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Ehrenburg and Lipkin, Englishly
Two Major Jewish-Russian Poets Survive in Translation
A review article*

Ilya Ehrenburg. *Babi Yar and Other Poems*. Translated by Anna Krushelnitskaya. Introduction by Joshua Rubenstein. [With parallel Russian and English versions]. Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Smokestack Books, 2024.

Semyon Lipkin. *A Close Reading of Fifty-Three Poems*. Translated by Ivonne Green and Sergei Makarov. Introduction by Donald Rayfield. London: Hendon Press, 2023.

In 1979, the year Brezhnev's USSR invaded Afghanistan and the wave of Jewish emigration crested, 1,830,000 Jews were living in the USSR. There are about 120,000 Jews left in the post-Soviet states, the vast majority of them in Russia and a significant minority in Ukraine – two Jewish communities now living on opposite shores of a bloody war. Spurred by Putin's obsession with ghosts of the past, the war in Ukraine has thrown into yet the sharpest relief the finale of Jewish history in the lands of the former Russian Empire. Spaces of the former empire are not likely to produce another national poet of Jewish origin – the next Boris Pasternak or Osip Mandelstam, Boris Slutsky or Genrikh Sapgir. At the same

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Unless noted otherwise, all literaral translations from Russian are mine. References to Ilya Ehrenburg's Russian originals are from: I. Erenburg, *Stikhotoreniia i poemy*, B. Ia. Frezinskii, ed., Akademicheskii proekt; Novia biblioteka poeta, St. Petersburg 2000. References to Semyon Lipkin's Russian originals are from S. Lipkin, *Pis'mena*, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, Moscow 1991.

time, Israel, North America and Germany have gained large Russophone Jewish communities. A growing number of ex-Soviets, whom one is tempted to call *heritage Russophones*, are writing in English, Hebrew, and German, translating into those languages, and shaping the literary canons of their countries. Translation of literary works by Jewish-Russian authors no longer remains the domain of a stray Slavic or Jewish scholar, or the wayward ardor of an Anglo-American poet who has fallen in love with a poem's shadow. Making Jewish-Russian literature, poetry especially, available in translation has become an urgent task of cultural preservation and transmission.

Both the Kyiv-born and Moscow-raised Ilya Ehrenburg (1891 – 1967) and the Odessa-born-and-raised Semyon Lipkin (1911 – 2003) originated from what is now Ukraine and subsequently made the Russian language their home.[1] The English translations of Ehrenburg's poetry (passionately transposed by the Russian-American poet Anna Krushelnitskaya) and of Lipkin's poetry (lovingly curated by the late Jewish-British poet Yvonne Green) could not have come at a better time for the heritage of Jewish-Russian culture and at a worse time for the worldwide standing of cultural Russianness. A judgment of Ehrenburg's and Lipkin's literary works is particularly complicated when Russian bombs are falling on Ukraine, and, as a backlash, when streets named after Russophone authors, some of them Jews, are being renamed in Ukrainian cities.

Joshua Rubenstein, Ehrenburg's biographer whose introduction adorns the new volume, offers this judgment: "[Ehrenburg] managed to survive Stalin, but in spite of his official conformity there was always a feeling about Ehrenburg that he was different."[2] Fiction writer, journalist, poet and memoirist, Ehrenburg possessed a peerless talent for articulating the vibes of history. Even before World War 2, Ehrenburg had already been well known outside the USSR, especially to left-leaning European and American intellectuals. In a letter to Walter Benjamin, dated 27 November 1937, Theodor Adorno drew on Ehrenburg's novel *The Extraordinary Adventures of Julio Jurenito and His Disciples* (published in Berlin in 1922 and based on Diego Rivera) to describe the position of the intellectuals exiled from Nazi Germany: "Dear Walter, […] In all serious-

[1] For an overview of Ehrenburg's career, see M. D. Shrayer, "Ilya Ehrenburg" (1891–1967), in *Voices of Jewish-Russian Literature: An Anthology*, edited, with introductory essays, translations and notes by Maxim D. Shrayer, Academic Studies Press, Boston, 2018, pp. 205–209; 390–392. For an overview of Lipkin's career, see Shrayer, "Semyon Lipkin" (1911–2003), in *Voices of Jewish-Russian Literature*, pp. 611–613.

[2] I. Ehrenburg, "Babi Yar" *and Other Poems*, Anna Krushelnitskaya, trans., (with an introduction by Joshua Rubenstein), Smokestack Books, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, 2024, p. 13.

ness, I can hardly imagine our relationship to Europe as other than that of Ehrenburg's travel company rummaging its way through her devastated cities."[3]

During World War 2, Ehrenburg's journalism made him one of the most famous Soviets abroad. He was a principal cultivator of popular hatred against the German invaders, which he famously summed up in his article "Ubei" ("Kill!") published in *Krasnaia Zvezda* (*Red Star*) on July 24, 1942, as the panzers pushed ahead toward the Caucasus and Stalingrad, and also in a poem of the same title included in the new volume: "Kak eta zhizn' – ne esh', ne pei/ I ne dyshi – odno: ubei!" ("Like life – don't eat, don't drink, keep still,/ No breath, no word, except for – kill!").[4] Growing up in Moscow, I heard from war veterans that only two sections of army newspapers were exempt from being rolled into cigarettes: Stalin's portraits and Ehrenburg's publications. Soon after Stalin's death in 1953, Ehrenburg wrote the novel *Ottepel'* (*The Tha*w, 1954), which lent its title to the period of palliative de-Stalinization. Ehrenburg was never a dissident, yet his funeral in Moscow amounted, in the eyewitness account of my late father, the writer David Shrayer-Petrov, to a demonstration of dissent.

Unlike Ehrenburg's fiction, nonfiction, and journalism, his poetry has yet to be discovered by the Anglo-American reader. Formally diverse and lacking a signature intonation, some of Ehrenburg's poems are very accomplished, especially his lyrics of soul-searching. His influences represent the main currents of modernist Russian poetry, including Sologub, Blok, Mayakovsky, and Tsvetaeva. In 1923, he described himself as a "timid disciple"[5] of Pasternak. In the anxious judgment of Ilya Selvinsky, a pillar of Soviet avant-garde and a national poetic witness to the Shoah in the occupied Soviet territories, Ehrenburg lacked the kind of virtuosic poetic technique that would make the reader forget about form and focus on the poetic message.[6]

Ehrenburg started out as a poet in 1910, publishing six collections in the pre-1917 period. Richly equipped to absorb artistic innovations from the air of culture, he approached style as a means and not an end of expression. Formal aspects of writing served to underscore Ehrenburg's principal métier: a polemicist and a witness

[3] Quoted in M. D. Shrayer, M.D., "Ilya Ehrenburg's January 1945 *Novy mir* Cycle and Soviet Memory of the Shoah," in *Eastern European Jewish Literature of the 20th and 21st Centuries: Identity and Poetics,* Klavdia Smola, ed., Die Welt der Slaven Sammelbände/Verlag Otto Sagner, Munich-Berlin, 2013, p. 204.

[4] Erenburg, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, p. 497; Ehrenburg, *Babi Yar*, p. 79.

[5] From Ehrenburg's letter to M. M. Shkapskaia, 18 July 1923, quoted in Frezinskii's commentary, Erenburg 2000, p. 715.

[6] See Frezinskii's commentary in Erenburg, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, p. 720

to his torrid times. With interruptions, Ehrenburg wrote poetry his whole life and also translated French and Spanish poets into Russian. As was the case with other prominent prose writers who also write poetry, such as Vladimir Nabokov, Ehrenburg often treated poems as public diaries, lyrical sketchbooks or rehearsals of future works of prose. His early Jewish-themed poems bring to mind the words of the philosopher Morris Feitelzohn in Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Shosha* (1974): "I love Jews even though I cannot stand them." From 1923 to 1939, he wrote virtually no poetry. Another gap followed from 1948 to 1957. Footlights of history – Spain, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the dark years for Soviet Jewry, and the Thaw – easily annotate both the silences and the poetic revivals.

According to Boris Frezinsky, Ehrenburg's leading student and commentator in post-Soviet Russia, Ehrenburg wrote about eight hundred poems, of which about two hundred forty were written after 1938.[7] Without Ehrenburg's war and Shoah poems, we mostly have thousands and thousands of lines of average-quality verse. With them – in them – we have a monument to Isaian awakening. Ehrenburg's poetry is not infrequently self-indulging, narcissistic the way an avant-garde painter can often be, but a poet can rarely afford it. Yet there are moments of some supreme clarity of articulation, such as the untitled octave of iambic tetrameter, written in 1943 after Ehrenburg's visit to the then recently liberated areas of left-bank Ukraine. Although marred by formal blemishes, it belongs to Ehrenburg's greatest poems and deserves to be read and admired:

* * *
Был час один – душа ослабла.
Я видел Глухова сады
И срубленных врагами яблонь
Уже посмертные плоды.
Дрожали листья. Было пусто.
Мы простояли и ушли.
Прости, великое искусство,
Мы и тебя не сберегли![8]

(In a literal translation: "There was the hour – the soul grew feeble./ I saw the orchards of Glukhov./ And on the apple trees cut down by the enemy/ [there were] now the posthumous fruits./ The leaves trembled. It was empty [all around]./ We stood a while and then left./ Forgive us, o great art,/ We haven't protected you, either").

[7] See Frezinskii's commentary in Ehrenburg, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, p. 641.

[8] Erenburg, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, p. 598.

The poet Aleksandr Mezhirov, a Russian Jew of Lipkin's generation and much finer craftsman than Ehrenburg, observed that in its unadorned syntax, this poem possesses a divine simplicity, targeting not the picky intelligentsia but the regular folk.[9] Yet this short poem about violence, war, and the Shoah reveals layers of Jewish history. Located in the Sumy province of Ukraine, the town Glukhov (Hlukhiv) had been an important center of Jewish life. In 1904, one third of its population was Jewish. Jews of Hlukhiv had experienced Civil War pogroms and Soviet de-Judaization. The community was nearly wiped out during the Shoah. In 1989, there were 143 Jews in its whole population of almost 30,000 people. The most recent wave of devastation occurred during the Russian-Ukrainian war, when Russian shelling damaged the town's Jewish cemetery. When one revisits Ehrenburg's best poetry today, one sees more and more that for him a crisis of civilization was felt most acutely as a crisis of art and measured most precisely on the scales of Jewish history. The outward simplicity of diction and the deeply intimate, colloquial linkages between verbal texture and meaning make Ehrenburg's poetry particularly difficult to translate without formal losses or semantic excesses.

Anna Krushelnitskaya, a US-based bilingual poet and translator, selected forty-two poems by Ehrenburg for the new volume, about one third of them from the earlier work, and two thirds from 1939-1966. The title of the volume, *Babi Yar and Other Poems*, probably chosen for marketing reasons, is misleading and textually misguided. The first published poem about the murder of the Jews of Kyiv in September 1941 was the long docupoem *Babi Yar* by Lev Ozerov, which appeared in Moscow in 1946.[10] Sensationalism hurts rather than helps the Ehrenburg volume by making the Western readers think of the *succès de scandale* of Evgeny Evtushenko's 1961 poem of the same title, which Dmitri Shostakovich set to music. Composed in 1944, Ehrenburg's own, untitled poem about Babi Yar (Ukrainian Babyn Yar) was first published in January 1945 in the Moscow flagship monthly magazine *Novyi mir* in a cycle of six untitled poems. A modified version, titled "Babi Yar," had not appeared until 1953.[11] While the word "Jew" did not

[9] See Frezinskii's commentary in Erenburg, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, p. 743.

[10] On Ozerov's *Babi Yar*, see M. D. Shrayer, "Lev Ozerov as a Literary Witness to the Shoah in the Occupied Soviet Territories," in *The Holocaust: Memories and History,* Victoria Khiterer, Ryan Berrick, and David Misal, eds, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge 2014, pp. 176–187.

[11] For details on the history and structure of Ehrenburg's 1945 *Novy mir* Cycle, see M. D. Shrayer, "Ilya Ehrenburg's January 1945 *Novy mir* Cycle and Soviet Memory of the Shoah," in *Eastern European Jewish Literature of the 20th and 21st Centuries: Identity and Poetics,* Klavdia Smola, ed., Verlag Otto Sagner, Munich-Berlin 2013, pp. 191–209.

figure in the poem, the line "I kazhdyi iar teper' mne dom" ("And every *yar* [ravine] is now my home") spoke to the national Soviet audience about the murder of Jews not only outside Kyiv in the autumn of 1941 but in countless ravines and anti-tank diches across the occupied Soviet territories. Ehrenburg subsequently toned down his poignantly Judaic line "Ia govoriu za mertvykh. Vstanem" ("I speak for the dead. Let's rise"). In Krushelnitskya's translation, based on the 1953 version, the line "My ponatuzhimsia i vstanem" reads as "We'll rise; we'll strain with all our might."[12]

Krushelnitskaya's otherwise keen understanding of Ehrenburg's originals sometimes lacks exposure to Judaism and Shoah history. Her approach privileges form over message and prosody over idiomaticity. Many of Ehrenburg's individual lines in Krushelnitskaya's translation live and breathe poetry: "by the shallow creek where bulrush weaves" ("If you press your ear down to the ground…"); "And the roused monastery/ Plays its full carillon" ("Devichye Polye" [sic]); "The Kremlin's pauper porphyry" ("Spring pushed around her snowfalls…").[13] The problem of excess and overwriting (overtranslating?) reveals itself even without the readers' access to the Russian originals. In seeking to capture Ehrenburg's versification, Krushelnitskaya adds as much as 25 percent of extraneous material. "I'll tell you of bygone childhood, of mama,/ and of mama's black shawl,/ Of the dining room with a cupboard, with a big clock,/ And of a white puppy," reads a word for word translation of the opening of Ehrenburg's 1912 poem:

> Я скажу вам о детстве ушедшем, о маме
> И о мамином черном платке,
> О столовой с буфетом, с большими часами
> И о белом щенке.[14]

In the new volume, the opening receives the following treatment in Krushelnitskaya's translation:

> I'll talk of past childhood, of Mamma; I'll talk
> Of the black shawl my Mamma wore up,
> Of our dining-room hutch, of our grandfather clock,
> Of our little white pup.[15]

I am very sympathetic to Krushelnitskaya's ambition to preserve the vestments of Ehrenburg's versification, including his feminine

[12] Ehrenburg, *Babi Yar,* p. 85.
[13] Ehrenburg, *Babi Yar*, pp. 33; 39; 57.
[14] Erenburg, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, p. 127.
[15] Ehrenburg, *Babi Yar*, p. 27.

rhymes, his restless caesuras, and even his trochaic pentameters. What price is too high enough to pay for such formal preservation? Or, to put the question differently, how much is the translator prepared to alter Ehrenburg's diction and expand the information contained in his lines? What is the right balance of formal transposition and interpretation in translation? In "Boi bykov" ("The Bullfight," 1939), an allegory of the Spanish Civil War, on which Ehrenburg reported from Republican strongholds. His voice is sparse and brittle:

> Зевак восторженные крики
> Встречали грузного быка.
> В его глазах, больших и диких,
> Была глубокая тоска.
> Дрожали дротики обиды.
> Он долго поджидал врага,
> Бежал на яркие хламиды
> И в пустоту вонзал рога.[16]

(Its literal translation is following: "The ecstatic screams of the gawkers/ Met the burly bull./ In his eyes, big and wild,/ There was a deep longing./ Darts of offense trembled./ For a while he had been waiting for the enemy,/ [He] ran at bright loose garments/ And thrust his horns into emptiness").

Krushelnitskaya's inspired translation preserves the iambic tetrameter and even some of the non-masculine rhymes:

> The burly bull came out surrounded
> By crowds excited, cheering, raucous.
> His big wild eyes looked out, confounded
> And deeply sad, upon the gawkers.
> The darts of hurt stung sharp like needles.
> He gave the foe a patient stare,
> Ran charging at the bright muletas
> And thrust his horns into this air.[17]

"Muleta" is a great retroactive restoration of the name of the cape employed by a *matador*. Yet it comes at the price of making Ehrenburg's austere verse appear purplish. How can *darts of hurt* possibly sting *like nettles*? (A rhyme is needed for *muletas*?)

The translator's propensity for overwriting and over-orchestrating is nowhere as jarring as in Ehrenburg's Shoah poems, where, like in Chekhov's prose, every word and every silence matters. Consider this excruciating poem composed in January 1941:

[16] Erenburg, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, p. 460.
[17] Ehrenburg, *Babi Yar*, p. 59.

Бродят Рахили, Хаимы, Лии,
Как прокаженные, полуживые,
Камни их травят, слепы и глухи,
Бродят, разувшись пред смертью, старухи,
Бродят младенцы, разбужены ночью,
Гонит их сон, земля их не хочет.
Горе, открылась старая рана,
Мать мою звали по имени – Хана.[18]

(A word for word translation reads: "Rachels, Khayims, Leahs wander/ Like lepers, half-alive,/ Stones poison them, blind and deaf/ Having taken off their shoes before death, old women wander,/ Infants wander, having been awoken at night,/ Sleep chases them away, the earth does not want them./ Woe, the old wound has opened,/ My mother's first name was Hannah.")

Above all else, a poem like that commands simplicity and forbids ostentation. Krushelni-tskaya's metrically faithful version takes various liberties:

A great many Leahs, Haims, Rahels
Wander like lepers, ghosts of themselves,
Tortured by stones, blind, deaf,
Old women take off their shoes before death;
Sleep won't take them, the earth won't take them.
Woe, the leaking wound of old trauma.
My mother's given name was Hana.[19]

Rhyming forces unwitting choices upon the translator. In the finale of the volume's title poem, Ehrenburg, who as early as in December 1944 put an accurate number on the toll of the Shoah, speaks of the murdered Soviet Jews as a collective *we* – voice, bones, and living memory:

Мы понатужимся и встанем.
Костями застучим – туда,
Где дышат хлебом и духами
Еще живые города.
Задуйте свет. Спустите флаги.
Мы к вам пришли. Не мы – овраги.[20]

(Very literally: "We'll strain ourselves and rise,/ We'll rattle our bones [and go] – there,/ Where breathing bread and perfume/ [Are] the still alive cities./ Blow out the lights. Lower the flags./ We've come to you. Not we – ravines [*yars*]")

[18] Erenburg, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, pp. 482–483.
[19] Ehrenburg, *Babi Yar*, p. 73.
[20] Erenburg, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, p. 512.

In Krushelnitskaya's version, Ehrenburg's lines gain the quality of a chorale, yet some of the lines would be difficult to say out loud or sing in English:

> We'll rise; we'll strain with all our might;
> We'll rattle with our bones, exhumed,
> Toward the live cities filled with light,
> With bread and sharp cologne perfumed.
> Half-staff your flags. Blow out your stars.
> We come to you – us gullies, *yars*.[21]

In 1950, while in Stockholm as a Soviet peace crusader, Ehrenburg met the left-wing activist Liselotte Mehr, a Jewish woman half his age who was married to Hjalmar Leo Mehr, a Swedish Social Democrat politician of Jewish-Russian origin. Liselotte Mehr became Ehrenburg's last love, and by some accounts, Ehrenburg's willingness to carry out official Soviet missions masked a desire to see her. In 1965, the ailing Ehrenburg, who had two years left to live, penned the poem titled "Posledniaia liubov" ("Last Love"):

> Календарей для сердца нет,
> Всё отдано судьбе на милость.
> Так с Тютчевым на склоне лет
> То необычное случилось […].[22]

In Krushelnitskaya's translation it takes the following form:

> There are no seasons for the heart:
> It's tossed by winds that fate will summon.
> Tyutchev's was pierced by a strange dart
> In his old age – a love uncommon […].[23]

In the poem, Ehrenburg tried on the destiny of Fyodor Tyutchev, one of Russia's greatest mid-19th century lyrical poets, whose love for and extramarital relationship with Elena Denisyeva, a much younger woman and a writer in her own right, resulted in the composition of one of the most profound pages of Russian love poetry. Soon after coming to America with a Jewish wife and son in 1940, Vladimir Nabokov would translate, brilliantly and precisely, with literalness and metrical nuance, Tyutchev's great lyric "Last Love":

> Blue shade takes half the world away:
> Through western clouds alone some light is slanted.

[21] Ehrenburg, *Babi Yar*, p. 85.
[22] Erenburg, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, p. 545.
[23] Ehrenburg, *Babi Yar*, p. 115.

O tarry, O tarry, declining day,
Enchantment, let me stay enchanted.[24]

Krushelnitskaya's translation, which is among the most accomplished ones in the new volume, recognizes the performative rather than imitative nature of translation. Here we have ageing Ehrenburg playing at ageing Tyutchev, and Krushelnitskaya in turn playing at American Nabokov playing at Tyutchev in translation. An assessment of how much of Ehrenburg's own voice survives, and how much of Krushelnitskaya's materializes instead, will, thus, depend on both the readers' familiarity with the Soviet and Jewish contents and their vision of modern Anglo-American verse aesthetic.

Through their lives and poetic oeuvres – and in their intergenerational dynamics – Ilya Ehrenburg and Semyon Lipkin betoken the contorted destinies of Jews in the former Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Reading today their poetry in English translation helps us understand the historical and cultural baggage ex-Soviet Jews brought to Israel, North America and Germany. Ehrenburg and Lipkin came from very different backgrounds and, growing up, had drastically different exposures to Jewish culture and Judaism. Ehrenburg was raised in Moscow, in a deeply acculturated milieu and without Jewish religious observance. His youthful idols were Russian poets of the Silver Age, as well as revolutionary thinkers and doers. As a young author, he had made the international Parisian avant-garde his home, and he never really parted with it, even during the Stalinist period. After Ehrenburg's death, Pablo Picasso, his lifelong friend since their shared Parisian youth, announced to the press that he "had his telephone cut off […] so he could mourn in private the death of Ilya Ehrenburg."[25] During bouts of insomnia in wartime Moscow, when Ehrenburg was not writing his searing articles against the German invaders, he translated his beloved French poets. He was, of course, an official Jew if not a court Jew who, starting with 1941, enjoyed Stalin's personal favor. Ehrenburg strove to speak not in code but directly, to power and Sovietness, despising the proverbial desk drawer and managing to steer into print the greatest number of Shoah-related works. Even though Ehrenburg had no traditional Jewish upbringing (or, perhaps, because of it), he regarded Jewishness to be an existential condition and, especially after the Shoah, an essential category of being.

[24] V. Nabokov, *Verses and Versions: Three Centuries of Russian Poetry*, Brian Boyd and Stanislav Shvabrin, eds., Harcourt, Orlando 2008, p. 257.

[25] "Picasso Is Mourning for Ilya Ehrenburg," *New York Times*, September 2, 1967.

With Semyon Lipkin, Ehrenburg's younger contemporary, things could not have been more different. As a child, he observed Hayyim Nahman Bialik in the courtyard of Odessa's Great Synagogue and remembered, rightly or wrongly, Bialik telling his father in Yiddish that a "poet must be a salesman." Until his latter days in post-Soviet Moscow, Lipkin continued to observe Jewish holidays in the privacy of his home. His translations from Yiddish included works by Perets Markish, Itsik Fefer and Shmuel Halkin. Having forgotten the alphabet, but not the language, Lipkin relied on phonetic transcriptions of the Yiddish originals. Taking to heart Pasternak's mythologized comment about Mandelstam's poem against Stalin, "How could he write these verses, he is a Jew," Lipkin kept his Jewish head down and only in the late 1970s he reluctantly became involved in unsanctioned literary performances. Jewishness, for Lipkin, was something of an accident of birth – not to be obfuscated or abnegated, and not to be touted with pride. Both Ehrenburg, who died three years after Khrushchev's deposal, and Lipkin, who outlived the USSR and witnessed the great exodus of Soviet Jewry, appreciated writing in Russian and Jewish. This is the reason why they are regarded to be the facets of the disappearing civilization.

Poet, translator, novelist, and memoirist, Semyon Lipkin moved from Odessa to Moscow in 1929. A protégé of the resplendent Odessan Jewish-Russian poet Eduard Bagritsky, Lipkin became a member of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1934. He had a difficult time publishing his original poetry and turned to literary translation. His Russian rendition of the Kalmyk national epic *Dzhangar* (1940) put him on the map. In his prolific career, Lipkin translated and adapted poets and heroic epics of ethnic regions in Central Asia, the Volga basin, the Caucasus, and the Far East. Lipkin was a military journalist during World War 2 and fought at Stalingrad. While he enjoyed a sterling career as a top literary translator, his first full collection of poems appeared only in 1967.

He showed great civil courage when he safeguarded a copy of his friend Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate* following the novel's "arrest" by the KGB in 1961. He subsequently edited Grossman's four-volume *Works* (1998). In several works of poetry, notably "Kogda mne v gorode rodnom…" ("When in my native town you…," 1987), Lipkin called on key motifs of Grossman's writings, such as the recurrent image of the Sistine Madonna. In 1980, he and his second wife, the poet Inna Lisnyanskaya, resigned from Union of Soviet Writers to protest the expulsion of two fellow contributors to the *Metropol* collective (1979). He was temporarily

blacklisted in the USSR, but his books appeared in Russian in the United States, cementing Lipkin's reputation abroad. *Volia* (*Freedom* [or *Will,*] 1981), a retrospective of Lipkin's poetry, was edited by Joseph Brodsky. Donald Rayfield, Chekhov's British biographer, writes in his preface to the new volume that "Lipkin […] and his wife Inna Lisnyanskaya […] formed one of the most extraordinary couples in the history of Russian literature," forcing a comparison to Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam. Rayfield argues that as literary witnesses, "Lipkin and Lisnyanskaya deserve the rank of martyrs, even though they were both vouchsafed a longevity extraordinary for a Russian poet in any era."[26]

The new volume features a number of Lipkin's Jewish and Judaic poems, notably "Vil'niusskoe podvor'e" ("The Compound at Vilnius"), Moisei" ("Moses"), and "Odesskaia sinagoga" ("Odes[s] a's Synagogue"). In "Zola" ("Ashes," 1967), miraculously published in the USSR, the protagonist "whispers": "[…] Menia sozhgli./ Kak mne dobrat'sia do Odessy?"[27] ("They've incinerated me./ How can I reach Odessa?") Lipkin resorted to Christian imagery in memorializing victims of Nazism and Stalinism. Discussing what defines a Jewish writer in Russia, Lipkin told me when I visited him and his wife in Peredelkino outside Moscow in 2000 that: "The important thing is how a person perceives himself [. . .]. Not for a single moment have I felt myself to be *not* Jewish. But I love Christ […] consider him the greatest Jewish prophet." Decades of translating the poetry and epics of different ethnic groups, including such victims of Stalinist collective punishment of nations as Crimean Tartars, Kalmyks, and Chechens, made Lipkin exceptionally attuned to the persecution of smaller nations. At the same time, Lipkin's writings about the Jews display an obsession with demonstrating that Jews are just as capable of wrongdoing as are non-Jews – as though such a truism required proof.

Traditionalists admire Lipkin's verse composed in the classical vein but occasionally betraying the modernist winds of his youth. He was hailed in post-Soviet Russia as a minor classic and an emblem of Jewish artists who had not emigrated. Russian by culture as they were, he preserved a Jewish spirit. "I cannot part with [the Jewish theme]," Lipkin told me in 2000. In the 1970s, Jewish motifs resurged in Lipkin's lyrics. That Lipkin was writing Judaic religious poetry in Moscow in the late Soviet period is in itself remarkable. His cycle "Posledniiaia noch' Avraama" ("Abraham's Last Night,"

[26] S. Lipkin, *A Close Reading of Fifty-Three Poems*, Ivonne Green and Sergei Makarov, trans., (with an introduction by Donald Rayfield), Hendon Press, London 2023, p. xix.

[27] Lipkin, *Pis'mena*, p. 118.

1981) belongs to a series of meditations on episodes of the Torah. In several Jewish poems, Lipkin managed to steer past the censors as he resorted to subtle analogy, allegory, and Aesopian language. Perhaps most famously, a play on words and historical associations engendered his poem "Khaim" (1973) built around the coincidence between Khaím, the name of a river and a mountain pass in Eastern Siberia, and the Jewish name Kháim (*Hayim*, meaning *life* in Hebrew). Lipkin loved coded messages and puzzles and he resorted to devices of concealment in order to fool the Soviet authorities. He exemplified the method of writing and reading between the lines that Marat Grinberg recently explored in *The Soviet Jewish Bookshelf.*[28] Cognizant of complex ironies of history (and echoing Nabokov in *Pnin*[29]*), he imagines Goethe strolling "v chase khod'by ot Veimara" ("an hour's stroll from Weimar") as death chambers of Buchenwald are being built.*[30] *While Lipkin was superior to Ehrenburg as a master of verse, in many of his poems, including his biblical verse, Lipkin comes across as cold and cerebral. Yet his best poems possess exuberant descriptions while also radiating a Homeric simplicity of tone.*

The cover of the Lipkin volume claims that the fifty-three poems collected in it were "selected by Alexander Solzhenitsyn." This is, in fact, an innocent marketing ploy. Solzhenitsyn never selected Lipkin's poems for a volume. In 1998, the Moscow magazine Novyi mir published Solzhenitsyn's essay titled "Four Contemporary Poets" (1995),[31] which also appears in the new Lipkin volume in English translation. Solzhenitsyn's essay belongs to one of the orbits of his book *Two Hundred Years Together (1795–1995)* (2001–2002), in which he laid historical blame on the Jews, while seeking to prove to himself and to others that he was not a visceral antisemite. Solzhenitsyn's essay highlighted the work of four Jewish-Russian poems, Semyon Lipkin, (Lipkin's wife) Inna Lisnyanskaya, Naum Korzhavin, and Liya Vladimirova. For Solzhenitsyn of the post-American years, all of them embodied the good Jews, namely Jews whose hearts

[28] M. Grinberg, *The Soviet Jewish Bookshelf: Jewish Culture and Identity Between the Lines*, Brandeis University Press, Waltham, MA 2022.

[29] About Nabokov's *Pnin* and the Shoah, see M. D. Shrayer, "Jewish Questions in Nabokov's Art and Life," in *Nabokov and His Fiction: New Perspectives*, Julian W. Connolly, ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, pp. 73–91; M. D. Shrayer, "Raisa Blokh as an Historical, Literary and Emotional Source for Nabokov's *Pnin*," in *Skreshcheniia sudeb. Literarische und kulturelle Beziehungen zwischen Russland und dem Westen. A Festschrift for Fedor B. Poljakov*, Lazar Fleishman, Stefan Michael Newerkla, and Michael Wachtel, eds., *Stanford Slavic Studies*, vol. 49, Peter Lang, Berlin 2019, pp. 619–656.

[30] Lipkin, *Pis'mena*, p. 202.

[31] A. Solzhenitsyn, A., "Chetyre sovremennykh poeta," *Novyi mir*, 1998, 4, https://magazines.gorky.media/novyi_mi/1998/4/chetyre-sovremennyh-poeta.html, accessed March 9, 2025.

ached for Russia and her destiny, Jews who allegedly recognized that Russianness was always Orthodox Christianness, Jews who were baptized (as did Korzhavin, who emigrated to the US and lived in Boston), or Jews pined for Russia after moving to Israel. In the section on Lipkin, Solzhenitsyn quoted his works extensively and superficially, and the fifty-three poems he quoted from are the ones chosen for the new volume.

Yvonne Green worked on philological translations prepared by the Israel-based translator Sergei Makarov, who is married to Lipkin's stepdaughter Elena Makarova – a writer and Shoah cultural historian. In Greene, who had previously published two books of Lipkin's poetry and prose in translation, Lipkin found his principal Anglophone champion. Green formulated her method as follows: "…by audio taping Russian friends reading [Lipkin's poems] and using literal translations obtained word for word, line for line, most notably from Sergei Makarov, and by examining the evident patchwork of rhyme visible on the page and with the help of a phonetic copy of the Cyrillic alphabet, I began my search to understand Lipkin's poems and bring them to an English reader."[32] Relying on interlinear translations may lead one astray, as in Lipkin's poem "Solikamsk v avguste 1962 goda" ("Solikamsk in August," 1962), where the poet envisions a visit to a labor camp town in the Urals. In Green's version, the text reads as: "To the right, the opera house, tribunal, reprisals […]."[33] In Lipkin's original, the word *oper* appears as a colloquial abbreviation of *oberupolnomochennyi*, which is a Soviet law enforcement officer with special privileges.[34] Something along the lines of "domain of the police detective" might have captured Lipkin's intonation ironic but not absurdist.

Where, in translating Ehrenburg, Anna Krushelnitskaya adds to and ferments his text, Yvonne Green pares down and distills Lipkin. A case in point is the long poem *Tekhnik-intendant* (in Green's ornate translation, *The Technical Lieutenant-Quartermaster*, 1961–1963), which Lipkin regarded to be his "main" poetical work. Through the eyes of a young Jewish lieutenant, the poem depicts some of the worst fighting in the south of Russia during World War 2. Shifting between the spring of 1942 and the fall of 1942, and projecting onto the spring of 1945, Lipkin's poem pays tribute to Selvinsky's great wartime poetry of Shoah witnessing.[35] Green is both at her finest

[32] Lipkin, *A Close Reading*, p. xvi.
[33] Lipkin, *A Close Reading*, p. 111.
[34] Lipkin, *Pis'mena*, p. 311.
[35] See M. D. Shrayer, *I SAW IT: Ilya Selvinsky and the Legacy of Bearing Witness to the Shoah*, Academic Studies Press, Boston 2013.

and her weakest as a poet writing on the stumps of Lipkin's verse. Consider Lipkin's Rabelaisian Russian:

> Адыгейские ряженки и сыры,
> Сухофрукты в сапетках, в бутылях вино
> Местной давки – дешевое, озорное
> И чуть мутное, цвета казачьей сабли.
> На столах оцинкованных – светлое сало.
> И гусиные потроха, и арбузы,
> Что хозяйки зимой замочили к весне,
> К нашей первой военной весне.[36]

(In a literal rendition: "Adyghean fermented baked milk and cheeses./ Dried fruit in woven baskets with two handles, in flagons, wine/ Of the local pressing – cheap, roguish,/ And a little turbid, the color of a Cossack saber./ On the zinc top tables – gleaming salt pork./ And goose giblets, and watermelons/ The women [of the house] had canned back in winter for the spring,/ Our first wartime spring."

And now Green's version:

> Baked milk and cheese from the Caucasus,
> To reach into bins of dried fruit,
> To choose bottles of cheap, mischievous, cloudy
> Local wine, as red as the blood on the blade
> Of a Cossack's shashka.
> Zinc-topped tables heave with glowing lard, giblets,
> And preserved watermelons the housewives
> Soaked in salt water for this, the first spring of the war.[37]

Displacing meaning to endnotes, Green parades a museumist habit of not translating items of local use and deliberate names. Sometimes, it betrays the utmost devotion to the poet and to the original. Sometimes, it takes away the integrity of Lipkin's design, as when a mare's name is Biryuza ("Turquoise") and it should be rescued rather than simply transliterated. Rendering idioms is tricky business. In "Osen' u moria" ("Autumn at Sea"), old men in Odessa play dominos, in Russian *zabivaiut kozla*, literally "slaughter a billy goat"; in Green's translation, they "score goat." *Score* goat?

In a key episode of *Lieutenant*, Lipkin negotiates his idea of Jewish Russianness in the autumn of 1942, as fierce fighting goes on and swaths of Cossack host land are lost:

> Вы спите только днем – в сарае, в хлеву, в кукурузе.
> А вечером один из вас

[36] Lipkin, *Pis'mena*, p. 258).
[37] Lipkin, *A Close Reading*, p. 37.

Вынужден спрашивать у станичника:
— Наши давно ушли?
— А кто это ваши?
— Красная армия.
— Так то не наши, а ваши.
Тогда, поумнев, уточняете по-иному:
— Наши – это русские.
— Так то не наши.
— А вы разве не русские?
— Не. Мы казаки. А скажите, товарищ, —
(А губы язвят, а в глазах – все, что зовется жизнью), —
Может, вы из жидов?
И вот что странно: именно тогда,
Когда ты увидел эту землю без власти,
Именно тогда,
Когда ты ее видел только по ночам,
Только по беззвездным, страшным, первобытным ночам,
Именно тогда,
Когда многолетняя покорность людей
Грозно сменилась темной враждебностью, —
Именно тогда ты впервые почувствовал,
Что эта земля – Россия,
И что ты – Россия,
И что ты без России – ничто […].[38]

(A word for word version reads: "You sleep only during the day – in a barn, in a cowshed, in a cornfield. And in the evening one of you/ Is forced to ask a resident of a small Cossack town:/ "Have ours left a while ago?"/ "And who are 'yours'?"/ "Red Army"/ "So those are not ours but yours."/ And then, having regained your wits, you clarify your thought in a different fashion: "Ours are Russians."/ "So those aren't ours."/ "Aren't you Russian?"/ "No. We're Cossacks. Comrade, could I ask you?"/ (And his lips are pursed with acerbity, and his eyes fill with everything they call life),/ "Perhaps you come from the Kikes?/ And here's the strange part: it was then/ When you have seen this land without rule/ Right then,/ When you saw it only by night,/ Only on starless, scary, primordial nights,/ Right when/ The people's submissiveness of many years/ Had threateningly turned into dark hostility,/ – Right at that time you felt for the first time,/ That this land is Russia,/ And that you are Russia/, And that without Russia you're nothing […]").

Green presents it in the following way:

In the evening, one of us goes to ask the villagers,
When did our people leave here?
Who are your people? Comes the question.
The Red Army.
So it is not ours but yours?

[38] Lipkin, *Pis'mena*, p. 273–274.

Ours is Russian, we specify, wising up,
That's not ours either.
Aren't you Russian? We ask.
No. We're Cossacks, one says.
Then, with a sneer and flint-sharp eyes, he asks,
Maybe you're Jews?
And what is strange, just then,
As I see this land ungoverned,
Just then,
As I see it only at night,
In the starless, primitive, terror of night,
Just then,
When resignation
Gives way to dark, hostile, menace,
Just then is when I first fee,
This territory is Russia,
I am Russia.
That without Russia I am nothing […].[39]

Is this a mournful celebration of Jewish survival? A paean of assimilation à la Pasternak in *Doctor Zhivago*? A hymn of filial, adoptive love for Russia? Here is Lipkin's original:

То померещится тебе—
Говорит песчинка другой песчинке:
«Мы одной крови — я и ты,
А все иное – не я и не ты,
Не нашей крови,
Задушим проточную воду,
Задушим все, растущее на земле,
Задушим грядущее на земле,
Пусть останется только то,
Что я и ты,—
Песок, песок!»[40]

Based on the choices Green makes, she has trouble deciding what is happening in the original, and Anglophone readers will have trouble with the uncertainty of the diction:

Visions of one grain of sand,
Which speaks to another,
says, We're of one blood – you and I,
Everyone else is different from us [literally: Not of our blood],
So let's strangle the rush of water,
Strangle what grows on earth,
Survive alone,
The steppe's sand.[41]

[39] Lipkin, *A Close Reading*, p. 55–56.
[40] Lipkin, *Pis'mena*, p. 280.
[41] Lipkin, *A Close Reading,* p. 63.

Green's approach to classical versification, in which the majority of Lipkin's poetry is composed, is almost the opposite of Krushelnitskaya's: freedom from formal constraints, and disregard of rhyme and prosody. Even basic stanzaic structures are disregarded. Whole stanzas are shifted around. "Kombinat glukhonemykh" ("The Cooperative of Deaf-Mutes," 1960) in the original has four stanzas of trochaic tetrameter with alternating feminine and masculine rhymes. Green's version showcases sixteen lines with occasional trochees but also iambs and even anapests, with occasional shadow rhymes. Lipkin's poetic diction lives on, while his formal sophistication dies:

> Southern hops, the world's midday
> Breath, are we lost
> You, my poor verse, and I?
> Have we joined a mute cooperative?[42]

This approach works with some of the shorter, allegorical poems. However, it does not work properly with a longer narrative or descriptive poems. In Green's version of "The Taiga," one of Lipkin's poems about the Gulag, raw beauty shines through:

> […] How long is it since felling's plague
> Raged in the forest, since axe blows
> Seemed wiser than sacred language,
> Trees fell like Jews, and every ditch became a Babi Yar?[43]

Left behind are Lipkin's sestets of iambic tetrameter. Obfuscated are Lipkin's closing two lines of the eighth sestet, "I valiatsia derev'ia, kak evrei,/ A kazhdyi rov – kak Babi Iar"[44], translated literally as: "And trees fall like Jews,/ And each ditch – like Babi Yar." The line is directly in conversation with Ehrenburg's verse, which Krushelnitskaya translated truthfully as "I'm right at home in every *yar*." Green's abandonment of Lipkin's sestets is especially disappointing. For Lipkin, a translator and rescuer of voices, poetic texture was essential. Likewise, in the long poem *Nestor and Saria*, devoted to the history of Soviet Abkhazia, Green makes the choice to render Lipkin's unusual eleven-line stanzas of rhymed iambic pentameter in nine-line stanzas without a consistent meter or rhyme scheme.

[42] Lipkin, *A Close Reading,* p. 72.
[43] Lipkin, *A Close Reading*, p. 83.
[44] Lipkin, *Pis'mena*, p. 93.

Lipkin's verse demands inventiveness from translators. In the new English-language volume, his poem "Soiuz" ("Conjunction" or "Union") is titled "And." Lipkin was taken with the fact that one character, both 夷 and 彝, in Chinese and one letter, *И*, in Russian capture the name of an entire people, the Yi (or Nuosyu) in southern China. When published, the poem was immediately attacked for its coded admiration for Israel ("Yi" as in Yisroel), which after 1967 was openly vilified by Soviet anti-Zionist propaganda. "And" with an endnote does not cut it, but what would actually do justice to Lipkin's translingual design?

One of the greatest challenges of literary translation is rendering imperfection. This is even more the case when one translates Jewish-Russian poets into English – going from a culturally conservative tradition to a formally liberal one, while also negotiating hybridity and otherness. Translators pay the double price for the choices they make: the original's flaws and the translation's infelicities. Ehrenburg sometimes allowed himself obvious imperfections, such as "Chuzhoe gore – ono kak ovod" ("Another's woe, it's like a gadfly"), which phonetically evokes defection (*kak o*), and which Krushelnitskaya neutralizes as "A grief not your own is a gadfly…."[45] Lipkin permitted himself lengthy meanderings that Green condenses. Imagine a poet in the English language as restrained and poised as Green is, and a poet in the Russian language as enthusiastic about writing Russianly in English as Krushelnitskaya is, who would miraculously team up. Such ideal translations would incarnate both Lipkin's desires for posterity and Ehrenburg's fervent pleas for artistic toleration. In 1984, Lipkin spoke directly of his legacy in the poem "Uzheli krasok nuzhen tabor…" ("Does one need the gypsy encampment of colors […]?"):

> О, если бы строки четыре
> Я в завершительные дни
> Так написал, чтоб в страшном мире
> Молитвой сделались они […].[46]

Green rendered the stanza as:

> If only four of the lines
> I write in my old age
> Could become prayers
> In our horrible world.[47]

[45] Ehrenburg, *Babi Yar*, p. 91.
[46] Lipkin, *Pis'mena*, p. 194.
[47] Lipkin, *A Close Reading*, p. 164.

In 1945, in the January *Novyi mir* cycle that also featured the poem about *yars* and "speaking for the dead," Ehrenburg "beg[ged] not for [him]self – for them" – thus begging the censors, and ultimately the country's tyrant, who as a young man had dabbled in Georgian poetry, to allow "nemnogo smutnogo iskusstva."[48] Literally "a little bit of vague art" in Krushelnits-kaya's version becomes "some unutterable art."[49] Ehrenburg's original alludes to *smutnoe vremia*, Russia's "time of troubles" and interregnum, which led to the establishment of the Romanov dynasty. Krushelnitskaya's translation discards the historical backdrop.

If getting "unutterable art" across the boundaries of history, language, and identity should be deemed the translator's principal task, both Ivonne Green and Anna Krushelnitskaya have succeeded in their noble endeavors.

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[48] Erenburg, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, p. 520.

[49] Ehrenburg, *Babi Yar*, p. 95.

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