

# I SAW IT

*Ilya Selvinsky and the Legacy of  
Bearing Witness to the Shoah*

WITH TRANSLATIONS OF MAJOR WORKS

Studies in Russian and Slavic Literatures, Cultures, and History

**Series Editor – Lazar Fleishman (Stanford University)**



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Bearing Witness to the Shoah*

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MAXIM D. SHRAYER

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I Saw It: Ilya Selvinsky and the Legacy of Bearing Witness to the Shoah

By Maxim D. Shrayer

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Cover image:            *The Bagerovo Anti-Tank Ditch*. Crimea, 14 December 2011  
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*IN MEMORIAM PYOTR (PEYSAKH) SHRAYER*



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*Я очень бледно это описал  
В стихотворении "Я ЭТО ВИДЕЛ!"  
И больше не могу ни слова.  
Керчь...*

*I have described this very hazily  
In the poem "I SAW IT!"  
And I cannot add even a single word.  
Kerch...*

Ilya Selvinsky, "Kerch," 1942

Back at the headquarters of the front they told me that the family of [Colonel Abram] Khasin was murdered during the mass execution of the civilian population of the city of Kerch, carried out by the Hitlerites, and that by chance Khasin came upon a photograph of the dead lying in a ditch and recognized his wife and children. I was thinking: What must this person feel when he leads his tanks into battle.

Vasily Grossman, *Years of War. Notebooks*, 1942

I walked on a stomped-out path ... and 10,000 eyes that belonged to the vilest enemies of my people (both Russian and Jewish) stared at me from the formation.

Ilya Selvinsky, *Wartime Diaries*, 1945

## INTRODUCTION

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

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

Selvinsky was able to steer his Shoah poems into print during and immediately after the Great Patriotic War (as the war against Nazi Germany and its allies became known in the Soviet Union), although he made compromises, some of them negotiating the official Soviet

views of Jewish victimhood.<sup>iv</sup> During the war, he experienced political repression, paying a high price for his poems about the war and Shoah.

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

\* \* \*

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

\* \* \*

Since my Moscow youth, both Eduard Bagritsky and Ilya Selvinsky have been among my favorite poets. My views of Bagritsky's poetry and Jewishness have evolved over the years, and I hope to revisit them before long. Having completed a book about Ilya Selvinsky as a principal Jewish-Russian poetic voice of the Soviet 1940s, I now realize that this volume is in a number of ways a sequel to my earlier book about Bagritsky and

Jewish-Russian poetic identity. It is, perhaps, fitting that this book not only tells the story of Selvinsky as a witness to the Nazi atrocities but also includes English translations of Selvinsky's major Shoah poems.

M.D.S

December 2011; April 2012; January 2013  
Brookline, Massachusetts

### NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

- ii. As an example of Selvinsky's cartoon captions, see, for instance, "Fashisty—o blagodarnost' sud'be..." *Syn otechestva* 20 October 1941.
- iii. I have previously discussed Selvinsky's experience as a Shoah poet; see Shrayner, "Jewish-Russian Holocaust Poetry in Official Soviet Venues: 1944-

1946 (Antokolsky, Ehrenburg, Ozerov),” paper delivered at the Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS) (Washington, 21 December 2008); “Ilya Selvinsky,” in *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature: Two Centuries of Dual Identity in Prose and Poetry, 1801-2001*, 2 vols., ed. Maxim D. Shrayer, 1: 226-227 (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2007); Shrayer, “Selvinskii, Ilia Lvovich,” in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2 vols., ed. Gershon David Hundert, 2: 1684-1685 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Shrayer, “Bearing Witness: The War, the Shoah and the Legacy of Vasily Grossman,” *The Jewish Quarterly* 217 (Spring 2011): 14-19; “Jewish-Russian Poets Bearing Witness to the Shoah, 1941-1946: Textual Evidence and Preliminary Conclusions,” in *Papers from the VIII World Congress of the International Council for Central and East European Studies, Stockholm, July 2010*, ed. Stefano Garzonio, 59-11 (Bologna: Portal on Central European and Balkan Europe, 2011). <http://www.iecob.net>.

For a detailed, albeit not exhaustive, bibliography of works by and about Selvinsky, see “Sel’vinskii, Il’ia L’vovich,” in *Russkie sovetskie pisateli. Poety (Sovetskii period). Bibliograficheskii ukazatel’*, vol. 23: 35-50 (St. Petersburg: Rossiiskaia natsional’naia biblioteka, 2000). The bibliography is missing some of the wartime publications. Selvinsky’s wartime poems with explicit Shoah and Jewish references include: “Evreiskomu narodu” (“To the Jewish People,” 1941); “Ia eto videl!” (“I Saw It!” 1942); “Kerch” (1942; pub. 1945); “Otvét Gebbel’su” (“A Reply to Goebbels,” 1942); “Sud v Krasnodare” (“A Trial in Krasnodar,” 1943; pub. 1945); “Krym” (“Kak boi barabana, kak golos kartechi...,” [“Like drumbeat, like the voice of canister shots...”] 1944, pub. 1945); “Krym” (“Byvaiut kraia, chto nedvizhny vekami...”) (“Crimea” [“There are regions unchanged by centuries...”], 1945; pub. 1962); *Kandava* (1945); “Sevastopol” (Sebastopol,” 1944; pub. 1945).

- iv. The primary published source of information about Selvinsky’s war years is Vera Babenko, *Voina glazami poeta: Krymskie stranitsy iz dnevnikov i pisem I. L. Sel’vinskogo* (Simferopol’: Krymskaia Akademiia gumanitarnykh nauk; Dom-muzei I. L. Sel’vinskogo, 1994). Babenko published—and commented on—extensive excerpts from Selvinsky’s wartime diaries and letters. However, her valuable publication contains a number of errors, including those in the dating of diary excerpts. Babenko’s book also includes Eduard Filat’ev’s article “Taina podpolkovnika Sel’vinskogo,” Babenko, 69-82. Filat’ev’s article does not contain a scholarly apparatus or use footnotes, and the sources of his information stand in need of further verification.

See also Liudmila Daineko’s investigation of Selvinsky’s war experience in Kerch, 1941-1942: “Sel’vinskii i Kerch. Noiabr’, 1941-mai, 1942,” in *Vestnik Krymskikh Chtenii I. L. Sel’vinskogo*, vol. 1, 63-71 (Simferopol’: Krymskii Arkhiv, 2002).

Parts of Selvinsky’s wartime diaries and a few of his wartime letters to family members have previously appeared; the largest selection, which for the

most part overlaps with the materials that Babenko quotes in *Voina glazama poeta*, appeared as Sel'vinskii, "Ia eto videl'" (*Krymskie stranitsy voennykh dnevnikov*), ed. Ts. A. Voskresenskaia and R. M. Goriunova, *Krym-90. Al'manakh*, 76-85 (Simferopol': Tavriia, 1990); see Sel'vinskii, "Na voine. Iz dnevnikov i pisem rodnym," ed. Ts. Voskresenskaia, *Novy mir* 12 (1984): 163-175.

Maurice Friedberg might have been the first Western scholar to mention Selvinsky's World War II "moving poems dealing with the tragic fate of Russian Jewry"; see Friedberg, "Selvinskii, Ilya Lvovich," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 14: 1137 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972). Benjamin Pinkus included Selvinsky in a short list of Jewish-Russian poets who wrote about the Shoah; see Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews 1948-1967: A Documentary Study*, 389 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Some of Selvinsky's poems about the Shoah have been identified in an entry in the Russian-language Jewish encyclopedia published in Israel; see "Sel'vinskii, Il'ia L'vovich," in *Kratkaia evreiskaia entsiklopediia*, vol. 7: 742-743 (Jerusalem: Obshchestvo po issledovaniuu evreiskikh obshchin; Evreiskii universitet v Ierusalime, 1994) [unsigned; entry by Mark Kipnis] and also in an entry in the recent Russian encyclopedia of the Shoah, M[aria] M. Al'tman, "Poeziia," in *Kholokost na territorii SSSR. Entsiklopediia*, 2nd ed., ed. I. A. Al'tman, 789 (Moscow: Rosspen, 2011). Ada Kolganova included "I Saw It!" in her anthology; see Sel'vinskii, "Ia eto videl'" in *Menora. Evreiskie motivy v russkoi poezii*, ed. Ada Kolganova, 130-134 (Moscow-Jerusalem: Evreiskii universitet v Moskve, 1993). Feliks Kandel' touches on Selvinsky's "I Saw It!" in the opening of his overview of the Soviet cultural response to the Shoah; see Kandel', "Ocherk shest'desiat chetvertyi. 'Chernaia kniga'. Deiateli kul'tury i Katastrofa," in *Kniga vremen i sobytii. Vol. 5. Istoriia evreev Sovetskogo Soiuz, 1939-1945*, <http://felixkandel.org/index.php/books/295.html>, last accessed 28 January 2012. In his recent book, *"I am to be read not from left to right but in Jewish: from right to left": The Poetics of Boris Slutsky* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011), Marat Grinberg comments on Selvinsky's experience as a Shoah poet. I read Harriet Murav's book, *Music from a Speeding Train: Jewish Literature in Post-Revolutionary Russia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), in November 2011 as I revised this manuscript for publication. I noted Murav's readings of three of Selvinsky's Shoah poems, "I Saw It!," "Tribunal in Krasnodar," and *Kandava* (Murav, 134; 154-165). I further noted the absence of references to "Kerch," Selvinsky's second principal poem about the Bagerovo anti-tank ditch massacre. Finally, I noted that Murav does not discuss Selvinsky's wartime troubles and punitive dismissal from the army.

For additional sources of information on Selvinsky's wartime years and Crimean connections, see M. F. Arkharova, "Vmeste s nami shli v nastuplenie stikhi Sel'vinskogo," in *O Sel'vinskom: vospominaniia*, ed. Ts. A. Voskresenskaia and I. P. Sirovinskii, 106-112 (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1982); "Avtory 'Boevoi Krymskoi,'" *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 6 May 1970: 5 [selection of interviews]; Vera Babenko and Vladislav Gavriiliuk, "Net, ia ne legkoi zhizn'iu zhil..." *Krymskie*

penaty 2 (1996): 88-107; D. Berezin, "Oruzhiem stikha," in *O Sel'vinskom*, ed. Ts. A. Voskresenskaia and I. P. Sirotinskaia, 101-105; I. A. Dobrovoľ'skaia, "Eshche moi brig ne trogalsia s prichala...": *O iunosti poeta Il'ii Sel'vinskogo* (Simferopol': Krymskaia akademiia gumanitarnykh nauk, 1999); Vera Katina, "Kazhdyi chelovek imeet pravo na tumannyi ugolok dushi' (evreiskaia tema v zhizni i tvorchestve Il'ii Sel'vinskogo)," in *Dolia evreis'kykh gromad tsentral'noi ta skhidnoi Evropy v pershii polovinye XX stolittia. Materialy konferentsii 6-28 serpnia 2003 r.*, Kyiv, <http://www.judaica.kiev.ua/Conference/Conf2003/46.htm>, last accessed 26 February 2011; Iakov Khelemskii, "Kurliandskaia vesna," in Voskresenskaia and Sirotinskaia, eds., *O Sel'vinskom*, 125-175; E. A. Nekrasova, "Voennaia zhurnalistika Il'ii Sel'vinskogo," in *Vestnik Krymskikh chtenii I. L. Sel'vinskogo*, vol. 2: 76-84 (Simferopol': Krymskii arkhiv, 2003); M. A. Novikova, "Zagadki biografii Il'ii Sel'vinskogo (nekotorye novye metody eksursionnoi raboty)," in *Vestnik Krymskikh chtenii I. L. Sel'vinskogo*, vol. 2: 95-101 (Simferopol': Krymskii arkhiv, 2003); Evdokiia Ol'shanskaia, "Mne zhizn' podarila vstrechi s poetom," *Zerkalo nedeli* (1998), <http://www.litera.ru/stixiya/articles/397.html>, last accessed 7 April 2010; Lev Ozerov, "Stakan okeana," in *O Sel'vinskom*, ed. Ts. A. Voskresenskaia and I. P. Sirotinskaia, 366-396; Lev Ozerov, "Il'ia Sel'vinskii, ego trudy i dni," in *Il'ia Sel'vinskii, Izbrannye proizvedeniia v dvukh tomakh*, ed. Ts. Voskresenskaia and I. Mikhailov, 2 vols., 1: 5-20 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1989); Osip Reznik, *Zhizn' v poezii: Tvorchestvo I. Sel'vinskogo* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1981); L. A. Rustemova, "Krymskii 'kontekst' I. Sel'vinskogo," in *I. L. Sel'vinskii i literaturnyi protsess XX veka. V mezhdunarodnaia nauchnaia konferentsiia, posviashchennaia 100-letiiu I. L. Sel'vinskogo. Materialy* 73-80 (Simferopol': Krymskii arkhiv, 2000); Margarita Shitova, "Neiasnaia bol' nadezhdy," *Krymskie izvestiia*, 4 November 2006, <http://www-ki.rada.crimea.ua/nomera/2006/205/bol.html>, last accessed 7 April 2010; Mikhail Solomatina, "My eto videli," *Zhurnal Mikhaila Solomatina*, 21 October 2009, <http://mike67.livejournal.com/261554.html>, last accessed 29 June 2010; David Shraer-Petrov, "Karaimskie pirozhki. Il'ia Sel'vinskii," in David Shraer-Petrov, *Vodka s pirozhnymi: roman s pisateliami*, 272-282 (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2007); P. P. Sviridenko, "Stroka poeta v boevom stroiu (Iz frontovykh vospominanii)," in *O Sel'vinskom*, ed. Ts. A. Voskresenskaia and I. P. Sirotinskaia, 115-121. See also Evgenii Evtushenko, "Nesostoiavshiisia velikii. Il'ia Sel'vinskii," *Novye izvestiia* 24 March 2006, <http://www.newizv.ru/culture/2006-03-24/43038-nesostojavshijsja-velikij.html>, last accessed 10 April 2011. For a useful overview of Selvinsky's political troubles and censorial difficulties in 1943-1946, see P. S. Reifman, "Glava piataia: Vtoraia mirovaia. Chast' vtoraia," in P. S. Reifman, *Iz istorii russkoi, sovetskoi i postsovetskoi tsenzury*. [http://www.gumer.info/bibliotek\\_Buks/History/reifm/16.php](http://www.gumer.info/bibliotek_Buks/History/reifm/16.php), last accessed 6 April 2010. To the best of my knowledge, Herman Ermolaev was the first Western scholar to discuss Selvinsky's wartime troubles in the context of Soviet censorship. See Ermolaev, *Censorship in Soviet Literature, 1917-1991*, 73-74 (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997).

## CHAPTER ONE

### SELVINSKY ON THE SHOAH BY BULLET

#### *1. Selvinsky before the War: Poetics and Politics*

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

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1 On Selvinsky's command of Yiddish, Tatyana Selvinskaya, Personal Interview, Simferopol, 15 December 2011.

2 Vera Katina and Marina Novikova recently investigated Jewish aspects of Selvinsky's childhood and early youth. See Katina, "Kazhdyi chelovek imeet pravo...."; Novikova, "Zagadki biografii Il'ia Sel'vinskogo."

to Constantinople, Turkey, where Selvinsky briefly attended school at the French Catholic mission. As a young man Selvinsky had his share of adventures, ranging from wrestling in the circus and working as a sailor, a longshoreman, and an itinerant actor to participating in the Civil War (first, briefly, in an anarchist troop, later in the the Red Army). He published his first poem in 1915, and in the 1920s experimented with the use of Yiddishisms and thieves' lingo in Russian verse.<sup>3</sup> In 1923, Selvinsky graduated in law from Moscow University.

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



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

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

3 Yuri Tynyanov first spoke about Selvinsky's "new intonation" in the article "Interval" (1924). See Iu. N. Tynianov, "Promezhutok," in *Poetika, Istoriiia literatury*. Kino, ed. V. A. Kaverin, A. S. Miasnikov, 7 (Moscow: Nauka, 1977).

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

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

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4 Aleksandr Revich, “Sedoe s detstva pokoleni’e,” in Il’ia Sel’vinskii. *Iz pepla, iz poem, iz snovidenii*, ed. A. M. Revich, 15 (Moscow: Vremia, 2004).

5 Lazar’ Fleishman, *Boris Pasternak v tridtsatye gody*, 12-14 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press/Hebrew University, 1984). Fleishman quotes from the memoirs of Mariia Ioffe.

6 Viacheslav Polonskii, *Ocherki literaturnogo dvizheniia revoliutsionnoi epokhi*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 46 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, 1929).

Selvinsky's polemic and rivalry with Vladimir Mayakovsky was one of the highlights of the Soviet literary scene in the late 1920s, while his grudging recantation of the Constructivist program in 1930-1931 did not earn him much trust from the regime.

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

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

7 Il'ia Sel'vinskii, *Tushinskii lager'*, *Zerkalo* 15-16 (2000), <http://magazines.russ.ru/zerkalo/2000/15/14selv.html>, last accessed 20 February 2012.

derstanding of history,”<sup>8</sup> and remained unpublished until 2000, when Selvinsky’s daughter, the visual artist and poet Tatyana Selvinskaya, unearthed it from the archive and offered it to a Russian-Israeli journal for publication. One of the play’s principal subtexts is S. An-sky’s *The Dibbuk* (1911-1919), which in and of itself is a remarkable fact for a Soviet play written in 1930 for the stage. In a short appreciation of Selvinsky that appeared as a preface to *The Tushino Camp*, the Russian-Israeli critic Aleksandr Goldshtein noted:

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

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

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

9 Aleksandr Gol’dshstein, “O Sel’vinskom,” *Zerkalo* 15-16 (2000), <http://magazines.russ.ru/zerkalo/2000/15/14selv.html>, last accessed 20 February 2012.

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

11 Arlen Blum, “Index librorum prohibitorum russkikh pisatelei,” Part 4, *NLO* 62 (2003), <http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2003/62/blum.html>, last accessed 19 September 2011.

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

When in 1928 my *Fur Trade* came out, Kerzhentsev raised a scream in the newspapers [Platon Kerzhentev was at the time Deputy Chief of the Directorate of Propaganda and Agitation of the Central Committee of the Communist Party], that it was supposedly the intelligentsia's claim to power. All newspapers picked up this scream and turned it into a call for action. Then I wrote a letter to *Komsomolskaya Pravda* [*Komsomol'skaia Pravda*] —“A Reply to Comrade Kerzhentsev”—in which I strenuously objected to his thesis. [...] Naturally *Komsomolskaya Pravda* did not print the letter but forwarded it to Kerzhentsev.”<sup>12</sup>

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

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

I did not expect such cynicism and was literally stunned. I said many insolent things to K. and then left.<sup>13</sup>

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

12 Selvinsky, *Wartime Diaries*, 20 May 1945.

13 Selvinsky, *Wartime Diaries*, 20 May 1945.

influence or at least inform official Soviet rhetoric. Selvinsky's ideological bets with history, some of which in retrospect appear both naïve and miscalculated, did not serve him well with Stalin and his henchmen.

Throughout the 1930s, Selvinsky's official status proved to be precarious while he continued to enjoy great literary acclaim. The (found-ing) First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers, which convened in August-September 1934 in Moscow, offers ample evidence of Selvinsky's position. In the proceedings of the congress, Selvinsky's name was the fourth-most-frequently evoked of all the living Soviet poets, trailing Boris Pasternak's and Nikolai Tikhonov's, and closely competing with Nikolay Aseev's. At the congress Nikolai Bukharin, one of the leading Bolsheviks and editor-in-chief of the daily *Izvestia*, delivered a long speech about poetry. At the time Bukharin, whose career had entered a downward spiral in 1928-1929 and would eventually end with his purging in 1938, still wielded much influence, not least in the realm of literary politics. To "Tikhonov, Selvinsky, Pasternak," the three poets fatefully conjoined in a poetic line by Eduard Bagritsky, Bukharin added Nikolay Aseev, labeling Pasternak, Selvinsky, Tikhonov, and Aseev as the four living Soviet poets of "the very highest caliber" who influenced the poetic scene in "the most decisive fashion." Bukharin praised Pasternak's originality and mastery most highly, yet favored Selvinsky's longer and shorter poetry with an almost equal enthusiasm: "I. Selvinsky is to a certain measure B. Pasternak's antipode. He is a poet with a big poetic voice, seeking to burst out to the expanses of wide roads, mass scenes, where one hears screaming, where horses stomp their hooves, where a dashing song is pouring out, where enemies fight, where a living life is boiling and where history kneads its tough dough." Bukharin also chided Selvinsky, if gently, for sometimes "failing his own directive" and substituting "rhymed factory wall newspaper" for "attempts [...] at vast canvasses." Bukharin closed the Selvinsky section of his speech by calling him "an undoubtedly revolutionary, very big, real—and at that cultured—master of verse."<sup>14</sup>

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

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14 See Bukharin's speech in I. K. Luppel et al., eds., *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s'ezd sovetskikh pisatelei. 1934. Stenograficheskiy otchet*, 479-503 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo "Khudozhestvennaia literatura", 1934; Rpt. Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1990).

some of the ideologically more orthodox and formally inferior poets.<sup>15</sup> The response to Bukharin's poetry speech in fact adumbrated a turn in Stalinist cultural policy after the First Congress; as Fleishman notes, "from the autumn of 1934 Bukharin's speech was being referenced in a markedly negative fashion."<sup>16</sup> Selvinsky's unapologetic remarks at the First Congress sum up his stance: "I consider the main challenge of working in poetry [the fact] that the wide reading public absorbs the new verse with difficulty. Take any thought, express it in normal human speech, and everybody understands. Yet the poet speaks in an abnormal, rhythmical language. [...] But the trouble is that the critics do not promote our wealth among the masses [Selvinsky uses this expression to refer to the achievements of Soviet poetry]."<sup>17</sup>

From the late 1920s and throughout the rest of his life, its middle part intersecting with the years of Stalin's rule, Selvinsky advanced an artistic platform that could be described by three ideological-aesthetic principles. He argued, through thick and thin, that artistic form must be experimental, and that Soviet art must possess a complex structure and texture. He emphasized that the *narodnost'* (here understood as an artistic sense of nationhood or peoplehood) of Soviet literature cannot be restricted to the interests and aspirations of workers and peasants and must give voice and form to the intelligentsia. Finally Selvinsky warned, sometimes through his criticism of other authors, that Russian cultural chauvinism threatens not only the ideology of Soviet national unity but also the development of Soviet art.<sup>18</sup>

As a young poet Selvinsky was so impressed with *Das Kapital* that he added the name Karl to his first name and for a long period of time signed his works "Eli-Karl Selvinsky," a form binding together his wor-

15 See Surkov's speech in Luppol et al., *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s'ezd sovetskikh pisatelei. 1934*, 512-514; see also Aleksandr Eshanov, "V preddverii zamysla," *Alef* 991 (2009), <http://www.alefmagazine.com/pub1917.html>, last accessed 29 January 2012; Valentin Domil', "Zvezdy i ternii Il'i Sel'vinskogo. Evreiskii vopros 'korolia poetov,'" *Sekretnyi portal. Zhurnal Vladimira Pletinskogo* 16 April 2010, <http://velelens.livejournal.com/45472.html>, accessed 29 January 2012.

16 Fleishman, *Boris Pasternak*, 219.

17 See Selvinsky's speech in Luppol et al., *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s'ezd sovetskikh pisatelei. 1934*, 554-557.

18 Selvinsky's position comes across very clearly in his letter to Ilya Ehrenburg of 25 November 1956, expounding upon and explaining his own polemical article "Sense of Nationhood and Poetry" (1956), which in turn had been occasioned by Ehrenburg's article "On the Poems of Boris Slutsky" (1956); both articles had appeared in *Literary Gazette*. See Selvinsky, Letter to Ehrenburg, 25 November 1956 in B. Ia. Frezinskii, ed., *Pochta Il'i Erenburga. Ia slyshu vse...1916-1967*, 331-334 (Moscow: Agraf, 2006); Il'a Erenburg, "O stikhakh Borisa Slutskogo," *Literaturnaia gazeta* 8 July 1956; Sel'vinskii, "Narodnost' i poeziia," *Literaturnaia gazeta* 18 October 1956.

ship of Marx with the traditional style of Jewish double or hyphenated first names.<sup>19</sup> (In Isaac Babel's story of 1931, a Jewish boy is given the name "Karl-Yankel"—after Karl Marx and Jacob the Patriarch—and is secretly circumcised by his grandmother). As late as in his 1940s identification papers, Selvinsky's full name still appears as "Ilya-Karl Lvovich Selvinsky." A blazing modernist and a classicist, an intellectual and an artist, a Marxist by heart's conviction, a Jew, a Russian, and a Soviet, like an icebreaker Selvinsky pressed for a navigational path of his own. He tried to take cues from the regime, yet insisted on his inalienable right to an aesthetic of his own, and also on featuring members of the intelligentsia, and not workers and peasants, as his chosen heroes.

Characteristic is the story of the creation of Selvinsky's epic work based on his participation, as a special correspondent for *Pravda*, in the SS *Chelyuskin* Arctic expedition of 1933-1934.



2. Ilya Selvinsky (second from left) with fellow participants of the SS Chelyuskin expedition. Murmansk. Circa August 1933. (Courtesy of Tatyana Selvinskaya.)

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19 About Selvinsky's hyphenated first name see, for instance, Tssetsiliia Voskresenskaia, "Oproverzhenie," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 27.1-2 (1995): 281-282. In the poem "Youth" ("Iunost'," 1920) and elsewhere in poetry Selvinsky wrote of studying Karl Marx in his youth.

Selvinsky began work on the epic poem *Chelyuskiniana* in 1934, soon after his return from the expedition, which ended with the sinking of the ship and the survival of its crew. Selvinsky and a small group of comrades had left the expedition earlier upon the order of the leader, the Polar explorer Otto Shmidt. Shmidt later came to Selvinsky's defense when unfounded public charges and rumors of cowardice were leveled against the poet.<sup>20</sup> Still, Selvinsky's aborted participation in the expedition became something of a pretext for an orchestrated critical campaign against him and his writings. This campaign reached a peak at the February 1937 Pushkin Plenary Meeting of the Governing Body of the Union of Soviet Writers. The Pushkin Plenary Meeting, as Fleishman has shown, became the forum for the dismantling of what one might call the Bukharin line in Soviet literature, and Pasternak and Selvinsky were the principal targets.<sup>21</sup> In his response, quoted in the Soviet press as an example of his allegedly disingenuous attempts to portray himself as a "victim" of ostracism (which he was), Selvinsky said: "It is bitter for me to realize that I, a thirty-seven-year-old adult, a healthy, physically strong, absolutely Soviet man, have no creative perspectives whatsoever. I know in advance that whatever I would write, there would always be people who would pull four lines from me and cover with spit whatever I do."<sup>22</sup>

In fact, Selvinsky had been having a hard time publishing his Arctic epic. In 1936 he placed short excerpts in newspapers, and part one appeared in the January 1937 issue of *Novy Mir*. Then the publication was stalled for a year. There were several factors behind Selvinsky's difficulties. It did not go unnoticed that Selvinsky's epic refused to concoct a proletarian or peasant hero. As Susanne Frank recently argued, "Selvinsky's long poem turns Otto Iulievich Shmidt into a prototype of a Soviet hero, Stalin's envoy, juxtaposed to the Norwegian conqueror of the South and North poles Amundsen. [...] The epic's other heroic figure is the radio operator [Ernst] Krenkel [...]"<sup>23</sup> Neither Shmidt nor Krenkel is an ethnic Russian, and both have foreign, Germanic names. However, it appears that the main reason for the publishing difficulties stemmed

20 O[tto] Iu. Shmidt, "Pisateli na 'Cheliuskine'," *Literaturnaia gazeta* 28 June 1934.

21 See Fleishman, *Boris Pasternak*, 196-199.

22 "Na pushkinskom plenumе pravleniia Soiuzа sovetskikh pisatelei," *Izvestiia* 27 February 1937, quoted in Fleishman, *Boris Pasternak*, 399.

23 Siuzanna Frank [Susanne Frank], "Teplaia Arktika: k istorii odnogo starogo literaturnogo motiva," tr. Tatiana Lastovka, *NLO* 108 (2011), <http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2011/108/fr7.html>, last accessed 29 January 2012.

from the sections of the epic devoted to Stalin, and to Selvinsky's approach to praising the Soviet leader. Although different in verse texture and voice, this approach may be likened to the one Boris Pasternak attempted in his four-part cycle "The Artist" published in *Izvestia* on 1 January 1936. There Stalin, although unnamed, appeared as an "artist" of history. The quality of Pasternak's and Selvinsky's verse, the loftiness of Pasternak's allegory in the Stalin cycle, and the might of Selvinsky's epic voice in the Stalin pages of *Chelyuskiniana* had the potential to lend more aesthetic validity to the tyrant than hundreds of cultist hymns, and yet neither work had struck its goal.<sup>24</sup>

This brings us to the 28 December 1937 report on Selvinsky's *Chelyuskiniana* sent to three Soviet leaders by Lev Mekhlis,<sup>25</sup> then a member of Stalin's inner circle. The note was addressed to the Soviet Premier and Politburo member Vyacheslav Molotov, to Lazar Kaganovich, Politburo member and one of Stalin's closest party generals, and to Andrei Zhdanov, Secretary of the Central Committee and Leningrad party boss after the murder of Sergey Kirov in 1934. Selvinsky had complained to Molotov about the difficulties he experienced with his epic work, and Mekhlis was responding to Molotov's consequent inquiry. In 1930-1937 Mekhlis had been editor of *Pravda*, and was afterward appointed Deputy People's Commissar of Defense and Chief of the Army's Political Directorate (PUR). Mekhlis's note is a fascinating document which shows the extent to which Selvinsky was known and knowable to the top echelon of the Stalinist leadership:<sup>26</sup>

In connection with the note by the poet Selvinsky addressed to comrade Molotov, I have the following to

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- 24 Neither Pasternak's nor Selvinsky's 1930s poetry about Stalin was selected for the 1936 anthology *Poems and Songs about Stalin*, which featured sycophantic texts by such talented Russian-language poets as Nikolay Zabolotsky and Aleksandr Prokofiev and poetry translated from a number of languages of the USSR, including many from Georgian and two from Yiddish. See Efim Zozulia and Aleksandr Chachikov, eds., *Stikhi i pesni o Staline* (Moscow: Zhurnal'nogazetnoe ob'edinenie, 1937); see also Fleishman, *Boris Pasternak*, 284-285.
- 25 In his recent book about Mekhlis, engaging albeit tainted by an anti-Jewish prejudice, Iurii Rubtsov makes no mention of Mekhlis's 1937 note on Selvinsky or of Mekhlis's subsequent encounters with Selvinsky, including those at the Crimean war theater in 1942; see Iu. V. Rubtsov, *Mekhlis. Ten' vozhdia* (Moscow: Veche, 2011).
- 26 Evgeny Dobrenko, in his study of the "forging of the Soviet writer," touches on Selvinsky's engagement with the regime and on the attention paid to Selvinsky by the apparatus of Soviet censorship. See Evgenii Dobrenko, *Formovka sovetskogo pisatel'ia: Sotsial'nye i esteticheskie istoki sovetskoi literaturnoi kul'tury* (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 1999), 450, 476, and passim.

report. [...] A chapter in the long poem *Chelyuskiniana* is devoted to a literary portrait of comrade Stalin. Previously Selvinsky negotiated [the publication of this long poem]. At the time *Pravda* did not agree to print the [submitted] version of the long poem. That which Selvinsky is now passing for a long poem about comrade Stalin differs radically from the original text. The author has either deleted or modified the most atrocious, illiterate places. [...] It would be difficult for me to quote in a letter everything that Selvinsky has corrected, as this would take up a huge amount of space. I shall quote only the most characteristic [excerpts]. [...] The part, concerning a description of how comrade Stalin walked through a [military] formation, has been radically re-done by the author. I would not say that it is entirely satisfactory. [...] Selvinsky is a formalist [a very negative Soviet term referring to active formal quest in literature and the arts—MDS], he writes in a language completely unintelligible to the masses. [...] Even in the latest version of the long poem about Stalin, substantially corrected, he all the time dubs Stalin “Soso” [Georgian diminutive of Stalin’s first name—MDS]. [...] Of Stalin’s appearance at the first congress of collective farms [First All-Union Congress of Collective Farm Shock Brigadiers, 1933] he writes this way: “There sits a man with the face of a portrait.” Thereafter he continues: “Touched with drumbeat, a rough-hewn face.” [...] There are good instances in the long poem, but on the whole it is written in such a language that it is difficult to read it. The mass reading public will not understand many places; some are marked by ambiguity. I suppose that Selvinsky needs to work on the long poem some more, mainly in the direction of turning it into a work accessible to the mass reading public.”<sup>27</sup>

27 L[ev] Mekhlis, “[Zapiska] Molotovu, Kaganovichu, Zhdanovu opoeme Sel’vinskogo ‘Cheliuskiniana.’ 28 December 1937,” Fond Aleksandra N. Iakovleva, <http://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/fond/issues-doc/1015940>, accessed 29 January 2012.

Did Mekhlis recognize a connection between Selvinsky's refusal to portray Stalin in a simplistically cultist fashion and the centrality of verbal technique in Selvinsky's poetry? Several days later Molotov wrote a short (and slightly ungrammatical) resolution on Mekhlis's report: "To comrades Kaganovich and Zhdanov: In the least this much needs to be done without allowing into print the 'long poem' and without a new scrutiny of it."<sup>28</sup> Excerpts from part two and part three of *Chelyskiniana* appeared in the leading monthlies *Novy Mir* and *October (Oktiabr')* in 1938, but Selvinsky was unable to publish a complete text of the revised and re-revised text of his "epic poem about Stalin."<sup>29</sup> In 1957 a further reworked version, titled *Arctic: A Novel*, was published in Thaw-era Moscow, stripped of its Stalinist sections. The revisions of *Arctic* were part of Selvinsky's larger postwar project of revamping his epic poems, whereby a lot of the intricacy, poignancy, and originality was purged from his texts.<sup>30</sup>

In the 1930s Selvinsky was twice targeted by separate party resolutions. On 21 April 1937, the Politburo issued the resolution "Concerning Selvinsky's play *Umka the Polar Bear*." Stick and carrot, carrot and stick were applied to some of the leading Soviet writers in the 1930s, and Selvinsky was among them. In 1938 he was decorated with the Order of the Red Banner of Labor. On 4 August 1939, on the eve of World War II, Selvinsky was chastised in the resolution of the Orgburo of the Central Committee titled "On the Magazine *October* and Poems by I. L. Selvinsky," and his poems were deemed "anti-artistic and harmful."<sup>31</sup>

Despite the official denunciations, in 1938-41 Selvinsky was professor at the Literary Institute in Moscow and poetry editor at *October*, and a principal mentor to the younger generation of Soviet poets, the

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28 Mekhlis, "[Zapiska] Molotovu, Kaganovichu, Zhdanovu o poeme Sel'vinskogo 'Cheliuskiniana.' 28 December 1937."

29 See "Selvinskii, Il'ia Lvovich," in *Bibliograficheskii ukazatel'*, 39; Frank.

30 Selvinskii, *Arktika. Roman* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1957).

31 See Andrei Artizov, Oleg Naumov, eds., *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsia: dokumety TsK RKP(b)-VKP(b), VChK-OGPU-NKVD o kul'turnoi politike, 1917-1953 gg.*, 359; 430; 433 (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond "Demokratiia", 1999); D. L. Babichenko, "Literaturnyi front". *Istoriia politicheskoi tsenzury 1932-1946 gg. Sbornik dokumentov*, 22; 40 (Moscow: Entsiklopediia rossiiskikh dereven', 1994); see also Babenko and Gavriluk. See a discussion of Selvinsky's position in the late 1930s by the poet Vladimir Kornilov. Kornilov brings to light a critique of Selvinsky by the then-young and relatively unknown Konstantin Simonov, published in *Literary gazette* on 15 January 1938. Simonov argued that Selvinsky needs to "seek a path to the heart of the mass reader." See Kornilov, "Dvoe. Kniazhii vnuk i vnuchka prachki," [http://www.chukfamily.ru/Lidia/Biblio/kornilov\\_dvoe.htm](http://www.chukfamily.ru/Lidia/Biblio/kornilov_dvoe.htm), last accessed 29 January 2012.

generation of Lev Ozerov (1914-1996), David Samoilov (1920-1990), and Boris Slutsky (1919-1986). In 1939-40 when, following the outbreak of World War II and then during the Soviet-Finnish War, Soviet writers were given military ranks, Selvinsky was made *intendant* second class (an administrative non-combat rank corresponding to major or battalion commissar).<sup>32</sup>



3. Ilya Selvinsky with his family members. Moscow. April 1941 Left to right: Selvinsky, wife Berta, stepdaughter Tsetsiliya, mother-in-law Anna Moiseevna; with the back to the camera: daughter Tatyana. (Courtesy of Tatyana Selvinskaya.)

At the time of the Nazi invasion Selvinsky may have remained, as Tatyana Selvinskaya reminisced, an “ardent admirer of Stalin.”<sup>33</sup> Selvinsky’s diaries and private letters bear out the notion of Selvinsky’s faith in the Soviet system much more than they simply expose his ardent Stalinism. Selvinsky kept going back and forth in his assessment of

32 See Filat’ev, 70.

33 Tatyana Selvinskaya, Personal Interview, Simferopol, 15 December 2011.

Stalin and of how to write and not to write about Stalin. The war and the Shoah put to the final test Selvinsky's vision of Stalin, of Soviet history, and of his own triple identity.

## 2. *The Nazi Invasion and the Frontlines*

In the 1930s, the reaction of Jewish-Russian poets to Nazism was muted at best and virtually absent at worst. In the USSR, poets were not having an easy time confronting the growing misfortunes of European Jewry or placing antifascist verses with specific Jewish references in Soviet publications. In 1936 Ilya Selvinsky traveled to Berlin and composed—perhaps concocted says it better—poems of political protest, including two short satires of Nazi Germany's anti-Jewish climate: "Antisemites" and "The Jewish Question." In "The Jewish Question," a brown-clad doorman first proclaims that no songs by "the Jew Heine" would be performed in a Berlin café, then mutters a song with Heine's lyrics—as though unaware of the irony of his performance. Selvinsky's poems based on his impressions from this visit to Berlin would remain unpublished until 1956.<sup>34</sup>

The outbreak of World War II and the Soviet annexation of Eastern Poland, North Bukovina, and the Baltic areas with their still-unSovietized Jewish populations did not elicit a response from Selvinsky. Had he and the vast majority of the Jewish-Russian poets in the USSR—Ilya Ehrenburg and the young Boris Slutsky excepting—not been aching to write about the looming tragedy west of the Soviet borders? This question is not easy to answer without a degree of speculation. We can definitely observe that in the atmosphere of the first weeks and months of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, which were quite disastrous for

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34 See Il'ia Sel'vinskii, "Antisemitizm"; "Evreiskii vopros," in *Izbrannnye proizvedeniia*, 2 vols., 1: 155; 156 (Moscow: Goslitdat, 1956); cf. Il'ia Sel'vinskii, *O vremeni, o sud'bakh, o liubvi*, 69-70 (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1962). In a letter dated 9 June 1936 and sent from Paris to Nikolai Bukharin in Moscow, Ehrenburg reacted to the official displeasure with Selvinsky's work: "Why would one first send Selvinsky abroad, and then print in the newspaper that this is 'gallimaufry'? The fascists quote our papers and ask the leftist intelligentsia: 'Is this what you applauded a month ago' and so forth"; see I. G. Erenburg, *Pis'ma*, ed. B. Ia. Frezinskii, 2: 222 (Moscow: Agraf, 2004). The political context surrounding the composition of Selvinsky's "The Jewish Question" is very briefly discussed in Rainer Grübel, "Genij-Geije. Zur Struktur und zur Strukturbildenen Funktion eines Reims in dem Gedicht 'Evreiskij vopros' von Il'ja Sel'vinskij." *Die Welt der Slaven* 18 (1973): 183-184.