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II. "SUNSET" BY I.E. BABEL:

From the Creative and Stage History of the Play

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

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

Can we expect new editions of Babel's books? So far, since the "Selected Works" were published in 1966, only two small books have appeared, one in Minsk and one in Elista.

Antonina Nikolaevna says that she submitted to the *Khudozhestvennaya literatura* publishing house manuscripts for a two-volume edition of Babel's works. That was last summer [i.e. in 1986 — E.K.]. The edition is planned for the second quarter of 1988, but progress is slow. *Knizhnaya palata* intends to reprint in 1989 a book of memoirs by Babel's contemporaries, considerably enlarged as compared with the similar collection published in 1972. It will include the full, unabridged text of A.N. Pirozhkova's own memoir telling of her husband's tragic fate.

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

In the West, "Sunset" was first produced in the early 1960s, after the play appeared

* O. Martynenko, "Family Drama of Mendel Krik (Isaak Babel's 'Sunset' at the Mayakovsky Theatre)", *Moscow News*, No.2, January 10, 1988, p. 11.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

However, what is most interesting is the attitude of the author himself. Babel, who is usually rather indifferent to the talk of the critics, a writer who speaks of his works reluctantly and with little emotion, is unwontedly loquacious when discussing his plays

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

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

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

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

Babel started his work on the short story entitled "Sunset" in 1923 or 1924 in Odessa

(the first seven pages of the manuscript, now in the archives of the painter M.V. Ivanov, were written on the trade forms of the agricultural machinery store owned by the writer's father E.I. Babel). He rewrote the story twice, most probably in Moscow (1924–25), and then corrected the finished text all over again. He never published "Sunset" in its novella version even though it seemed to fit naturally with the "Odessa Stories" collection. Moreover, in the novella entitled "Father" there is a direct hint, a direct "promise" of the future story: "Mendel Krik was drinking wine from a green glass and recalling how his own sons had beaten him up, Benya his eldest and Levka his youngest. He was bellowing his story at the top of his hoarse and terrible voice, showing his broken teeth and inviting people to feel the cuts on his belly. The Volyn' tsadiks with their porcelain faces stood behind his chair and listened numbly to Mendel Krik's boasting. They were amazed at all they heard and Grach despised them for it. 'The old braggart', muttered Grach and ordered a drink."⁵

The slyly ironic, romantically stylized world of "Odessa Stories" is a whimsical, gay and unconventional world of dream: weakness dreaming of strength, the dull, dreary existence dreaming of a life of color, exuberance and extravagance. A dream of a man humiliated socially and nationally, of a world where people are judged "according to their worth" and everyone takes his place at the table regardless of their seniority or wealth. "'We have our Majesty the Emperor and there can be no other king', said the police officer." Yet there he is, Benya the King — and the police station, the rightful representative of "our Majesty the Emperor" on Odessa soil, is going up in flames. In this world, the cruel laws are obliterated by the "just" lawlessness. This is a world, if not of freedom, then at least of wilful liberty for those who have long been deprived of their own will, bound and smothered by the social order and by religious and traditional rules and regulations. If not high drama, then at least unbridled, uncalculating passions reign in the world of the "Odessa Stories". This fairy world forms a strictly delineated, bewitched circle, locked from within; one step outside — and you will be grabbed by the devilish reality. It is concerned with this reality only in so far that "the sad, flashy romanticism of felons rejects the stability of the decent people's world" (V. Shklovsky). Shklovsky, however, is wrong to call Babel's romanticism "sad". Far from being sad, it is joyful, carnival-like, and not only because of its colourfulness but because of the extraordinary transformations of its characters and events. Because of the wise irony lighting up this world of dream and fancy, showing its fantastic, unlikely and, even if it could exist in reality, limited quality. For reality, even in this world, rules as of right. Not only bovine but human blood is spilled — the blood of those very poor devils whom Benya attempted to protect; a "skinny boy" is being bought as a husband for the forty-year-old Dvoira.

It took Babel just seven days in the summer of 1927 to write the first four parts of his film script "Benya Krik". However, the last two parts proved hard to finish. In these

two parts the writer attempted to depict the real events of the revolution: the romantic fantasy had to be brought down and localized on the map of history. In the script, the Moldavanka of Benya Krik and of Tartakovsky, the Moldavanka of "Odessa Stories", subjected to the realities of revolution, was not just defeated, but lost its heroic dimensions.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Babel's anxiety with regard to this scene is justified: indeed, it determines the whole

concept of the play, its conflicts, and its further development. What is Mendel, after all? Is he just a drunkard who, on a drunken spree, decided to sell his business and run away to Bessarabia with his young mistress? A man who, in his sodden state, was ensnared by Fomin the cunning contractor? This was more or less how things stood in the novella. The manuscript of Scene 3 of the play indicates a wholly different development of Mendel's character.[...] The playwright eliminated everything that might imply that Krik's actions were dictated by a chance drunken fantasy.[...] All the trivially comic touches are removed; far from being a result of a drunken bout, the conflict is firmly centered around the "business".[...]

The Benya Krik of the "Odessa Stories" is a noble brigand, "a Jewish Robin Hood" (G.A. Gukovsky) who wants to live "like a lion, like a tiger". If only rings could be screwed into the earth and the heaven he would have pulled earth and heaven together. He is a man on the scale of Russian epic heroes. He wants to live — but his father the drayman makes him "die twenty times a day" ("How It Was Done in Odessa"). In the novella "Sunset", the father and the son are equally matched. Benya is a ruthless, grasping businessman, quite happy in the role of a boss. We learn that "in a few months he was to become Benya the King". In the play "Sunset", he does become "the King", the leader of the raiders, but he retains the qualities he had acquired in the unpublished novella: a greedy, calculating property man who fights not for justice and colour in life but merely for "business" and "order".[...]

The Benya of the play is a novel type, novel not only in Babel's works but in the literature of that time in general. "The knighthood of Moldavanka", its mentality, its acts and ambitions, are revealed as fully committed to the support and preservation of the proprietary order.[...]

S.M. Eizenshtein, who considered "Sunset" "the best and most masterful play in post-October theatre", believed that the failure of the MKhAT production was due to the excessive emphasis its director put on the lyrical, romantic side of the drama. In his opinion, "the dramatic conflict should centre on the economic confrontation", on the clash between the greedy father and his equally greedy sons. Then, "the drama, from a particular occurrence at some drayman's stable of Moldavanka, grows into a wonderful generalized image of the economic fight, equally typical of Paris, London, or Chicago." I am afraid that a theatre that would follow Eizenshtein's advice and interpret "Sunset" as a struggle between moneymakers would be heading for a bitter defeat. The play is not just another variation on the theme of "The Death of Pazukhin" or "Wolves and Sheep", but a work of truly novel dramatic dimensions. It reflects not just the "economic struggle", but a much broader process, new and historically important.

This is a conflict between "men of affairs" and a man who dares to defy the idea of life devoted to "business", who challenges the order of petty-bourgeois property and propriety. This is something that neither Mendel's family, nor the whole Philistine

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

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

NOTES

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

T. Livshits

MY FATHER AND HIS WORK ON BABEL'S CREATIVE HERITAGE

My father Lev Yakovlevich Livshits was born in 1920 in the town of Melekess on the Volga river. In 1925, together with his family, he moved to Kharkov. In 1940, after high school, he began philological studies at Kharkov University. On the second day of the war, in spite of being exempt from military duty, he volunteered to go to the front. Demobilized in 1945, my father returned to the university and graduated just one year

later. After a brilliant defence of his graduate thesis, he continued his post-graduate studies; simultaneously he taught the Russian language and literature at an evening school and did a considerable amount of writing. Mostly he wrote theatrical reviews for Kiev and Kharkov publications.

In 1948 my father lost his job. It became increasingly difficult for him to get published. In 1949, swept up by the wave of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign, he was arrested and sentenced to ten years of hard labor. He returned from the camps in 1954, a very ill man. He died in February, 1965, at the age of 44.

What did he manage to achieve in the last decade of his life?

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

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

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

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

Being a true scholar, my father diligently gathered and thoroughly studied the

relevant material. By the last year of his life he had put together what was at that time the fullest archival collection of Babel's manuscripts which later served as a source for many publications.

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

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

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

Jerusalem

J. Wiener

INTERVIEW WITH YU. P. LYUBIMOV

Q. Yuriy Petrovich, you have started your work in Israel with a production of Babel's play. How did it come about? Had you ever considered such a production at your Taganka Theatre? What do you know about the productions of the play in Soviet theatres?

A. Unfortunately, I know very little about the productions of "Sunset" in the Soviet Union.

At one time I studied for a year at the hapless Second MKhAT Studio which, by Stalin decree, was speedily closed down and the company disbanded "to strengthen other Moscow theatres". That was before the war. Anyhow, they had staged "Sunset". The cast had been superb, with Bersenev as Benya Krik. For me that is a museum memory. When I was young student, I saw some photographs of that production at the Second MKhAT Museum. At the Vakhtangov Theatre, where I worked after the

Second MKhAT's closure, there was some talk about producing "Sunset" but already at that time the play was considered tricky, nobody was sure how to interpret it at that particular moment...

I myself never produced Babel's plays in the Soviet Union. One of my pupils at the Taganka Theatre, Yefim Kucher, a Jew, directed, with my help, a production based on Babel's "Odessa Stories" and "Konarmiya". We had to fight for it against theatre officials, but the play ran successfully for years.

I came to Israel with something entirely different in mind. I was preparing a production of "The Passion According to Matthew", a subject that I know well and is close to my heart. As soon as the Habima people saw me they literally fell upon me: here you are, an old Vakhtangov player, and Vakhtangov himself directed the "Dybbuk" at Habima, and our actor Klachkin used to work with Vakhtangov. In short, the hand of fate. I had heard, it is true, that somewhere in Europe a Polish director had staged "Sunset" and there had been protests from the local Jewish community. Just what I need, I thought: to be accused of anti-Semitism on top of all my other sins. So I made some enquiries. It turned out that in that production the whole action had taken place in the synagogue. Everything, including the fight with the father. That caused the protest and indignation of the Jewish community. Well, I thought, that's something I can deal with. However, I tried to suggest to the Habima people: let's make something out of the "Odessa Stories". But no, no way, they just wanted "Sunset"... Here I must stress that I like Babel as a writer very much. And his tragic fate also played a part in my decision. Anyhow, I accepted the offer, began working with Habima and the outcome of it all was that I settled down here in Jerusalem and became an Israeli citizen. Solzhenitsyn, when he congratulated me, said that it was God's will.

While planning this production, I came to the conclusion that it would make no sense to concentrate on the prosaic details of everyday life. Rather I should try and bring out things in this play that would be of interest both to me and to others. I decided to focus on the eternal theme of "fathers and sons", from which a straight line leads to the theme of "Sunset". The older generation is succeeded by the younger one which is so terrifying that, by comparison with his sons, even Mendel might seem an appealing character. An atmosphere of doom is created — the sun is going down, everything is coming to an end. I tried to emphasize not the realistic, but the abstracted, generalized quality of the play.

The sunset theme dictated also the scenography and the music. I introduced an enormous moon in the background: I first saw here, while visiting a kibbutz, such a gigantic, tremendous moon, and also a gigantic sun. I hoped that my scenography, the singing by the Georgian ensemble, the whole treatment of the play, built on abstract images, might provoke in the spectator certain associations of his own, perhaps

contemporary associations: it is my belief that art always affects through associations.

Now "Sunset" has been produced in Moscow, under the direction of Goncharov. There were rumours that he had been announcing this production for some twenty years, but only now it has become a reality. Perhaps, in a way, this is a reaction to the present-day anti-Semitism. The anti-Semitism that cannot be seen as a purely Jewish problem but a Russian problem as well.[...]

Among the true Russian intelligentsia this problem did not exist. Were one to attempt any disparaging cracks on this subject, such a person would promptly find his entry to those circles barred. There existed in those circles only one attitude, which I share: there is simply nothing to discuss. For instance, the allegation that the Jews had too much influence at this or that institution. Well, did they do any harm? And how did they attain their places at the top? By being gifted, talented people. If so, why shouldn't they go on holding those places and doing their job?

There are certain things going on in the Soviet Union that are very worrying. Recently I read in *Russkaya mysl'* about a meeting between the editors and the readers of the *Nash sovremennik* magazine. The speeches some writers made at that gathering were quite frightening. I am afraid that such good writers as Belov, Rasputin, Astaf'ev must have gotten into all this out of sheer ignorance. They are cut off from the true Russian intelligentsia which used to criticize even Leskov's attitude towards the Jewish question, even Dostoevsky's — although Dostoevsky changed his position considerably in his later years. Under Stalin, the time got "out of joint", the traditions of the true Russian intelligentsia were broken. Perhaps, this alienation from tradition explains the ease with which those writers fall for the anti-Semitic temptation. Another document, this time really terrifying, is the letter to the Plenum of the CPSU signed by Brusova, Litvinova and Ponomareva.* This is a well thought-out, cunning document with precise, well-worded formulations. Remember, in the "First Circle" Abbakumov pleads: "Comrade Stalin! Give us the death penalty!" Here, it is: "Give us our own, Russian Central Committee!" One CC is not enough, now they want a "Russian" one as well. As if they hadn't got enough bureaucrats as it is. The head of the state himself has recognized that they are being smothered by bureaucrats.

I see in this a threat to Russian culture, to the Russian spirit. It is simply obscurantism. The vehicle again is veering off the road, God only knows to where. And, most terrifyingly, it smells of blood. The lowest, darkest instincts are being unleashed, murky accounts settled. This is a call for a riot. I believe in the old-fashioned truth: a riot in Russia is senseless and ruthless. It can only be destructive, and the country has been destroyed enough as it is. The atmosphere reminds me of the times at

* Published in "22" journal, No. 57 (December 1987–January 1988), pp. 219–227.

the beginning of Stalin's purges — an unmanageable process, God forbid if it gets out of control. The need would then arise for a strong hand, in other words, for a dictator. The advent of a dictator is always a disaster; the country is on the brink of a disaster as it is, they say so themselves.

Would I stage a play on a Jewish subject if I were in Moscow now? I would have been guided, in the first place, by artistic criteria. All these gatherings [of Russian nationalists — ed.] are for me, above all, anti-artistic. I feel ashamed for those writers who find it possible to have discussions on that level.

In my twenty years of running a theatre in Moscow I had always seen everything through the prism of my artistic perceptions. I used to check my inner feelings: what was worrying me at this or that particular moment, what seemed to me alarming, important, and necessary. I always believed that I couldn't be alone in those feelings; if something concerned me so much, there must be other people just as concerned. I would have acted now in the same spirit.