

Russian Jews in the Turmoil of History: Three Ages of Stalinism

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Today I will discuss the life and works of Peretz Markish, Julius Margolin and Yevgenia Ginzburg. Why have I chosen to present these three figures of the Jewish literary world among so many others? First of all, because I like them very much; but also because they represent, each in their own way, the Jewish intellectual destinies of the 20th century. Through them, one can study not only literature, but also history. We will therefore try to grasp the links between literature and history, because bringing these three figures together also raises the question: how does this history, the history of the Jews under Stalin, take shape in literature?

One of the reasons to gather them in this presentation is to present a community of destinies, insofar as all three are victims of Stalinist terror. But they are different in their identity, intellectual and aesthetic choices. Comparing their itineraries amounts to asking if (and how) the question of Jewish identity is expressed in their writings and, more broadly, in the Soviet world in the face of repression.

All three were born more or less with the dawn of the century (Peretz Markish in 1894, Julius Margolin in 1900, Yevgenia Ginzburg in 1904), that is, in the Russian Empire. All three originated from the western borderlands of the empire. In this sense, their trajectory reflects not only Soviet history, but also the geography of the Russian Empire, where Jews were confined to so-called residential zones. The majority of Russian Jews were therefore concentrated in the territories of present-day Ukraine, Belarus and the Baltic countries, which were then part of the empire. Peretz Markish was born in Pollonoye, a town in Volhynia, now in Ukraine; Margolin in Pinsk, now in Belarus. Ginzburg was born in Moscow and her family then moved to Kazan, but her parents came from Vilno and Grodno. They belong to that central and eastern European multiculturalism that was gradually destroyed during the 20th century, first by Sovietization, then by the Holocaust, and finally by the post-war Stalinist purges.

In his novel *The Five*, set in Odessa at the beginning of the 20th century, Vladimir Jabotinsky paints a picture of the decline of the traditional Russian Jewish world based on the example of a family. The five children represent five typical Jewish fates, five paths. What were the possibilities open to Russian Jews at the beginning of the 20th century? To emigrate, to engage in the revolution, to assimilate until sometimes converting to Christianity, to try to preserve the world that is leaving, or to die. Like Sholom Aleichem in *Tevya the Milkman*, Jabotinsky chooses five characters, five young people in conflict with their elders, within a new world which, even before the revolution, threatens

Jewish life in large urban centers like Odessa But how much more so in the shtetls, the small Jewish towns, which the onset of industrialization and social upheavals leave on the margins of modernity.

I have chosen three writers, not five, but their example shows how they navigate between these five models by negotiating different identities over the course of their lives. They grope and search for themselves according to the upheavals of history. They emigrate, then come back (Markish, Margolin). The period following the revolution is propitious to hesitations about identity. Russian Jewish lives (perhaps all Jewish lives) are lives in broken lines, always "other," not only in relation to non-Jewish fellow citizens, not only in relation to other Jewish lives, but often in relation to one's own. Despite the difficulty of comparing our three writers, in some ways they are similar in the very differences that separate them, for these differences are also characteristic of **Jewish destinies**.

Each has confronted the choices Jabotinsky describes in his book, each in his own way. Markish received a traditional Jewish education (he studied in a *heder*, a Jewish school, sang in the synagogue choir). He is upset, shaken, fascinated by the February and then by the October revolution, and goes so far as to say that these events justify the creation of the world! But just like Mayakovsky, whom he admires, he does not see in the Revolution an event that is only political. For him, it is first of all an aesthetic event, not only global and social, but also personal and intimate. He appropriates it, integrates it into his poetic universe. This event changes his identity as a poet because he then starts writing and publishing in Yiddish (after beginning his work in Russian): this is his contribution to the Revolution.

Yevgenia Ginzburg was born into a family of assimilated pharmacists. She does not receive a Jewish education. A teenager at the time of the revolution, she fully engaged in communism. If geographically she is cut off from the traditional Jewish world, the shtetl, the cities of the empire with a high concentration of Jewish population, the universe where she grew up and engaged in the construction of communism is also a multicultural universe. Kazan, an important city on the Volga River, today the capital of Tatarstan, was a great center of Muslim culture with a large Tatar population which has been, moreover, a victim of Stalinist repression.

Margolin also came from an assimilated, mostly Russian-speaking family, but his family has not lost all ties with tradition. Pesach was celebrated (in an abbreviated version), but ham was eaten. He evolves in an environment where he hears, in addition to Russian, Polish, Belarusian and Yiddish. The choice of writing language will be dictated by the revelation of reading Gogol. He decided to study in Berlin, at the faculty of philosophy, to get away from the family, then settled in Lodz, in then-newly-independent Poland. He emigrated to Palestine in 1936 without, however, cutting his links with Poland, where he unfortunately found himself in August 1939.

Our three writers are—and here again we find one of the themes sketched by Jabotinsky—at odds with their families, attitude representative of the conflicts between fathers and sons who were then crossing the Jewish world. By joining the revolution, Markish did not betray his social class, because he came from a poor family—his mother sold herrings and his father was a Jewish teacher, a *melamed*—but he broke with the tradition of the Jewish faith in which he was brought up. Margolin was in conflict with his father who violently criticized everything he wrote and did not understand his choice of Zionism¹. Ginzburg remained close to her family. (Her father was arrested as a relative

¹ Julius Margolin, *Eight Chapters on Childhood*.

of an enemy of the people and, although released, died as a result of this arrest. Her mother was an immense support for her during her detention.) But by her choice of life, through her involvement in communism, she broke with an important aspect of Jewish life to which her parents still belonged.

Conflicts between fathers and sons or daughters have existed since the beginning of time. They do not only concern Jews. In the whole empire, they take on a political meaning and announce the disappearance of the old world, of Russia, soon to be replaced by the USSR. This is not a soft disappearance, it will be at the price of blood, of countless victims. In the Jewish world, filiation, continuity, and community life are the very condition of the survival of the people; that is why these conflicts convey more radical and vital issues. The choices made by Jewish sons and daughters affect not only individual and family existence, but also that of the community². Moreover, despite the conflict with the father's generation, the three writers affirmed in their own way—a way elders sometimes did not understand—their loyalty to the community. Markish returned to the USSR from Paris believing that it was the best place for Jewish culture to flourish. Margolin chose Zionism, believing, like many others, Jabotinsky and his Revisionist-Zionist party, that Jews had no future in Europe. For Ginzburg, the community was the entire Soviet Union, with no difference in nationality: its communism was a universalist communism, which united everyone. In prison, she recalled her revolutionary childhood, which she considered exceptional because of the strength of union that the communist idea carried within her. She wrote:

After each chapter we read, we indulge in sweet childhood memories. After all, we have had it like no one before us or after us. Revolutionary childhood. Even a poster with a huge louse calling to fight against typhoid seems to us now to have a high poetic halo; and our first student self-management! And the first demonstration, when we walked, with wet feet, having holes in our shoes, but carried the slogan we had composed ourselves: “The School of Labor and Joy welcomes the Soviet power!”

Markish and Margolin were nomadic spirits. Markish traveled the roads and different cities of southern Russia with his Jewish choir. He left the house where he was born at a very young age and had a multitude of small jobs (in a bank, as a teacher, etc.). His poorly educated family could not afford and did not see the need to pay for his studies. So, he joined the newly founded Shanyavsky People's University in Moscow. In 1916, he was sent to the front in the Imperial Army for the First World War. After a year, he was demobilized because he was wounded and completely traumatized. He then returned to live with his parents in Ekaterinoslav (where Margolin also lived for a time). At the same time, he wrote poems, then short stories, in Yiddish in the local newspapers.

In 1918 he joined a group of young poets in Kyiv, among them, David Gofshtein, Leib Kvitko, Osheroff Schwartzman. He moved for a time to Moscow before leaving for Warsaw, at the end of 1921, where he was sent by the *evseksiia* of Ukraine to carry out communist propaganda. There he helped found the Yiddish modernist movement through his participation in the literary group Khalyaster (The Gang), with Uri Zvi Grindberg and Melech Ravitch. The group sought to break the boundaries between the arts (following the European movement of the synthesis of the arts), and to precipitate the advent of a new world. The anthology published by Khalyaster in 1922 marked

² The Yiddish writer H. Leivick has beautifully depicted this conflict in his book *Oyf Tsarisher katorge* [at the Tsarist Penal Colony].

Warsaw as the capital of Yiddish modernism in Europe. The second and last edition of *Khalyaster* was published in Paris in 1924 with an illustration on the cover by Marc Chagall, a friend of Markish. From 1921 to 1926, Markish lived successively in Warsaw, Berlin, Paris, London, Rome. He went to Palestine in 1923, but came back disappointed. He settled down only in 1926, in Moscow, after a short time in Kharkov. The Soviet State, in fact, looked down on any wandering.

Margolin's life was devoted to nomadism since childhood. His father was a provincial doctor, an official of the empire, and the family was constantly moving from city to city, from shtetl to shtetl. Stations and trains became a second home for Margolin, which in retrospect appeared to him as an anticipation of his destiny as a displaced person. In his book *Eight Chapters on Childhood*, he recounts how, overcome with anguish, he started shouting: "I want to go to the station! I want to take the train!" just as other children may shout, "I want to go home!" Berlin, where he studied, Lodz, where he later settled, Tel Aviv, where he emigrated, then, after the return from the Gulag, Lodz again, Paris, Marseille, Tel Aviv—These are his "stations." It is in terms of journey that he describes his detention and it is again the traveler who will relate the return, during which he retraced the path he took during his deportation.

Julius Margolin came from a Polish, Yiddish and Russian culture, and held a doctorate in philosophy from Berlin. He called upon the three cultures—in his case, deeply rooted in the European literary tradition—to elaborate a narrative which, without erasing anything of the brutality of the experience, shows, in its articulation, a fidelity to the literary forms prized in his intellectual world, thus restoring the rigor of thought and historical continuity that the concentration camp institution had put in danger.

His journey through the Soviet concentration camps thus begins as a travel narrative. A very special journey, however, which leads him to the country of the Ze-Ka (administrative term for prisoners), a world without precise borders, in continuous movement and extension, spreading over the whole Soviet territory. The geographical metaphor, used by many witnesses to the Gulag, offers, here again, a key to understanding the singular and exemplary significance of this journey. Margolin was a victim of a geopolitical reshaping that took place during the Second World War and the repressive measures put in place to consolidate it. He documented the way in which forced displacement expressed the nature of the Stalinist regime and constituted one of the fundamental rules of spatial management in the Soviet Union: ridding the area of undesirable populations and colonizing and developing the vast inhospitable regions of the North and East by using these same populations as slave labor.

Ginzburg, for her part, was firmly established in Kazan, but became a "traveler" by force of circumstance. She spent two years in a prison in Yaroslavl, then was sent to the Kolyma, in the extreme northeast, a place so far removed from the civilized world that it seemed out of this world. This journey will also be described in detail in her book *Journey into the Whirlwind*. The word "journey" does not appear in the Russian title; rather, the Russian title includes the word "marshrut"—way, path, itinerary, suggesting both the actual journey and a broken path of life. All in all, this journey will last eighteen years: Ginzburg will serve her ten years in camp and then remain in Magadan, in relegation, until 1955.

Now I come back to our problem. If the title of my paper refers to three ages of Stalinism and not three phases of persecution, it is because the nature of the persecutions reflects the phases of development of the Soviet state itself. Victims are designated according to the objectives of the state at its different stages. Let us recall them briefly. In the 1920s, the persecutions targeted the former tsarist elites, clerics and representatives of political parties other than the Bolsheviks: this was the period when the young state was being constituted and asserting itself, fighting for its existence. In the 1930s, with industrialization and collectivization, it was the specialists trained under the old regime and now replaced by new Soviet specialists, engineers, as well as peasants, then the army and the party itself. Then, with the approach of the Second World War, it was ethnic persecution: the so-called "national operations" against Poles, Finns, Greeks and others. In 1939-1940, at the beginning of the War, these persecutions extended to the territories annexed by the German-Soviet pact. The same practice was then exported, no longer spread over time, but all at once: elites, engineers, clergymen, soldiers, peasants. During the War, ethnic operations continued, striking the Chechens, Ingush, Volga Germans and many others. After the War, it was the Jews' turn.

Ginzburg, Margolin and Markish represent three categories of Jewish victims of Stalinism and thus three moments in the history of the Stalinist USSR and its waves of terror. They were arrested in 1937, 1940 and 1949 respectively. Looking at these dates, one can easily identify the context: the Great Terror, the purges in the territories annexed as a result of the German-Soviet pact, and the post-war anti-Semitic campaign.

Were they victims of anti-Jewish action? Are these repressions directed against Jews? The choice of these three writers allows us to question the history and nature of anti-Jewish persecution in the USSR. In all the groups mentioned above, except peasants, Jews are among the victims. But until the anti-Semitic campaign of the post-war period, they are not necessarily simply targeted as Jews. Indeed, Yevgenia Ginzburg is not arrested as a Jew, she is arrested as a communist. The Great Terror struck all categories of the population, all social classes and all nationalities of the Soviet Union. Many Jewish names can be found among the victims, as Jews are widely represented in party and administrative bodies³. However, this is not yet an anti-Jewish purge. The proof is that when Jews are arrested, they are not systematically replaced by non-Jews, so this criterion does not necessarily come into play.

Julius Margolin was arrested at the beginning of the Second World War when, being in Poland, he fled the Nazi invasion in the hope of reaching Palestine through Romania, but found himself in the territory invaded by the Red Army. Was he arrested as a Jew? Still possessing Polish nationality, he was persecuted as a "citizen of a non-existent country" (as Molotov called Poland in his speech of 17 September 1939). After this fourth partition of Poland, this time between Nazi Germany and the USSR, every Polish citizen on Soviet territory was, in fact, guilty of belonging to a non-existent state. Margolin was deported and naturalized as a Soviet citizen by force. Was this an action that specifically affected Jews? No, more than a million Poles were deported from the territories of Eastern Poland, now Belarus and Ukraine. Polish Jews, however, constitute a very distinct group within this wave of deportations. What characterizes this group is that many of them were not born in the annexed territories or had left them like Margolin. They fled Western Poland, which was invaded by Nazi Germany, where they were threatened with death. No one then could foresee that the USSR would invade Poland, because the protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact had remained

³ Let there be no mistake, however: the majority of the Jews who are part of the apparatus occupy subordinate positions.

secret. Thus, for those who survived, detention in camps or deportation to Kazakhstan offered a terrible refuge from extermination.

Another specificity: when, after the invasion of the USSR by Nazi Germany, the Poles interned in the USSR benefited from an amnesty and formed a Polish army under the command of General Anders, it was more difficult for Polish Jews to join this army than for non-Jewish Poles. Margolin, for example, served his sentence to the end and returned to Poland (and from there to Palestine) only in 1946, thanks to international agreements on repatriation. These difficulties came, in his case, from the Soviet administration, where virulent anti-Semitism was rampant during the war, although it is known that Anders' recruiters were also sometimes reluctant to accept into army ranks Jews who were always suspected of wanting to go to Palestine (which some of them did, moreover) and not to fight.⁴

As for Markish, he was a victim of the post-war anti-Semitic campaign, accused of Jewish nationalism, arrested and shot as a member of the Jewish Antifascist Committee. He was arrested on the night of January 27–28, 1949, accused of bourgeois Jewish nationalism, Zionism. Under torture, he acknowledged “his crimes,” but he would retract his statement during the trial just like the other defendants. In this respect, the trial of the leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee differs from the major trials of the 1930s. In spite of the torture, the organizers of the trial failed to mount an exemplary show trial in which the accused would have publicly confessed their crimes. The speeches of the accused were true acts of resistance. Some of the “directors” of the trial were arrested after this failure.

Markish was sentenced to 25 years in prison, and it was Stalin who personally changed this sentence to a death sentence. Other great Yiddish poets, Leib Kvitko, David Hofshtein and Itzik Feffer, were shot along with him.

Let me remind you that the idea of creating an "International Jewish Antifascist Committee" came from Viktor Alter and Henryk Ehrlich, respectively leaders in Poland of the Socialist International and the Bund, the Jewish Socialist Party. Both had been in prison in the USSR since 1939 and were released through the Polish amnesty. Stalin took up the idea, ordered to kill the two leaders and decided to create a committee no longer international but strictly Soviet, composed of 70 of the most important Jewish personalities under the presidency of Solomon Mikhoels, a great actor of the Yiddish theater. (In 1950, Jerzy Gliksman, Viktor Alter's brother, went to Paris to testify in a libel suit brought by David Rousset against the communist journal *Les Lettres Françaises*, which had accused him of having “invented” the Soviet camps. Margolin, also a witness in this trial, met him there). The role of the Committee was to inform the world of Nazi atrocities against Jews and to solicit international assistance while offering the image of a Jewish world flourishing in a USSR where anti-Semitism did not exist. Nearly 45 million dollars would be collected in this way, in addition to technical assistance (medicines, clothing, etc.).

The Jewish Antifascist Committee also collected testimonies on the extermination of Jews in the occupied territories. These testimonies would form the famous Black Book edited by Grossman and Ehrenburg. I don't have the opportunity to dwell on the history of the Black Book in this paper; I will just remind you that the Black Book would be banned and destroyed, it would not be published

⁴ See Józef Czapski, *Inhuman Land: Searching for the Truth in Soviet Russia, 1941-1942* (NY, NYRB Classic, 2018).

in Russia until 2015 thanks to a miraculously preserved set of proofs. Mikhoels is assassinated in 1948, the Jewish Antifascist Committee is dissolved and 13 of its members are shot in 1952, among them Markish.

We can thus observe the evolution of anti-Jewish policies. If Jews were not targeted as a specific group during the Great Terror, if they were targeted indirectly in the terror of 1940-1941 in the annexed territories, they were targeted specially after the war. Most of the studies devoted to state anti-Semitism in the USSR begin the chronology of anti-Jewish repression from the end of the 1930s. This does not mean that antisemitism did not exist before in the USSR, but it does show that national policies were more ambivalent beforehand. In fact, it was from the 1930s that the Soviet state definitively stopped relying on Jews, whereas before, after the revolution and in the 1920s, Jews as a national minority were considered by the authorities as one of the strong supporters of the new state.

That said, it must be remembered that already during the war, anti-Semitism was strongly felt, especially in the administration and the party. Vasily Grossman describes in his diary the anti-Semitism in the army. It can be said that state anti-Semitism expressed itself strongly for the first time in May 1939, even before the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, when, at Hitler's request, Maxim Litvinov was dismissed from his post of People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs and replaced by Molotov.

Let us return to our writers. They differ in their political, aesthetic and identity positions. Markish is fascinated by the advent of a radically new world, but even more so by the destruction of the old one. He makes himself the chronicler and singer of this destruction. In his youth, the anarchist tendency prevailed for him over orthodox communism. He joined the revolution because he saw in it an opportunity for the Jews to develop their culture and literature in the Yiddish language. Yiddish poetry began to emerge before the revolution, particularly in the United States, a place of strong Jewish emigration. But this poetry is then rather "social," it tells of the difficult working conditions of Jews in America, it mourns the Jewish misery. The radical change that Markish and his group would introduce was to make the Yiddish language the site of a new perception of the modernist world, without however losing sight of the social realities of Jewish life. This poetry is to "working-class" poetry what cubist painting is to realist painting. Yiddish becomes a language that reinvents the world at the same time as it reinvents itself. It is this desire to inhabit the language as a modernist that pushed Markish to return to the Soviet Union, because nowhere else did he see such a possibility, especially not in Palestine where Yiddish was then considered the symbol of life in the diaspora and its use fought against.

Markish is an avant-garde program of his own, often interpreted as a synthesis of Expressionism and Futurism, which in reality embodies an original turning-point in Yiddish modernity and does not fit into any canon. Like the Russian Futurists, he identifies his "I" and his body with the earth, the world or God. "I am the sense of the worlds, I am created from stone, earth, days and nights... The whole world is me!" wrote Markish in 1917, in the poem "I am (a) man." "I am as big as the universe", the same year. "I am the earth myself! And myself the field! And myself the mature ear, cloud I passed into the sky and came down as rain from myself ... I myself am the time."

Margolin, for his part, studied philosophy and, at the time of his arrest, he was the author of essays, including literary criticism, and a treatise on Zionism in Russian. He destroyed all copies of this book found in his father's house in Pinsk, where he was staying before his arrest, under the astonished eyes of his father who did not understand what was going on and imagined that his son had renounced his Jewish identity.

It is the camp that makes him a true writer. There too, he wants to be first a thinker and a polemist. He undertakes to write, while in detention, a treatise on hatred, which belongs rather to the history of ideas or political history. One might wonder how it was possible to write in the camp. He wrote this work during the period when, totally exhausted by forced labor, he had the status of an invalid and therefore did not work. It was summer, he was writing, lying on the grass. He had managed to get paper and pencil. The text will be confiscated from him, but he reconstructs it in chapter 32 of *Journey to the Land of the Ze-Ka*.

During his studies in Berlin, he was in contact with Russian emigration, published in the magazine *Change of Signposts*, whose position was one of rapprochement with the USSR. Then, settled in Lodz with his family, he met Jabotinsky, became a Zionist and joined the Betar. He then viewed the Soviet experience from afar with neutrality and indifference. The USSR is for him another world, a world that seemed to him Asiatic, non-European, and the political regime that reigns there was, according to him, an internal affair of the Soviets. He has no opinion on what is happening "there" as long as he has not observed Sovietization in the annexed territories with his own eyes. His book, *Journey to the Land of the Ze-Ka*, is thus the story of an initiation into a world of hatred. In this universe, his involvement in Zionism constitutes a strong identity anchor and gives him moral support against dehumanization and Sovietization.

Ginzburg, for her part, immediately embraces all the dogmas of the new ideology and participates actively in what she sees as the creation of a new world. Her disgrace and arrest will be all the more painful for her because she was an absolutely faithful follower of the regime, ready to die for the party. In the world of prisons and camps, her communist identity offers the least moral resource against inhuman conditions. We see this identity cracking little by little, giving way to the humanist values that Ginzburg sought in communism, and that she now draws more from Russian culture and from Jewish and Christian spiritual roots. Thus, at the arrival of the new year 1938, which she celebrates with her cellmate, she pronounces the ritual phrase "This year here, next year in Jerusalem" and composes a poem in which she sees herself as an heiress of her Jewish ancestors. Ginzburg, too, did not do any serious literary work before her arrest. So, these are two literary vocations born out of the detention and which are expressed through testimonial texts. The great motivation of these works is to make known their experience of the camp.

Markish, the only one of the three to immediately assert himself as a poet, does not leave any testimony about Soviet repressions, for the simple reason that he was executed in 1952. His path is quite different. However, his work also has a testimonial dimension, but about another form of violence. He first became a witness to the pogroms of the Civil War and, during the Second World War, he lent his voice to Jewish suffering. This testimonial component is not directly expressed like in Ginzburg's or Margolin's work, it is sometimes cryptic and needs to be interpreted, especially in the expressionist phase of his youth. His famous poem *Die Kupe* (The Heap), subversive and blasphemous, is addressed to God, shouted by the heap of corpses left unburied after the pogrom.

Unlike Ginzburg and Margolin—humanist thinkers who try to understand political evil—Markish does not separate artistic experimentation from violence. For him, artistic language is itself engaged in the "terrible experiments" of the outside world. "Our measure is not beauty but horror," he writes in *Khaliashtra's* manifesto. But regimes of terror need neither "terrible" poetic experiments nor subversive poetry, they require wise forms, screens to hide the violence. Markish, who saw Soviet culture as a testing ground for Yiddish modernity, witnessed (and was forced to participate in) its burial.

What do our writers' texts say about the Jewish experience of repression?

Margolin wrote his book as soon as he returned to Tel Aviv, in the heat of the moment. It would be the first step towards what would constitute his activity until his death: fighting for the liberation of Jews detained in Soviet camps and the emigration of Soviet Jews to Israel. His appeal would not be heard: the Israeli public was not ready to hear the truth about the Soviet Union. The Israeli authorities did not wish to deteriorate relations with the Soviet Union (which were, moreover, destined to deteriorate).

His testimony is a major piece for the construction of knowledge about the Gulag in general and not only about the fate of the Jews in the camps. However, one finds there the whole range of Jewish destinies in the face of repression and Jewish identity choices, since one sees, on the pages of his book, socialists and Zionists, Jews attached to tradition, the Polish Jewish intelligentsia, etc. He recounts cases of Jewish solidarity in a world where most human ties are breaking down.

Margolin, for his part, brings the perspective of a "foreigner," a European Jew. Unlike the Soviets who, at that time, were used to arbitrary arrests, he describes himself as a "naïve" European:

At the time of my arrest I was 39 years old, I was a father, a materially and morally independent man, used to the esteem of those around me, a totally loyal citizen. I had not harmed anyone, I had not broken the law, and I was firmly convinced of my right to the consideration and protection of the institutions of every state, except Hitler's. In short, I was a rather naive intellectual who, after struggling for nine months in the Soviet spider's web, still felt, in his mind and in his heart, a citizen of beautiful Europe, with its Paris, its Athens and the azure horizons of its Mediterranean.

Once I crossed the threshold of the house on Logiszynska Street [the prison], I ceased to be a man. This change occurred instantly, as if, suddenly, on a beautiful clear day, I had fallen into a deep pit.

Paradoxically, this naivete gives him strength. It is the strength of belief in the law, not the law of a state, nor even the law of God, but the universal law as Hannah Arendt calls it in the *Origins of Totalitarianism* and the *Condition of Modern Man*. For a long time, this belief enabled him to preserve his integrity despite the decline of the body. Margolin is not at home, he is abroad, in an "Asian" country, not because of its geography, but because of its customs.

Margolin is the first one to document with almost medical precision, the decay of the body, describing in detail death from hunger. Only Varlam Shalamov later achieved this precision. But in

the translation of his book, published in France in 1949, the chapters devoted to this problem were absent. The publisher determined that three years after the war, the public was not prepared to read such a naturalistic description of physical decay in Soviet camps. These chapters would not be published in French until 2010.

When he returned from the Gulag and discovered the extent of the Holocaust, the total disappearance of the Jewish world in Poland, the assassination of his mother in Pinsk, Margolin felt more Zionist than ever, going so far as to accuse the Yiddish land of having allowed itself to be annihilated without resistance. But this Zionist identity would crumble somewhat in Palestine and then in Israel, where he found it so difficult to make his point about Jewish suffering in the USSR. At the end of his life, he returned in the imagination to his childhood in the shtetl, seen no longer with the eyes of militant Zionism, but with those of nostalgia.

The comparison between the Nazi and Soviet systems that Margolin makes in several of his writings is also dictated, among other things, by the fact that he is concerned, as a Jew and a victim of Stalinist repression, by both totalitarianisms. He covered the Eichmann trial for the Russian press in exile, which gave him another opportunity to reflect on this question.

Margolin writes in a free world. He is not always heard, but he fears neither censorship nor repression. This is not the case for Ginzburg, who has to fight against the inner censor, from whom she gradually frees herself in the process of writing. She constantly fears new reprisals. Her book will be published only abroad, in Italy.⁵

In her book there are no reflections on the Jews in the camps. She seeks to give her testimony a universal dimension, concerned less with questions of identity than with the more general question of faith in man, of good over evil. She comes closer to Christianity, especially in contact with her husband, a practicing Catholic. However, one of the great questions that animated her, that of forgiveness, intersected with Margolin's questions about Nazi Germany.

One of the specificities of Ginzburg's book is that it describes the detention from the point of view of women. We have here one of the greatest documents on the life of women in the camps of Kolyma, the most arid region of the Northeast, which Solzhenitsyn calls "a pole of ferocity." Ginzburg shows the diversity of the population in the camps. For example, she met women who were members of the Komintern or wives of arrested foreign communists. She details the whole range of women's (and also children's) situations in prisons and camps and shows that women are doubly victims in the Gulag universe, both as prisoners and as women.

In a sense, Ginzburg also believes in "law"—in other words, Soviet legality—until she confronts herself with the absurdity of the purges. However, a belief in the restoration of justice—not Soviet but universal—does not leave her, and one can see there, in the background, a form of Jewish messianic consciousness.

Markish keeps affirms his Jewish identity until the end. Yet he is obliged to cope with the Soviet system. After having promised the possibility of developing Yiddish culture, the regime restricted

⁵ The Soviet publication issued in 1989.

more and more the room for maneuver of the actors of this culture. The Yiddish institutions that emerged after the revolution were gradually reduced and totally banned at the end of the 1940s. The Jews, initially allies with the Soviet state, become an internal enemy.

In January 1948, the great actor and artistic director of the Jewish Theater in Moscow, Solomon Mikhoels, was assassinated on Stalin's personal orders. The murder was disguised as a traffic accident. At the funeral, Markish read his poetic tribute to him, where his death was clearly qualified as murder.

It was an act of courage unheard of in the Stalinist state, an almost suicidal gesture, comparable to that committed by Mandelstam when he wrote his poetic pamphlet against Stalin. Like Mandelstam, Markish could have said, "I will only be killed by an equal": the challenge thrown in front of the regime is a way of remaining a player and not a passive victim, of "living his own death" as an artist rather than suffering it, of transforming his death into a work of art. In the end, he thus joined his first modernist involvement, not through the form of the poem but through the force of the artistic gesture.

The question "Is there any Jewish literature, and if so, what does it mean?" has been the subject of much discussion. One of the critics who has tried to answer it is Shimon Markish, one of the sons of the murdered poet (his other son is David Markish, a Russian-Israeli novelist). If this question makes sense, then one can say that the Jewish literature of Stalinist violence awaits the critic who will analyze its narrative, linguistic and aesthetic specificities.

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