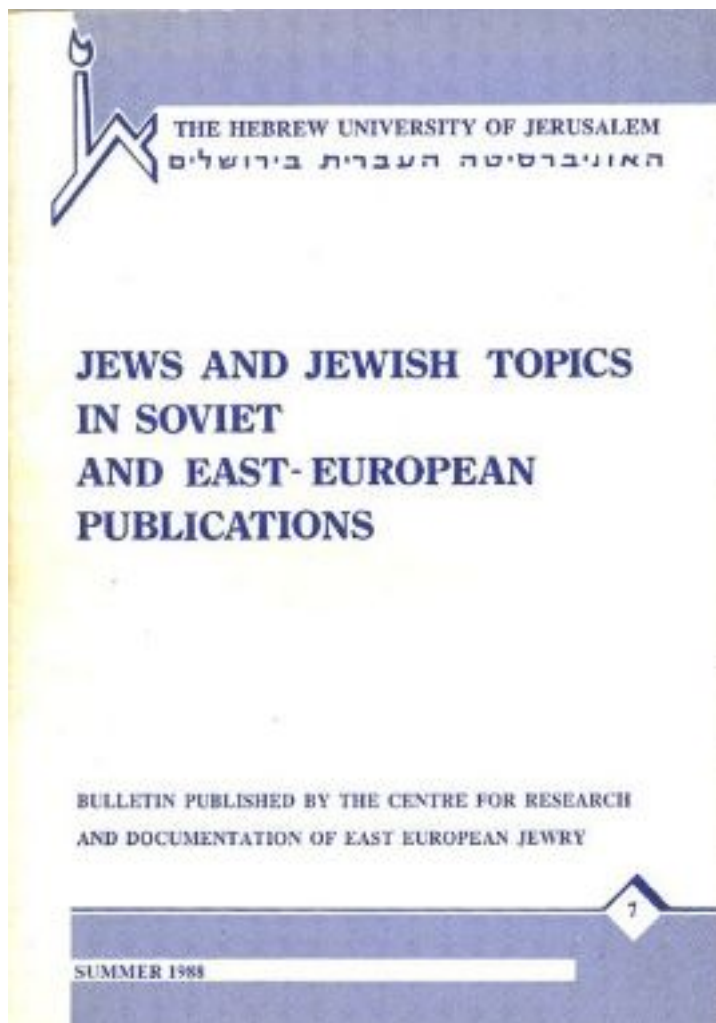


II. "SUNSET" BY I.E. BABEL: □ from the Creative and Stage History of the Play

Prepared for publication by E. Kapitaikin



Late in 1987, the Mayakovsky Theatre in Moscow opened a production of I.E. Babel's play, "Sunset", under the direction of A. Goncharov. Reviews of the premiere appeared in several Soviet newspapers including the Moscow News weekly.* Earlier, in the summer, the weekly reported that the play had been, or was being staged in Lvov, Riga and Leningrad.

Olga Martynenko, the reviewer of the Moscow production, mentions also a new edition of Babel's works. In this regard, however, she is far from optimistic. Quoting her conversation with Babel's widow A.N. Pirozhkova, the reporter says:

Can we expect new editions of Babel's books? So far, since the "Selected Works" were published in 1966, only two small books have appeared, one in Minsk and one in Elista. Antonina Nikolaevna says that she submitted to the *Khudozhestvennaya literatura* publishing house manuscripts for a two-volume edition of Babel's works. That was last summer [i.e. in 1986 — E.K.]. The edition is planned for the second quarter of 1988, but progress is slow. *Knizhnaya palata*

intends to reprint in 1989 a book of memoirs by Babel's contemporaries, considerably enlarged as compared with the similar collection published in 1972. It will include the full, unabridged text of A.N. Pirozhkova's own memoir telling of her husband's tragic fate.

It should be noted that the Mayakovsky Theatre's artistic director, Andrei Goncharov, has for years announced the production of "Sunset"(with Armen Dzhigarkhanyan as Mendel Krik) as part of its planned repertory. Yet only now has it become possible to realize these plans. Babel's Jews from Moldavanka had to wait for Gorbachev's perestroika. Sixty years have passed since the play's first production on the Soviet stage.

In the West, "Sunset" was first produced in the early 1960s, after the play appeared in the first posthumous edition of Babel's works in 1957, the "Selected Works". In 1965, the play was staged at the Israel National Theatre, Habima, directed by S. Friedman. In 1986, the Habima Theatre produced the play again. This time it was staged by a notable Russian director, Yu. P. Lyubimov, who has since become an Israeli citizen. An interview with Lyubimov is published below.

Moscow News reported the "enormous success" of the Tel Aviv production at last year's international theatre festival in Berlin, without, however, mentioning either the theatre or the director by name.

There exist in modern Western (and, since recently, Soviet) theatre and theatrical literature various interpretations of Isaak Babel's "Odessa tragedy". In this artistic dispute, which is now so topical, a fascinating interpretation suggested as far back as the early 1960s by Soviet literary critic L. Ya. Livshits (1920-1965) deserves to be rescued from oblivion. His article about "Sunset" was published posthumously in *Pamir* (No. 6, 1974) a publication which is little known in the West.

We also print here excerpts from reminiscences by L.Ya. Livshits's daughter, devoted among others, to the critic's research into Babel's creative legacy.

* O. Martynenko, "Family Drama of Mendel Krik (Isaak Babel's 'Sunset' at the Mayakovsky

Theatre)", *Moscow News*, No.2, January 10, 1988, p. 11.

EXCERPTS FROM L. LIVSHITS' ARTICLE "FROM THE ODESSA STORIES' TO SUNSET "

[...] Having just finished the first draft of "Sunset", Babel writes to a friend on September 25, 1926: "The trouble is that this play has nothing to do with the Revolution; however one may look at it, it clashes abominably with what they do nowadays in the theatre, and the last scene of the play may be easily perceived as an 'apotheosis of the petty bourgeoisie'." (1) [...]

The writer's fears seem to be justified. In Odessa, it is true, the play is successful: in the fall of 1927, "Sunset" opens simultaneously on two stages: at the Russian theatre (director A. Gripich, premiere on October 26), and at the Ukrainian one (director N. Vilner, premiere December 1). However, the production at the MKhAT (Moscow Arts Theatre) II, by B. Sushkevich (premiere on February 28, 1928), a production that was to decide the stage fate of the play, is an obvious failure. After only sixteen performances, the play is taken off the stage at the end of 1928. Babel's worst forebodings are confirmed. Some critics go so far as to see in "Sunset" the "idealization of hooliganism" (2) and "sympathy for the petty bourgeois underground". (3) [...]

However, what is most interesting is the attitude of the author himself. Babel, who is usually rather indifferent to the talk of the critics, a writer who speaks of his works reluctantly and with little emotion, is unwontedly loquacious when discussing his plays in letters to friends. At times he even speaks of them with a certain pathos. As a rule, he lets his writings "mature" for years and only then rewrites them, in some instances up to twenty times, before he feels ready to hand them over for publication. Yet on his plays he works furiously and almost uninterruptibly

until completion, although this goes against all his habits, his wishes, and simply his physical capacities. "I have worked myself into total mental exhaustion, I should really drop all this 'literature' for some time, but how can I do that? I'll wait another 2-3 days, then I'll get down to rewriting the play", he relates in his letter to T. V. Kashirina (September 20, 1926) at the height of his work on "Sunset". One might presume that he was spurred by purely financial considerations since initially "Sunset" was conceived by Babel as a "commercial undertaking" (a letter of August 19, 1926) and his only worry at that time was: "is there enough 'dough' in my play?" (letter of September 25, 1926). Very soon, however, the tone changes radically. Babel compares his work on "Sunset" to that on Konarmiya, and he sees the play as an important step forward: "I experience a fervour which was lacking for at least three years... I hope that this time, too, it will produce some good results" (letter to his mother, October 27, 1926). When on June 22, 1927 he sent the play to V.P. Polonsky for publication in *Novyi mir*, Babel, half-jokingly but quite plainly, indicates that the play does not fit the conventional perception of his work: "Read this strange composition. The day after tomorrow, we shall hold council together, to decide what to do with it."

When a conflict evolves with the repertory committee, Babel rejects all "commercial" considerations. "I have no intention of accepting or following any of their remarks. All their 'corrections' are dictated by bad taste, politically redundant and ludicrous... I cannot give in... Should our efforts bring no results, I would rather give up the production", he writes to T.V. Kashirina from Paris on October 6, 1927.[...]

Could this be an example, not so rare in the history of literature, of self-delusion by a writer who believes that he is creating something new, moving forward, while in fact all he is doing is embroidering upon once-successful motifs, types, and situations? The critics of the MKhAT production had no doubts on this score. They were convinced that they were "only too familiar" with Benya Krik and with the concept of the play as a whole, since they had read the "Odessa Stories". As the hero of a "romantic adventure story, of a humorous descriptive narration" Benya was quite "acceptable". However, as the central character of "Sunset" (and through inertia they insisted on seeing him as such) [...] he could not be accepted by the critics who rebuked Babel for self-repetition.

Thirty years later, all this was explained with iron-clad simplicity by V. Arkhipov: "Babel was disastrously short of things to say, so he was endlessly tinkering with Benya Krik... Having no creative affinity with the new reality, Babel was suffocating as a writer. " (4) [...]

Babel started his work on the short story entitled "Sunset" in 1923 or 1924 in Odessa (the first seven pages of the manuscript, now in the archives of the painter M.V. Ivanov, were written on the trade forms of the agricultural machinery store owned by the writer's father E.I. Babel). He rewrote the story twice, most probably in Moscow (1924-25), and then corrected the finished text all over again. He never published "Sunset" in its novella version even though it seemed to fit naturally with the "Odessa Stories" collection. Moreover, in the novella entitled "Father" there is a direct hint, a direct "promise" of the future story: "Mendel Krik was drinking wine from a green glass and recalling how his own sons had beaten him up, Benya his eldest and Levka his youngest. He was bellowing his story at the top of his hoarse and terrible voice, showing his broken teeth and inviting people to feel the cuts on his belly. The Volyn' tsadiks with their porcelain faces stood behind his chair and listened numbly to Mendel Krik's boasting. The were

amazed at all they heard and Grach despised them for it. 'The old braggart', muttered Grach and ordered a drink." (5) The slyly ironic, romantically stylized world of "Odessa Stories" is a whimsical, gay and unconventional world of dream: weakness dreaming of strength, the dull, dreary existence dreaming of a life of color, exuberance and extravagance. A dream of a man humiliated socially and nationally, of a world where people are judged "according to their worth" and everyone takes his place at the table regardless of their seniority or wealth. "'We have our Majesty the Emperor and there can be no other king', said the police officer." Yet there he is, Benya the King — and the police station, the rightful representative of "our Majesty the Emperor" on Odessa soil, is going up in flames. In this world, the cruel laws are obliterated by the "just" lawlessness. This is a world, if not of freedom, then at least of wilful liberty for those who have long been deprived of their own will, bound and smothered by the social order and by religious and traditional rules and regulations. If not high drama, then at least unbridled, uncalculating passions reign in the world of the "Odessa Stories". This fairy world forms a strictly delineated, bewitched circle, locked from within; one step outside — and you will be grabbed by the devilish reality. It is concerned with this reality only in so far that "the sad, flashy romanticism of felons rejects the stability of the decent people's world" (V. Shklovsky).

Shklovsky, however, is wrong to call Babel's romanticism "sad". Far from being sad, it is joyful, carnival-like, and not only because of its colourfulness but because of the extraordinary transformations of its characters and events. Because of the wise irony lighting up this world of dream and fancy, showing its fantastic, unlikely and, even if it could exist in reality, limited quality. For reality, even in this world, rules as of right. Not only bovine but human blood is spilled — the blood of those very poor devils whom Benya attempted to protect; a "skinny boy" is being bought as a husband for the forty-year-old Dvoira.

It took Babel just seven days in the summer of 1927 to write the first four parts of his film script "Benya Krik", However, the last two parts proved hard to finish. In these two parts the writer attempted to depict the real events of the revolution: the romantic fantasy had to be brought down and localized on the map of history. In the script, the Moldavanka of Benya Krik and of Tartakovsky, the Moldavanka of "Odessa Stories", subjected to the realities of revolution, was not just defeated, but lost its heroic dimensions.

His desire to depict the old Odessa in a different manner apparently unsatisfied, Babel returned to "Sunset", the novella he had started while still at home and then brought to Moscow and tried to complete. Judging by the manuscript, he did complete it in the end but never published it.

Why?

The novella is surprisingly different from its fellow-stories of the Odessa cycle, even if the humorous tone, the jokingly naive amazement at the life and mores of the "incredible Moldavanka" are all still there. But the characters and the events are all reduced to a less grand scale, the imagery is deliberately poorer and rougher. Gone are the reckless, but in a way noble, bursts of passions clashing with the oppressive petty bourgeois order of existence. Not the force of passion reigns here but the petty love of gain.[...]

The system of sharp, at times hyperbolic tropes in the novella "Sunset" is different for it serves different purposes. It is made deliberately coarser, harsher. While in "Father" "the shining eye of the sunset fell into the sea behind Peresyp", in this novella the sunset "spread over the sky, thick as jam". In "The King", the torches of the raiders "light up Eichbaum's yard like nine glittering stars". In "Sunset", the stars above the Kriks¹ house spill all over the sky "like soldiers relieving themselves".

In the process of work on the novella, Babel consistently removed anything that might in any

way poeticize Mendel's emotions, that might single him out from his environment. The paragraph where Arie-Leib tries to console Mendel with a story about King David is crossed out with a question mark, on the margin appears Babel's decisive note: "Arie-Leib has to go". Indeed, what parallel can there be between King David and the foolish Papa Krik "dethroned" by a bash on the head with a colander.

All characters in the novella, each in his own way, exemplify the stagnant, humdrum, petty-bourgeois element.

And yet I do not think that Babel refrained from publishing the novella just because it differed in its interpretation of the themes and characters of the "Odessa Stories". The reason was different: his work on the play led to new, unexpected developments which took it away from both the Odessa cycle and, especially, from the novella "Sunset".

"Sunset" as a play had been initially sketched by Babel in just nine days in August 1926 (letter of August 28, 1926), but the actual work stretched for many months. The first trouble arose when Babel came to the third scene of "Sunset" (at the tavern).[...]

Babel's anxiety with regard to this scene is justified: indeed, it determines the whole multitude can forgive. "You make day out of night, do you, Mendel? You make Sunday out of Monday, don't you, Mendel?" Here is the indignant voice of a Philistine. The very Philistine who relates with relish how he "once teased to death an elephant in a zoo". Probably because an elephant is a rarity, and to a Philistine anything out of the ordinary is unbearable. That is why he also hates the "elephant" Mendel who wants to be "smarter than God". That "God" who had reduced the whole wide, boundless world down to a single narrow path "from the slop-bucket to the latrine and from the latrine back to the slop-bucket". Mendel does not want to see the end result of his life as a sum total of his income.[...]

In the play, Mendel becomes the central figure, a different personage from his namesake in the "Odessa Stories". He, a "pillar" of Moldavanka, does not wish "to sweep floors with his mug" anymore — he wants to plant gardens. His protest is not the whim of a petty tyrant, nor an old man's futile prank in an attempt to stop the natural course of events, but an act of defiance against the unnatural, fossilized, yet far from unavoidable existence of possession. The owner of a twelve-thousand-worth business realizes that his life has no meaning. He does not want to be an owner, he wants to be a man, an individual.[...]

NOTES

- 1.□□ □ *From the letter to T.V. Kashirina, I.E. Babel's close friend in 1925-28. All further letters quoted, if not indicated otherwise, are addressed to Kashirina.*
- 2.□□ □ *"Should 'Sunset' Appear on Stage?", Rabochii i teatr, No. 44, 1927, p. 8.*
- 3.□□ □ *N. Osinsky, "Babel's 'Sunset'", Izvestiya, March 1, 1928.*
- 4.□□ □ *V. Arkhipov, "Lessons", Neva, No. 6, 1958, p. 196.*
- 5.□□ □ *I. Babel, hbrannoe (Selected Works) (Moscow. Goslitizdat, 1957), pp. 168-9.*

T. Livshits

MY FATHER AND HIS WORK ON BABEL'S CREATIVE HERITAGE

My father Lev Yakovlevich Livshits was born in 1920 in the town of Melekess on the Volga river. In 1925, together with his family, he moved to Kharkov. In 1937, after high school, he began literature studies at the department of history and literature at the Kharkov University. On the second day of the war, in spite of being exempt from military duty, he volunteered to go to the front. Demobilized in 1945, my father returned to the university and graduated just one year later. After a brilliant defence of his graduate thesis, he continued his post-graduate studies; simultaneously he worked in everyday newspaper "Krasnoe znamya" and did a considerable amount of writing. Mostly he wrote theatrical reviews for Kiev and Kharkov publications. In 1949 my father lost his job in the newspaper and his position as PhD student and it became increasingly difficult for him to get published. In 1950, swept up by the wave of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign, he was arrested and sentenced to ten years of hard labor. He returned from the camps in 1954, a very ill man. He died in February, 1965, at the age of 44. What did he manage to achieve in the last decade of his life?

By the age of 34, my father had experienced five years of war, six years of the labour camp and, in between, the three short years of studies and intensive literary practice. From the camp he returned an accomplished scholar and literary critic. Within nine months he had completed and defended his doctoral thesis and soon obtained the position of assistant professor of philology at Kharkov University. In the last ten years of his short life, my father's main preoccupation, his supreme goal, was his work on Babel's writings.

His fascination with Babel's work dated from his return from the Gulag. He related to the human and creative destiny of the writer in a very intimate, private, Jewish way, one could say that he "tried" this destiny on himself and on his generation.

This, at times nearly religious, devotion to Babel contained both admiration for the writer's talent and a veiled polemic against the accepted dogmas of Soviet literary criticism which treated Babel as a "fellow-traveler" and an outcast. My father wanted to show how deeply Babel believed in the "planetary" dimensions of the Russian revolution. He often quoted Babel's words which, he thought, best reflected the writer's attitude towards the Soviet reality: "This country [France — T.L.], strange as it may sound, is terribly backward and provincial. We who are from Russia feel homesick for the wind of large thoughts and lofty passions" (1927). And again from France: "The body feels good here but the soul yearns for the 'planetary' Russian dimensions. After three-months stay in Paris, I moved to Marseille for a while. Everything is very interesting but, to tell the truth, does not touch the soul. The spiritual life is NOBLER in Russia. I'm poisoned by Russia and homesick for her, can't think of anything but her."

These excerpts from Babel's letters reflect the frame of mind which L.Ya. Livshits, a man of a different generation but of a similar destiny, fully shared. They both paid with their lives for their devotion to their ideals, both died young. They both believed in the ultimate justice of their chosen doctrine and, though fully aware of how far the practice was removed from the ideal, both saw sacrifices and temporary injustice as unavoidable.

Being a true scholar, my father diligently gathered and thoroughly studied the relevant material. By the last year of his life he had put together what was at that time the fullest archival collection of Babel's manuscripts which later served as a source for many publications.

My father was writing an extensive monograph on Babel. He had time to publish several important papers. Among these the long article entitled "Materials for a creative biography of I. Babel" (Voprosy literatury, No. 4, 1964) occupies first place. This was a sketch for the future book, which no later researcher of Babel's writings can disregard.

Among my father's other numerous works, I would like to mention the work he did preparing the following publications: Babel's novella "Sunset" (Literaturnaya Rossiya, November 20, 1964); a large collection of forgotten novellas and letters to friends (Znamya, No. 8, 1964), and the book "I. Babel. Memoirs by His Contemporaries". The latter appeared in Moscow in 1972, after my father had already died, and no mention was made of the name of its initiator and one of its chief compilers. The article "From the 'Odessa Stories' to 'Sunset'" which was also not published in my father's lifetime, relates to this book.

It seems to me that the article on "Sunset" is an analysis not so much of Babel's text as of the context of the writer's creative destiny. The title, "From 'Odessa Stories' to 'Sunset' ", is a clear indication of that.

Jerusalem