
Roman Katsman

Poetics of Twenty-First-Century Russian-Language Fiction about the Shoah

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DOI: 10.18318/td.2024.en.1.9 | ORCID: 0000-0003-0607-8047

I

In this article, I will try to highlight the main ideological and poetic paradigm of today's Russian-language literature about the Shoah. In the limited material that this literature provides, one key epistemological and narrative strategy stands out: the ghetto is perceived as a place of cultural-creative, enlightening, pedagogical action, and this transforms the primordial horror of the Shoah into a source of rhetorical identification with a personality reborn to a new life. After an introduction to the problematics, the argumentation will be developed in four methodologically sequential stages. First, I will present a symbolic model that vividly demonstrates the concept of deep connection between the subject of the Shoah (and violence in general) with the tasks of growing up, education and enlightenment. Secondly, in the foundation of this model we will find life-building and culture cognition practices, such as therapy, translation, art, detective investigation, historiographic thought experiment, protection of dignity. Thirdly, it will be shown how these practices serve the aims of survival in the Shoah, as well as the narrativization of this experience. And finally, fourthly, it will be concluded that these practices remove the

Roman Katsman – Professor at Bar-Ilan University (Israel). His research focuses on Hebrew and Russian literature. He is the author of a recently published three-volume series on Russian-Israeli literature: *Nostalgia for a Foreign Land*; *Neulovimaia real'nost'*; *Vysshaia legkost' sozidaniia*, as well as other books in Hebrew and English. E-mail: roman.katsman@biu.ac.il.

dichotomy of the individual and the collective, serving to create a living, free and dynamic community, in essence, characteristically of the Jewish type – a community of continuously developing, learning, and teaching individuals.

In Russian literature of the last two decades, there is surprisingly little non-memoir and non-documentary prose about the Shoah.¹ Separate motifs can be found in the work of many contemporary writers, there are many stories and poems on this topic, but there are very few works of large-form genres that are entirely devoted to it. This unexpected silence requires an explanation, but it is already quite significant. The reasons for the silence of the Israelis in the early post-war years are well known: the rejection of “going to the slaughter,” on the one hand, and the trauma of the survivors, on the other. In addition, the Israeli authorities did not want to quarrel with the West and the USSR. The situation began to change with the beginning of the Cold War and the change in relations between Israel and the USSR. The trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 in Israel is considered a symbolic break in the silence. Another two decades passed, and the third generation, the grandchildren of Shoah survivors, began to return to the memory of their grandfathers.

Most of the citizens of the USSR, for their part, had almost no continuity in the memory of the Shoah. Many Soviet Jews fought in the Soviet Army or were evacuated, while most of those who found themselves under occupation were killed. The few survivors often emigrated after the war, and they or their descendants rarely wrote in Russian. In the Soviet Union, the topic of the Shoah was a taboo: the exterminated Jews were bashfully called “peaceful Soviet citizens.” The early literary evidence of the Shoah (provided by such writers as Ilya Selvinsky, Ilya Ehrenburg, Vasili Grossman) was mainly evidence of its consequences, those terrible traces that the German troops and their allies had left after their retreat. In the 1960s–1970s, monumental attempts to comprehend the Shoah appeared in the works of

1 On the previous periods see, for example, the recent works by Maxim D. Shroyer, Marat Grinberg and Dennis Sobolev: Maxim D. Shroyer, “Ilya Ehrenburg’s January 1945 *Novy mir* cycle and Soviet Memory of the Shoah,” in *Eastern European Jewish Literature of the 20th and 21st Centuries: Identity and Poetics*, ed. Klavdia Smola (Munich–Berlin: Verlag Otto Sagner, 2013), 191–209; Maxim D. Shroyer, *I Saw It: Ilya Selvinsky and the Legacy of Bearing Witness to the Shoah* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013); Maxim D. Shroyer, “Pavel Antokolsky as a Witness to the Shoah in Ukraine and Poland,” *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 27 (2015): 541–556; Marat Grinberg, “Between Mimesis and Allegory: Vasily Grossman, Boris Slutsky, the Strugatsky Brothers and the Meaning of the Holocaust in Russian,” in *Critical Insights: Holocaust Literature*, ed. Dorian Stuber (Pasadena: Salem Press, 2016), 174–179; Dennis Sobolev, “The Representations and Reassessment of the Holocaust in the Novels by the Strugatsky Brothers from the Middle Period” (in Russian), *Iudaica Russica* 1 (6) (2021): 60–96.

Anatolii Kuznetsov, Evgenii Yevtushenko, Anatolii Rybakov, Yulii Daniel, Eli Liuksemburg. Today, memoirs and journalistic works predominate; one can name such authors or compilers as Lev Simkin, Viktor Lazerson and Tamara Lazerson-Rostovskaya, Yakov Verkhovsky and Valentina Tyrmos, David Zilberman, Frida Mikhelson; the Holocaust Centre and Foundation in Moscow published several volumes of letters and evidence *Sokhrani moi pisma* [Save my letters] (2007–2021),² compiled and edited by Ilya Altman, Leonid Terushkin, Irina Brodskaya and others. It is possible to separately mention the books of Anatolii Kardash (pseudonym Ab Mishe),³ who openly uses the method of combining documentary, intellectual and fictional fragments in one text.

Fiction about the Shoah, as already mentioned, is rare in today's Russian literature. Attempts to speak on this topic in the language of literary fiction were made by Grigorii Kanovich (*Ocharovanie satany* [The charm of Satan], 2007),⁴ Ludmila Ulitskaya (*Daniel Shtain, perevodchik* [Daniel Stein, translator], 2006),⁵ Boris Akunin (*Trezorium*, 2019),⁶ Karine Arutyunova (a cycle of stories in the collection *Daughters of Eve*, 2015).⁷ Against this background, novels that are dedicated to the Shoah stand out: *Fridl* (2012) by Elena Makarova,⁸ *Poslednii vykhod Sheiloka* [Shylock's last act] (2006) by Daniel Kluger,⁹ *Pepel* [Ashes] (2008),¹⁰ *Reyna, Koroleva sudby* [Reyna, queen of destiny] (2020)¹¹ and *Kolechko zhizni* [The ring of life] (2023)¹², to some extent also *Oni vsegda vozvrashchaiutsa* [They always return] (2006)¹³ and *I vozvrashchu tebia* [And I shall return you]

2 Ilya Altman, Leonid Terushkin, *Sokhrani moi pisma. Sbornik pisem evreev perioda Velikoi Otechestvennoi voyny*, vol. 1–6 (Moscow: Tsentr i fond «Kholokost», 2007–2021).

3 See, for example Ab Mishe, *Posredi voiny. Posviashcheniia* (Jerusalem: Verba, 1998); Mishe, *Shoa. Iadovitaia triada* (Jerusalem: Nomina, 2013).

4 Grigorii Kanovich, "Ocharovanie satany," *Oktiabr* 7 (2007), accessed April 10, 2023, <https://magazines.gorky.media/october/2007/7/ocharovane-satany-2.html>.

5 Ludmila Ulitskaya, *Daniel Shtain, perevodchik* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2006).

6 Boris Akunin, *Trezorium* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2019).

7 Karine Arutyunova, *Docheri Evy* (No place: Rideo, 2015).

8 Elena Makarova, *Fridl* (Moscow: NLO, 2012).

9 Daniel Kluger, *Poslednii vykhod Sheiloka* (Moscow: Tekst, 2006).

10 Alex Tarn, *Pepel* (Tel-Aviv: Ivrus, 2008).

11 Alex Tarn, *Reyna, Koroleva sudby* (Tel-Aviv: Isradon, 2020).

12 Alex Tarn, *Kolechko zhizni* (Tel-Aviv: Isradon, 2023).

13 Alex Tarn, *Oni vsegda vozvrashchaiutsa* (Moscow: Olimp, 2006).

(2006)¹⁴, by Alex Tarn. These attempts are so rare that critics are clutching at straws, referring to the literature of the Shoah even such works of Jewish literature in which the Shoah is only implied as a moment of historical background. Such, for example, is the case of the monumental poem by Boris Khersonsky *Semeinyi arkhiv* [Family archive] (2006).¹⁵ In general, the situation is different in poetry than in prose, there are many individual poems about the Shoah, and each should be considered an independent full-fledged contribution to this topic, but in this paper, I will not touch on poetry at all.

If the low public interest in the Shoah can be explained by socio-political factors, then how can one explain the low interest of writers in such a significant historical event, so rich in themes, drama, tragedy, which is an inexhaustible source of philosophical, historical, social, and ethical reflections, serving as the cause of ongoing political scandals both within different countries and in international relations? The argument about the lack of historical distance is not valid, because in the literatures in other languages one can observe a different picture. It can be assumed that the problem lies in the discrepancy between the theme and those poetic strategies that contemporary writers consider the most relevant and fashionable. To write about the Shoah, for example, in the genre of historical fantasy, one needs special courage, as well as an appropriate tradition and school, which is not sufficiently present in Russian literature; and historical novels are not in fashion today for those writers who are looking for new forms.

And yet there are exceptions. The topic of the extermination of the Jews of Lithuania both during the war and after it in prisons, camps and shtetls is the pivot of the novel by Grigorii Kanovich¹⁶ *The Charm of Satan*, as well as earlier and similar novels *Kolybelnaya snezhnoi babe* [Lullaby to the snow woman] (1979)¹⁷ and *Kozlenok za dva grosha* [A goat for two penny] (1990).¹⁸ Recalling the participation of Lithuanians in the destruction of their Jewish neighbors, the writer wonders why Satan, who always pretends to be the Messiah, is so tempting to men.¹⁹ Kanovich's historical novels do not contain any culture-building message, any hint at the salvation of meaning, although many of his heroes are

14 Alex Tarn, *I vozvrashchu tebia* (Moscow: Olimp, 2006).

15 Boris Khersonsky, *Semeinyi arkhiv* (Moscow: NLO, 2006).

16 Grigorii Kanovich (1929–2023), repatriated to Israel in 1993 from Lithuania, a prose and play writer, poet, scriptwriter, translator.

17 Grigorii Kanovich, "Kolybelnaya snezhnoi babe," in *Svechi na vetru* (Moscow: Dom nazhdy, 2007).

18 Grigorii Kanovich, *Kozlenok za dva grosha* (Moscow: Izvestia, 1990).

19 Kanovich, "Ocharovanie satany."

Shoah survivors. Thus, the novel *Park zabytykh evreev* [Park of the forgotten Jews] (1997)²⁰ is an elegy about the disappearing world of Eastern European Jewry, who managed to survive the wars of the twentieth century and even the Shoah, but did not survive the uselessness and forgetfulness that befell it at the end of the 1980s. Russian-Israeli writer Mikhail Yudson's²¹ novels *Lestnitsa na shkaf* [Ladder to the wardrobe] (2013)²² and *Mozgovoy* [Brainie] (2020)²³ boldly use the Shoah as a prototype for dystopian fantasies and as a source of imagination and metaphor (one but bright example – the word “holostrophe” [kholostrofa] that combines Holocaust, catastrophe, and poetry strophe). In the prose of Linor Goralik,²⁴ both micro-narratives and large forms, like the novel *Vse, sposobnye dyshat dykhanie* [All who can breathe the breath] (2018),²⁵ tell a story about the epic shame that does not allow to live on. The narrator does not know how to live after the events that happened to her, after history in general, and in general – to live further. Time for her ends in a way that resembles an apocalypse. Some chapters of the novel by Russian-Israeli writers Elizaveta Mikhailichenko and Yurii Nesis *Talithakumi* (2018),²⁶ dedicated to the visit of the protagonists to the Auschwitz Museum, and in particular the figure of one of them, who initiated this visit, which ended for him with wet pants – this is perhaps a typical case of fear and attraction that simultaneously evokes the discourse of the Shoah.

Here we are confronted with the unity, on the one hand, of the craving for adventure and the unknown – and, on the other hand, the mythical horror of the underworld, the awe of the unknown, but obviously terrible, the archetypal cave with the dragon, the fear of experiencing in an alternative history what was experienced in reality by the Jews on the other side of the war front line. In any case, the discourse of the Shoah is the territory of genuine primordial pathos. The most widespread mode of the Shoah discourse corresponds to the “victimary” paradigm that dominates today;²⁷ however, Russian literature of

20 Idem, “Park zabytykh evreev,” *Oktiabr* 4–5 (1997).

21 Mikhail Yudson (1956–2019), repatriated to Israel in 1999; a prose writer, critic, and editor.

22 Mikhail Yudson, *Lestnitsa na shkaf* (Moscow: Zebra E, 2013).

23 Mikhail Yudson, *Mozgovoy* (Moscow: Zebra E, Galaktika, 2020).

24 Linor Goralik was born in 1975, repatriated to Israel in 1989; a prose writer, poet, painter, translator, editor.

25 Linor Goralik, *Vse, sposobnye dyshat dykhanie* (Moscow: AST, 2019).

26 Elizaveta Mikhailichenko and Yuri Nesis, *Talithakumi*, 2018, accessed April 10, 2023, <https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/890930>.

27 For development of this concept see Eric Gans, *A New Way of Thinking: Generative Anthropology in Religion, Philosophy, Art* (Aurora: The Davies Group, 2011).

recent decades does not suffer from the victim complex (except for Kanovich), but there is no heroism mania in it either. Perhaps this is the main reason for its strange silence on this topic: it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to find a non-victimary and non-heroic tone in a conversation about the Shoah. Let us try to figure out how it is possible for those who still prefer not to remain silent, but at the same time are not ready to give up the formal and ideological search and innovation.

II

I would like to start with one symbolic poetical gesture that is not directly related to Russian culture. In 2000, the movie “X-Men” was released, based on the comics about the superheroes of the Marvel universe, which began to appear back in the 1960s. The first episode, which opens the popular film franchise, explores the discovery of the superpowers of one of the main characters, Eric Lehnsherr, Magneto. According to the plot of the comic book, Eric was born in 1930 in Düsseldorf to a Jewish family. In the episode in question, we find young Eric with his parents in a convoy that the Nazis are escorting to the gates of the concentration camp. Being separated from his parents, Eric in desperation stretches out his hands to them while keeping struggling in the hands of the soldiers. When the parents disappear behind the bars of the concentration camp, his superpower awakens: he attracts metal, the bars of the gate bend and break, and it would have been destroyed if the Nazi had not stopped him with a blow from the gun butt. In later comics and films of the franchise, we learn that the Nazis tried to use Eric in their experiments, and in the 1960s he becomes a Nazi hunter and takes revenge on his offenders. In the future, Eric becomes one of the most powerful mutants and leads an underground organization that has embarked on the path of armed struggle against the persecution of mutants by people, and opposing the party that is looking for ways to peacefully resolve the problem and headed by Professor X, Charles Xavier. According to the script writer Chris Claremont, the figure of Magneto was based on Menachem Begin and the figure of Professor X was based on David Ben-Gurion.²⁸ He also adds that his attitude towards Magneto and Xavier is related to the Shoah.²⁹

28 Alec Foegen, “The X-Men Files,” *New York* (July 17, 2000), accessed April 10, 2023, <https://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/features/3522/>.

29 Dorian Lynskey, “Exclusive: X-Men’s Chris Claremont talks through five key storylines,” *Empire* (April 6, 2016), accessed April 10, 2023, <https://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/x-men-wolverine-jean-grey-chris-claremont-five-key-storylines/>.

The described scene, which opens the franchise, in a bright pictorial gesture represents what is the main idea and driving force of today's Russian literature about the Shoah: left in the distant past, separated from us by two generations, the Shoah is the source of the present, new life, new reality and its new understanding, and therefore it is a symbol of education and growing up, a symbol of time and life itself (and again Kanovich remains almost the only exception, which, perhaps, only confirms the rule). This literature's truly protagonist is a child or a young man who, at the moment of the greatest tension, the challenge of survival, discovers a hidden power in himself, and then his nature changes, he mutates into an Other who has the strength and desire to resist the given reality. At the same time, any experience that falls to the lot of today's "mutant" can serve as a challenge – emigration, terrorism, war, cancel culture, identity politics, racism, antisemitism, xenophobia. This is not the point, but the fact that the victim turns into a hero and a warrior. The historical genre roots of this plot are easy to detect in any culture. In Jewish culture, they can be traced from the Zionist idea of the birth of a "new Jew" to Hasidic and – further into the past – Talmudic tales and legends about rabbis, righteous people, and simpletons, in which the power or holiness, hidden until then, suddenly appears, indicating a change in human nature. These tales, in turn, go back to the ancient and particularly biblical myths about babies who escaped death, the fate of the victim, survived the second birth and became heroes, such as Isaac, Joseph, Moses, Jesus. All this is well known. It is important for me to point out that the ancient narrative of epiphany and the formation of a superhero in the literature of the Shoah is undergoing transformation from a fairy tale discourse into a philosophical-historical discourse about life-creating culture cognition practices, and in this form, it is laid at the foundation of the creative consciousness of writers.

III

For well-known historical reasons, Soviet and Russian literature does not know the Nazi camp. The main theme of the Shoah in it is therefore the ghetto or the occupied city or village, and the main chronotope is the movement towards the execution pit or the death camp, the premonition and expectation of it, which is why, hidden outside the stage space, it is felt as even more transcendent, unknowable, unchanging and unimaginable horror, as in ancient Greek tragedy. That is why, in contrast, everything that is beyond its borders, that is, the entire illuminated space of the narrative scene itself, is presented as disclosure (*aletheia*), as a field of cognition, becoming, doing, creating the replicated, self-organizing and self-reproducing forms of social behavior, that is, culture. This type of eventfulness, which is the essence of

the plot of the Shoah in the works under consideration, I call the culture cognition practices of the ghetto.

Let us formulate the question as follows: why does a writer need the representation and plot of the ghetto? Using the terminology of Paul Ricœur, one can assume that the ghetto works as a “living metaphor,”³⁰ that is, as a “refiguration”³¹ of the picture of reality as a result of exercising the narrative-temporal practices. That is, it brings time-action to the territory where the death is to be reigning. Such practices are lectures, lessons, drawing, modeling, performance, speech-writing, translation, research, detective investigation, and the last one that determines all the others – protection of dignity.

Elena Makarova’s³² books about the Terezin ghetto are the most striking example of this poetics. In the novels *Smekh na ruinakh* [Laughter on the ruins], published in periodicals in 1995, separate edition in 2008,³³ and *Fridl* [Friedl], published in periodicals in 2000, a separate edition in 2012,³⁴ Makarova opens a new page in the literature about the prisoners of Nazi ghettos and camps. From 1988, she has worked on staging exhibits of children’s drawings from the Theresienstadt concentration camp and has published albums and books about cultural life in the ghetto, in particular a series of books under the joint name *Krepost’ nad bezdnoi* [Fortress over the abyss] (2003–2008)³⁵ about art, music, theater, and education in the Theresienstadt concentration camp (together with Sergei Makarov, Viktor Kuperman, and Ekaterina Nekliudova) and the book *Frants Peter Kin. Son i real’nost’* [Frantz Peter Kien: Dream and reality] (2009)³⁶ about the artist and writer who was confined in the Theresienstadt ghetto and killed in Auschwitz. Here, experiments with forms of the narrative construction of events and memory

30 Paul Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny et al. (London: Routledge, 1978).

31 Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

32 Elena Makarova was born in 1951 in Moscow, repatriated to Israel in 1990, a prose writer, sculptor, artist, pedagogue, art therapist, and historian.

33 Elena Makarova, *Smekh na ruinakh* (Moscow: Vremia, 2008).

34 Makarova, *Fridl*.

35 Elena Makarova and Sergei Makarov, *Krepost nad bezdnoi. Vol. 3: Terezinskie lektsyi, 1941–1944* (Moscow, Jerusalem: Gesharim, Mosty kultury, 2006).

36 Elena Makarova, *Frants Peter Kin. Son i real’nost’* (No place: Izdatel’stvo Terezinskogo Memoriala, 2009).

of the Shoah are combined with avant-garde experiments with stream of consciousness and playing with variations in narration, stylization, and parody, which bring the novels close to a postmodernist aesthetic.

Makarova's particular attention is drawn to the story of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, an artist who was engaged in drawing with children in the Theresienstadt ghetto and was killed together with the other inhabitants of the ghetto in Auschwitz-Birkenau not long before the end of the war. She managed to save hundreds of her students' works. After the passage of years, exhibits and albums of the drawings of the children of the Theresienstadt ghetto, as well as Friedl's notes and letters, immortalized her name as one of the founders of art therapy and an example of an unbending strength of spirit and humanity in the face of monstrous violence and inevitable death. The story of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis lies at the foundation of the "documentary novel" *Friedl*, the aesthetic of which, adopted from the Bauhaus movement, consists in presenting art as teaching, a culture-building craft.

In her book about the Terezin Lectures, Makarova notes: "In the occupied countries, the education of Jewish children has become a survival strategy. The main goal was to maintain "normality" in an abnormal situation;" the author also quotes Leo Beck, a prisoner of Terezin: "These evenings created a community from a formless mass... It was a time of freedom."³⁷ The intention to search for a "time of freedom" drives Makarova in her desire to describe in as much detail as possible all the various cultural and educational practices of the Terezin ghetto: from scientific lectures to child therapy.

Since the 2000s and particularly in the 2010s, artistic, documentary-historical, autobiographical, and philosophical-pedagogical genre elements in Makarova's books have been interwoven to the point of being totally indistinguishable. In all her books of these years, thoughts about art and emigration are mixed in the consciousness of the characters with reflections about ghettos and concentration camps, both Nazi and Soviet. The collection *Vechnyi sdvig* [Eternal shift] (2015)³⁸, in addition to stories, contains tales stylized as the diary of an émigré of the 1990s, an alcoholic phantasmagoria of a sculptor in the Soviet Union of the 1970s, a dialogue (more accurately a monologue) of a female writer who is a repatriate – the author's double – with the Israeli writer Ben-Zion Tomer about Soviet and post-Soviet reality.

Putevoditel' poteriannykh [A guidebook of the lost] (2020)³⁹ is a collection of stories about the author's meetings with the survivors of the Theresienstadt

37 Ibid., 52.

38 Elena Makarova, *Vechnyi sdvig* (Moscow: NLO, 2015).

39 Elena Makarova, *Putevoditel' poteriannykh* (Moscow: NLO, 2020).

ghetto. The artistic discourse about the Shoah and its memory grows not only and not so much out of the survivors' tales as out of the story of spiritual and material culture that was nearly destroyed but that survived and is woven anew into the new life of the author and her characters as it is recreated in the book. It is no exaggeration to say that this is a book about building an ordered life on the ruins of memory and culture, just as Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*, which provides the title, serves to arrange order from the chaos of ideas and beliefs.

Makarova's poetic method is applied in full force in the novel *Shleif* [Trail], published in *Zvezda* 3–5 in 2021 and released as a separate edition in 2022.⁴⁰ Its main character, Anna, lives in Jerusalem during the period of COVID quarantine and does not remember who she is. But she is overwhelmed with the memories of other people about the events of the first quarter of the twentieth century in Russia, gleaned from suitcases containing old papers that she inherited. At the same time, she reads about the Shoah, the diaries of the victims. Fragments of memoirs and biographies, books and diaries, newspapers and scientific articles, poems, the voices of historical and fictional characters are compiled into a complex multilevel mosaic. While the heroine wanders around a half-empty city, meets real people, or communicates with her psychiatrist, many other people's lives occupy her mind, which, according to the author, is life, *chaim* in Hebrew – a plural word. She seems to be hiding fragments of texts on her body, like those prisoners she is talking about. Moreover, her body itself consists of these scraps, as well as her soul, tormented by the Jerusalem syndrome.

We find similar culture cognition practices also in works of other authors. Boris Akunin in *Trezorium* tells the story of the creation of an orphanage in the ghetto, adopting some advanced pedagogical theory. Daniel Kluger⁴¹ in the novel *Shylock's Last Act* presents work in the ghetto of a theater group, and when a murder occurs in the theater, scrupulous observation of the talented detective work of the investigator is added to this. In Lyudmila Ulitskaya's novel *Daniel Stein, Translator* (2006) the narrative is built around the translation work of the protagonist, understood both literally and figuratively as an effort to establish understanding, mutual understanding, education and the art of interpreting reality for the sake of survival.

⁴⁰ Elena Makarova, *Shleif* (Moscow: NLO, 2022).

⁴¹ Daniel Kluger was born in 1951, repatriated to Israel in 1994; prose writer, poet, essayist, translator and songwriter.

IV

This brings us to the question of how therapy, art, investigation, and translation-interpretation serve survival. The fact is that cultural cognitive practices are essentially a re-experiencing of reality. Therapy allows one to relive trauma from the past, art mimetically duplicates and transforms lived experience, investigation reveals the unknown and incomprehensible, and thereby heals trauma and refigures knowledge about the past, translation rethinks and doubles reality, thereby doubling its ability to survive. This is clear from evolutionary, cultural-social, and psychological points of view. In the most general form, such practices provide an answer to the question of how, by changing knowledge about the past, one can change the present. This question often underlies historical, cultural, and political studies. The same question for some writers becomes the source of plot construction. In Shoah literature, this is almost always the case, since the events of today still seem to be very closely connected with the events of the Shoah, and those in turn still seem to be insufficiently studied and understood.

Elena Makarova, in the opening fragment of her novel about Friedl, writes about her deep sense of spiritual and professional kinship with the main character. The wisdom of artistic life arrangement, which she adopted from the Bauhaus and invested in the practice of teaching painting and art therapy in Terezin, transforms both the world in which Makarova lives and her understanding of what happened in the ghetto. Another Russian-Israeli writer, Dina Rubina, often uses the technique when the heroine, our contemporary, suddenly experiences a brief but intense flash of living through the events of the Shoah, for example, while walking through the streets of European cities. After that, of course, her understanding of the past sharpens and her perception of the present changes. One could attribute this technique to post-memory⁴² or to the hermeneutic merging of horizons,⁴³ but this would not be accurate, since we are not talking about memory here, but about cognition or even active influence on the past, which is only accessible to artistic creative imagination, and thereby singles out literature into a special form of historical plot construction.

The most striking example of this are two novels by the Russian-Israeli writer Alex Tarn:⁴⁴ *Ashes* and *Reyna, Queen of Destiny*. *Ashes* belongs

42 See Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

43 See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

44 Alex Tarn (Aleksiej Tarnovitskii) was born in 1955; repatriated to Israel in 1989, prose and play writer, essayist, translator.

to “Berliade” – a series of novels about the Israeli special agent Berle, who performs the most difficult and intricate missions. This time, he is tasked with tracking down sellers and buyers of weapons destined for Arab terrorists in Israel. A gold bar falls into his hands, with which the buyers intended to pay, and this turns out to be one of those bars that were cast by the Nazis from the gold teeth and jewelry of the Jews they killed. Nir, the protagonist of *Reyna, Queen of Destiny*, meets a girl named Reyna, whose grandmother of the same name survived the Shoah and lived to old age in Israel. Before her death, she recorded on a videotape her testimony about what she experienced during the war years: robberies, murders, rapes, and mass executions of Jews. Reyna is convinced of the “quantum entanglement” of her fate with the fate of her grandmother. Having once changed her life (leaving the university, breaking up with a boyfriend and moving to Jerusalem), Reyna has already managed to change her grandmother’s life in the past – and the record of her testimony, albeit slightly, has changed. During the next experiment, already carried out together with Nir, the story told by Reyna changed significantly, and the reader will recognize this modified, even more terrible story of suffering. There is no more doubt: the past can be changed. The heroes are trying to cancel the Shoah altogether. However, in both the original and the modified stories, all of Reyna Sr.’s children die, and Reyna’s mother is born after the war. Therefore, by canceling the Shoah, Reyna cancels her own birth.

As can be seen from a brief retelling of these two plots, the main narrative and ideological strategy of both novels is to establish a tense relationship between the past and the present. *Ashes* is built as a detective or judicial investigation, accompanied by evidence. Here, as in *Reyna*, the storylines separated in space-time converge, duplicating the events of the Shoah in the present. In one case, the connection between the past and the future is presented as a riddle, in the second – as a causal relationship; in both cases, this connection is perceived by the heroes as a task or an exercise that needs to be solved or completed, which characterizes Tarn’s philosophy of history quite definitely: history is not a given, accomplished or deterministically predetermined, but a task, an open and always unfinished state.⁴⁵ In his recent novel *Kolechko zhizni*, about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Tarn develops this idea of the task or work in which the Jewish people are a part or instrument: it is the divine

45 For the origins of this philosophy of history see the line leading from Hermann Cohen to his student Matvey Kagan and further to the latter’s friend Mikhail Bakhtin: Matvey Kagan, “O khode istorii,” in *O khode istorii*, ed. Vitalii Makhlin (Moscow: Jazyki slavianskoj kultury, 2004), 238–287; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

work of preserving the dignity even in the ghetto, and it is the symbolic ring, the ring of life, that preserves the Jewish community, be it a classroom or a ghetto, in all historical catastrophes.

V

It can be seen from the above examples that Russian literature is concerned with the same question that is characteristic of many works of literature of the Shoah in other languages: what does it mean to remember and understand the Shoah, how is such memory even possible or what is it desirable to be, how to narrate it? Memory and understanding arise here through the construction of a living community, which becomes the source of the transformation of reality and memory. Literary memory does not bury, does not recall, does not reproduce, but creates, therefore it generates a living text or text-constructor. This is the meaning of the metaphor of the ghetto, which in a mythopoetic way is undergoing metamorphosis and is transformed into a school class filled with children, young and adult, which here symbolizes the cultural community in general, capable of resisting the forces of dehumanization. Such are Friedl's drawing classes, circles and lectures in Makarova's *Fortress over the Abyss* (and therefore, by the way, it is so important that in the translation into English of this book "fortress" was replaced by "university," which, in essence, identifies the meaning of these two words); such are Kluger's theater, and Akunin's orphanage classrooms, such are the Jewish fighting classes in the Warsaw ghetto in Tarn's *Kolechko zhizni*.

In conclusion, I will give two thematically similar examples that demonstrate today's understanding of the Shoah through the prism of the pedagogy for life. The story in *V poliakh Amaleka* [In the fields of Amalek] (2000)⁴⁶ by Eli Luksemburg,⁴⁷ included in the collection of the same name (2000), is the travel notes of an Israeli teacher accompanying schoolchildren on the March of Life in Poland. The hero has two personalities. One is a free, strong, and proud Israeli, building a new life in a new Jewish country. The other is a humble and cowardly diasporic Jew. To his horror, he discovers how easily even indomitable Israeli teenagers turn into an uncomplaining herd, carefully hiding their origin. Through what should have been the apotheosis of life – the march of Jewish children with Israeli flags through the streets of Auschwitz – in the tormented mind of the narrator, a vision of a march of victims, wandering

46 Eli Luksemburg, "V poliakh Amaleka," in *V poliakh Amaleka* (Moscow, Jerusalem: Geshe-
rim, Mosty kultury, 2000), 7–80.

47 Eli Luksemburg, 1940–2019, repatriated to Israel in 1972; prose writer.

into the gas chambers, emerges. The sound of the shofar, giving rise to the procession, leads the hero to the idea of a redemptive sacrifice:

As on the Day of Judgment, rising and rattling, rising and falling, at first it seems out of place in the fields of Amalek. [...] But you understand: it is here that it is needed, in Auschwitz, to remind G-d that we were killed solely because we are Jews who remained faithful to the union with the Creator. Hear, O Lord, the sound of the shofar, your sheep, given here to the slaughter!⁴⁸

Israeli flags and fragments of memories of repatriation are recoded into signs of substitution, into a ritual, which is what the March of Life or blowing the shofar is. The expiatory sacrifice is called upon to affirm the hero's being and restore order, to save his personality from decay, the danger of which is especially noticeable near the mountains of ashes and execution ditches.

An expressive image appears in the novel *Talitakumi* by Russian-Israeli writers Elizaveta Mikhailichenko⁴⁹ and Yuri Nesis.⁵⁰ Here, a new constructed living community emerges in the form of a group of vociferous and cheerful Israeli schoolchildren, spilling onto the lawns of the Auschwitz Museum, wrapped in Israeli flags:

Standing above the gas chambers, near the ruins of the crematorium, I sense the feeling of ashes. No, it doesn't knock on my heart. It penetrates without knocking. Standing on the full-blooded, well-fed grass, I cannot help feeling the dead threads growing through the soles of the feet, stretching from the fertilized soil. [...] On the huge and even field of Birkenau, on the cheerful grass, which no one eats out to the last blade of grass anymore, through the grayness that precedes the rain, ours are walking. They wave white-blue flags, some wrap themselves in the flag, some just walk with a fixed gaze, and two of them put the ends of the flag in their pockets and walk with this banner.

[The guide – author's note] – You see a group of Israeli schoolchildren. As part of the school program, the State of Israel sponsors trips of high school students to our museum. [...]

Teenagers reach us and sit down at the ruins. Someone falls on the grass and stretches, someone yells:

– Moti, maniac, where is my bag?

– Defective! – yells the girl near him. – Why are you yelling in a place like this?!

⁴⁸ Luksemburg, "V poliakh Amaleka," 76.

⁴⁹ Elizaveta Mikhailichenko was born in 1962; prose writer, poet, play writer, painter.

⁵⁰ Yuri Nesis was born in 1953; prose writer, play writer; they repatriated to Israel in 1990.

- They are noisy, those of yours, – Olya remarks.
- Alive, – for some reason I say and create a pause.

Teenagers sit with their legs dangling into the ruins of the gas chambers and the crematorium. Lelya pulls an Israeli flag out of her jacket pocket and hands it to Golya:

– Shlomik, here you go. You can also go with it... with the guys... Do you want to?

Golya shakes his head.

– Why don't you want to? Did you want...

Golya swallows, blushes, and says:

– I can't.

– But why? Lelya is perplexed. She is not ready to abandon the invented frame. – Well, why not?

Golya looks at me in fright, presses his head into his shoulders and whispers:

– I pissed myself. [...]

After I told the pissed Golya that he had nothing to be ashamed of, that this was the most typical to humans, even the most human reaction, I immediately realized that this was not for consolation, not out of compassion, but I really would prefer to live in a world where, on the main channels after the evening news, Golya would have trumpeted: "You see, all of you who didn't piss in Auschwitz!"⁵¹

Golya is an angel. It was his desire to go to Auschwitz. One of the results of Arkady's (the main character and narrator) meeting with him and with other angels was the realization of this desire, which took the form of a miracle of the resurrection of children, the transformation of "ashes" into "living ones." These numerous "talithas" became "ours" and rose from oblivion. Arkady simultaneously creates a myth and throws a reproach in the face of the executioners and simply indifferent or forgetful. In addition, he appropriates, proclaims as part of himself these children with flags and what they symbolize – the miraculously resurrected "talitha," the "daughter of Zion," Israel. They are "alive," and in this one word the philosophy of the history of the Shoah is symbolically embodied as the construction of a new living community of free people.

To sum up this short and by no means exhaustive study, we can say that for many Russophone, especially Russian-Israeli writers, the creation of this community is the core of their poetics and philosophy, and it is constructed as a collaboration of culture-cognizing individuals. This approach can be

51 Mikhaïlichenko and Nesis, *Talitakumi*.

called individualistic didacticism. It is embodied most prominently in the work of Elena Makarova. Culture, social organization, and community life – everything is in the hands of the individual. Thus, the ghetto becomes a sociological and pedagogical model, in which the antinomy of the individual and the collective, which has ceased to work, is removed. The Nazi and Fascist utopian politics of group identity is overcome by the realistic practice of individualistic becoming. Summing up, it is this overcoming that can be considered the basis of poetic, sociological, and historical understanding of the Shoah in today's Russian literature. I think it is in this sense that one should understand one, otherwise incomprehensible, thought expressed on the pages of Makarova's *Fortress or University*: "Terezin has opened a new page in literature."⁵²

Abstract

Roman Katsman

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

Poetics of Twenty-First-Century Russian-Language Fiction about the Shoah

The article deals with the fictional prose about the Shoah written in Russian in the last two decades. Observations show that the amount of such literature has been significantly reduced, and most of its authors now belong to Russian-Israeli literature. An analysis of its poetic and ideological attitudes leads to the conclusion that the main goal of this literature today is the individualistic pedagogy of the celebration of life, and among its strategies the main one is a culture cognition practice. Among the contemporary writers mentioned in the article are Elena Makarova, Alex Tarn, Daniel Kluger, Eli Luksemburg, Elizaveta Mikhailichenko and Yurii Nesis, Grigorii Kanovich, Liudmila Ulitskaya and Boris Akunin.

Keywords

Literature about Shoah, Holocaust, Russian literature, Russian-Israeli literature, twenty-first-century literature

⁵² Makarova and Makarov, *Krepost nad bezdnoi*, 80.