in mind anything but the swift realization of social justice. What did they do as that dream turned ugly? What did they think as they acquiesced to some injustices and ignored others while—in many cases—they themselves prospered? What did they do when they themselves became victims?

The answers vary. Leder, Ulanovskaya, and Lungina are by turn rueful and self-critical. Of the three, Ulanovskaya played the most prominent role in forwarding Soviet ambitions—she was, after all, a spy—and she has the most bifurcated view: she can congratulate herself on a skillful bit of espionage in one paragraph, and then in the next ask "how could I have done this?" Leder and Lungina had less scope to act, and therefore less to regret. But their outsider status made them perceptive observers. They rarely saw things as normal.

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2 Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 24–38.

3 Lilianna Lungina and Oleg Dorman, *Podstrochnik: Zhizn' Lilianny Lunginoi, raskazannaia eiu v fil'me Olega Dormana* (Moscow: Corpus, 2009), 194.

The most timid chronicler is Medvedeva: she eviscerates the social hierarchies of the shtetl, but retreats from judgment once that world is disbanded. Grossman, by contrast, devotes the last decade of his life to discarding most of what he lived by earlier.

The trial defendants go different ways. Lozovsky and Shtern, who both had experience as fighters for their own cause, use their time at trial to defend themselves. They reclaim their identity as Jews and offer to the Stalinist court the idea—audacious and just slightly veiled—that Stalinism itself was at fault. Just as unprecedented in a Stalinist trial, Lozovsky says to Shtern that "he can't look her in the eye" because he slandered her. He apologizes.

In contrast to Lozovsky and Shtern, Kvitko was obedient. But he was not cynical. A talented man and by all accounts an enormously kind one, he could not think his way out of the beliefs he had embraced so many years earlier. The poet Lev Ozerov wrote this about him:

> He understood the language of children,
> Leaves and birds, water and wind.
> He became a wise man and remained a child.
> Wisdom doesn't save the wise man
> Nor childhood the child.[4]

The lives examined here are frequently intertwined: only Medvedeva was on her own. But they also run parallel to each other in that the individuals who lived them confront the same crisis points and, though they respond differently, the same set of moral decisions.

By virtue of being Jewish, the subjects of this study found themselves on a historical path that differed in important ways from the general Soviet one. Not, of course, always: they shared with the Soviet population writ large a multitude of breaking points, including the 1917 revolutions, the civil war, the Terror of the late 1930s, World War II, and the death of Stalin. But they also had their own historical calendar, a set of events that affected them only. They, and not others, had to make quick and fateful decisions about the Nazi invaders: stay or flee? They had to mourn the Holocaust, not mentionable in public discourse, and keep to themselves the knowledge that Soviet individuals collaborated in it.

Jews were by no means not the only group to face crises that were ignored by everyone else. Soviet peasants, the victims of collectivization and famines,

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4 Lev Ozerov, "Kvitko," in *Stikhi o evreiskikh poetakh iz kolektsii V. I. Kishinevskogo*, ed. Rygor Borodulin, https://www.languages-study.com/yiddish/lider.html.

were another, and their calendar of disasters also contains dates specific to them. Awareness of your own disasters does not necessarily make you more empathetic to disasters that hit other people: the collectivization of agriculture, the cause of the famine, was something the Jewish subjects of this book ignored or even, initially, approved of. And the peasant survivors, who had good reason to hate the Soviets, were sometimes collaborators in the "Holocaust by bullets" that took place in the occupied territories where they lived.[5]

The Jewish path through Soviet history continued in the postwar years before Stalin's death, when this study ends. Expecting liberalization, Jews found themselves fired from the military, the sciences, and the arts. Practically all our memoirists give examples of those firings, which loomed over them personally; and practically all reflect Jewish-specific rumors, like the potent one that in the wake of the Doctors' Plot—Jewish doctors accused of murdering everyone from Politburo members to ordinary Russians—Jews were to be rounded up and deported to Siberia. In the absence of reliable information, people had to give those rumors credence. Sometimes the rumors were correct.

In her book about Soviet diaries, Irina Paperno writes about the "irresistible movement of history" that overrode otherwise ordinary lives.[6] All of our subjects were ordinary—even the talented writers; even Lozovsky, who rose high in the government. All were overrun by forces they could not combat. Yet the decisions that they made, to acquiesce or to fight, to speak or be silent, still resonate.

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Some parts of this book reflect work I have done previously and other parts are new. My analysis of *Life and Fate* was first put forward in my 1992 *Jewish Literature and Identity*, though it has evolved over many years of teaching and a talk I recorded for the Museum of Tolerance in Moscow. Much of what I say

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5 For the situation of Soviet peasants in those years, see Alexander Nakhimovsky, *The Language of Russian Peasants in the Twentieth Century: A Linguistic Analysis and Oral History* (Boulder, CA, London, and New York: Lexington Books, 2020). The beginning of the 1930s was terrible for peasants, while 1937—for urbanites and Party members, the start of the Terror—was a year of good harvest and some welcome tax breaks (ibid., 146–147 and 165). The phrase "holocaust by bullets" was coined by Patrick Desbois (*The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews* [New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008]).

6 Irina Paperno, *Stories of the Soviet Experience: Memoirs, Diaries, Dreams* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 14.

about Grossman has its origins in conversations with the late Shimon Markish, the literary scholar who was instrumental in getting Grossman's novel published in the West (and who was, not coincidentally, the son of the Yiddish poet Peretz Markish, one of the victims of the 1952 trial). Ala Zuskin-Perelman, the daughter of Veniamin Zuskin, another victim of the trial, wrote an important book about her father that figures both directly and indirectly.[7] My analysis of the 1952 trial was presented in a 2018 article, "Assessing Lives in the Face of Death: the 1952 Trial of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee."[8] It is much expanded here. My translation of the notebooks of Doba-Mera Medvedeva was published in 2019.[9] I included her in this study as a counterpoint to people who were movers and shakers, and far more erudite than she was. I am indebted to both the new biography of Grossman by Alexandra Popoff (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019) and the older one by the Garrards (New York: Free Press, 1996), as well as to essays on various periods of Kvitko's life and work by Harriet Murav, David Shneer, Mikhail Krutikov, Gennady Estraikh, and Sabine Koller. Yankl Salant checked my Yiddish and Roberta Newman helped with transcription. Natalia Lozovsky kindly shared materials from the Lozovsky family archive. In St. Petersburg, Anatoly Nakhimovsky and Vera Knorring were invaluable researchers at the Russian National Library. This work was supported by Colgate University, by way of a Senior Faculty Leave; by the Harriman Institute of Columbia University, which hosted me for two years; and the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture.

7 Alla Zuskina-Perel'man, *Puteshestvie Veniamina: Razmyshleniia o zhizni, tvorchestve i sud'be evreiskogo aktera Veniamina Zuskina* (Jerusalem: Gesharim: Mosty kul'tury, 2002).

8 Alice Nakhimovsky, "Assessing Life in the Face of Death: Moral Drama at the Trial of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, 1952," *East European Jewish Affairs* 48, no. 2 (2018): 188–209.

9 Michael Beizer and Alice Nakhimovsky, *Daughter of the Shtetl: The Diaries of Doba-Mera Medvedeva* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2018).

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Origins

The Russian Empire did not want Jews. It acquired them—"swallowed them," in the phrase of the historian John Klier, along with the Polish territory in which they had lived for several centuries. The Partitions of Poland (1772–1795) were a boon to Russia's economy and sense of self-worth. The cost was the absorption of a lot of Polish Catholics—a theological problem, as any reader of Dostoevsky can confirm—as well as a political one. Poles had had a kingdom and would rebel. Jews were not yet in a rebellious mode, but the theological problem they presented was much worse. The solution was to sequester them in what became "the line of settlement"—in more poetic English, the Pale.

The Pale was the origin point for the subjects of this book. By the time they were born, all between 1870 and 1920, the Pale could be breached, either legally, semilegally, or totally illegally. In the popular imagination of American Jews whose ancestors fled, the Pale has acquired a nostalgic hue. The subjects of this book fled less nostalgically. Relocating in major Russian cities, directly or through temporary way-stations in Europe or the United States, they remembered the Pale with love only when confronted by its destruction.

There was a great deal of destruction. World War I, fought right there, was followed by the Soviet Civil War, also there, and then the Polish-Bolshevik War, the last two roughly from 1918 to 1921. Jews suffered in particular, as they had in the pogroms that broke out in that area from the 1880s straight through the civil war, and as they would later on in the Holocaust. The subjects of this chapter either lived through all that violence or were personally, by necessity, attuned to it.

Another problem loomed as large as the violence: the restrictions and impoverishment of the small towns (shtetls) that comprised the Pale. The three subjects of this chapter—Doba-Mera Medvedeva, Leyb Kvitko, and Solomon Lozovsky—were drawn to Marxism both as a way of understanding the violence and as a path out of it. Marxism provided a conceptual structure and predicted the scientifically certain triumph of a just new order. Lozovsky and

Kvitko bought into this; they saw the arc of justice bending in a certain direction, and bending fast. At the same time, their faith was not unconditional. The violent birth of the new age exhilarated Kvitko in theory, but also disturbed him. Lozovsky wanted his own say in how Marxism would be applied; he polemicized. Medvedeva, far from the elite that both men joined, espoused a vague Marxism, acquired in youth groups. When necessary, it was expendable or never even consulted. In the case of the pogroms, which she alone of the three witnessed, her explanation is a kind of realpolitik picked up from an older generation that had learned to work the system as best it could.

Doba-Mera Medvedeva: A Working Girl Seeks a Future

Of our eight subjects, Doba-Mera Medvedeva is always the outlier. Lozovsky and Kvitko share her shtetl background, but they were men; they were not held back by the social expectations that kept Medvedeva from shaping her own fate. The forces that constrained Medvedeva will not be operant for the other women in this book, who were either born later, or whose families had more resources. They were, however, forces that constrained a lot of people like her.

Medvedeva was born in Khotimsk, a shtetl in the Russian Empire's Mogilev Gubernia, now Belarus. At the time of her birth, 1892, it had a population of around 3,000. The other town that figures prominently in her notebooks is Klintsy, a comparative metropolis that in the census year of 1897 had a population of nearly 12,000, a third of them Jews.[1] The shtetl was in some ways a theological kingdom, but it was not hermetically sealed. The inhabitants were largely literate. Some subscribed to the very modern Yiddish- and Hebrew-language press. Unlike the local peasants who surrounded them, Jews moved from place to place, and ideas traveled with them.

Medvedeva's father, Izrail-Velka, embodied modernizing trends. By profession he was a *melamed*, a low-status teacher of small children. Because the teaching took place in the central room of the three-room house (room, bedroom, kitchen) in which his family cooked, ate, and slept, Medvedeva's recollection of the routine was not second-hand. "From seven to nine in the morning," she records, "he would teach children who were not in his class, and also in the evening, from eight to ten, he would work with children who were not in

1 "Klintsy," Wikipedia, https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9A%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%86%D1%8B; "Klintsy," Rossiskaia evreiskaia entsiklopediia, http://www.rujen.ru/index.php/%D0%9A%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%86%D1%8B