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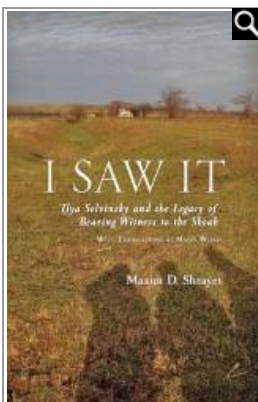
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Remembering a witness to the Shoah

New book recalls the historic writings of Ilya Selvinsky
 By Alexandra Lapkin
 Advocate Staff



Maxim Shrayer's new book focuses on Ilya Selvinsky's early witness of the Holocaust.

writing about the Holocaust," said Timothy Snyder, Bird White Housum Professor of History at Yale University, who has reviewed Shrayer's book.

Selvinsky, a famous Soviet Jewish poet and a professor at the Moscow Literary Institute, volunteered to serve as a military journalist and a combat officer, shortly after the German invasion in 1941.

"Selvinsky is ... someone I greatly admire not only as one of the best Russian poets of the 20th century, a real innovator, but also as a very proud Jew, and a person of great courage and valor," Shrayer said. "He felt that his mission was to be where the fighting against the Nazis was ... to be there as a poet, as a journalist and as a soldier."

In January 1942, fighting brought Selvinsky to his native Crimea, as the Soviet troops temporarily liberated the eastern part of the peninsula from Nazi occupation. When the Germans retreated from Kerch, they left behind a city completely decimated of its Jewish population.

"The Holocaust began with the shooting of Soviet Jews, but that beginning has been shrouded by distance and politics," Snyder said.

Upon witnessing the aftermath of the murder of about 7,000 Jewish civilians, who were systematically shot during several days in December of 1941, Selvinsky was inspired to write the poem titled "I Saw It." As he stood over the Bagerovo antitank ditch, on the outskirts

In December 2011, Maxim Shrayer traveled to Kerch, a city of about 150,000, located on the Crimean Peninsula in the south of Ukraine.

Exactly 70 years after the Jewish population of Kerch was destroyed by the Nazis in 1941, Shrayer – a Professor of Russian, English, and Jewish studies at Boston College – was there to conduct research for his new book "I Saw It: Ilya Selvinsky and the Legacy of Bearing Witness to the Shoah."

The book "conjoins biography and history with literary scholarship," Shrayer said. "[The book] ... looks ... for the first time, at the question of how Jewish-Russian poets in the Soviet Union ... became the first – and most powerful – literary witnesses to the Nazi atrocities and the annihilation of the Jewish population in the occupied Soviet territories."

"Restoring [Selvinsky's] poetic career, as Shrayer does, also restores an important stage in the history of



Ilya Selvinsky (center) was one of the first people to make the horrors of the Holocaust known to the public. He is shown above with Russian poets Nikolai Aseev (left) and Boris Pasternak.

Poll

How effective do you think the recent cease-fire between Israel and Gaza will prove to be?:

- A. Very
- B. Somewhat
- C. Not at all
- D. Not sure

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"The earliest Holocaust evidence we have – documented mass murder of Jews in Soviet-occupied territories – is from Crimea."
Maxim Shrayer

of Kerch, where the mass killings of Jews had taken place less than two weeks before, he began taking notes for what became one of the earliest firsthand literary accounts of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union.

By 1944, after three years of Nazi occupation, the Soviet troops eventually came to liberate the territories from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. Those territories, "which had been the backbone of Jewish communities in the former Russian Empire [known as the Pale of Settlement] ... had been depleted of Jews," Shrayer said.

What makes Selvinsky's account particularly significant is that the temporary liberation of Kerch peninsula in late December 1941 provided him with direct exposure to the beginning phase of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. According to Shrayer, "The earliest Holocaust evidence we have – documented mass murder of Jews in Soviet-occupied territories – is from Crimea."

Selvinsky became one of the first writers to tell the world about it through his poetry and journalism, several years before the Nazis began their retreat back to Germany and their annihilation of Jews was revealed on a much greater scale.

"When the Soviet troops come to liberate the former occupied territories ... we're dealing with Jewish bones and ashes. When the death camps in Poland are being liberated in 1944 ... in some cases we're talking about fields of pulverized bones," Shrayer said. "Now, in eastern Crimea, what they see and document in January 1942 are frozen corpses that look like real people ... it's as though they came to an enormous open-air morgue, this ... ditch, 1 kilometer long, filled to the brim with corpses."

When Selvinsky encounters the Bagerovo ditch filled with bodies, "I think the shock was immense," Shrayer said. "I think when Selvinsky sees it, he feels immediately convinced, that this is unimaginable, that an entire nation, the entire Jewish people, is being annihilated, and he feels that it's his duty to write about it and tell all of the Soviet people and the world about it."

Shrayer translated Selvinsky's poem about the massacre, "I Saw It," which begins with the following words: "One may choose to dismiss people's tales or disbelieve printed columns of news. But I saw it! With my own eyes." Those words speak to how early in the war the poem was written, before the word of the atrocities spread and became general knowledge.

Selvinsky's writing, and especially "I Saw It," contributed to the distribution of this information. His poem reached a wide audience and national acclaim due to its publication in a military newspaper, a literary journal and a collection of poetry, as well as readings on the radio.

It was not only the time, but also the place, of the poem's publication that contributed to its significance. Although the Soviet Communist Party officials did not openly ban writing about the extermination of the Jews, it nonetheless was treated as a taboo subject.

"The Soviet Union preferred to present all German crimes as directed against Soviet citizens generally," Snyder said. "And the Iron Curtain blocked Westerners' view of these events. Selvinsky saw the results of a major massacre and wrote about them at the time in the Soviet press. He was unusual in that he managed to specify that Jews in particular were the victims."

Selvinsky's poem appeared in the mainstream media just as the tide of the government's attitude toward the Holocaust began to shift. "We see the workings of the emerging official rhetoric and the emerging doctrine," Shrayer said, "which eventually would become known as the rhetoric of 'non-dividing the dead.' Namely: These are not Jews; these are Soviet civilians.

"By the time we get to the end of the war, the idea of reporting the annihilation of Jews as Jews in Soviet territories becomes very problematic – next to impossible."

Shrayer added that Jews were taken out of the Holocaust discussion in the Soviet Union. In fact, he said, "Holocaust" as a term did not enter the Soviet public discussions until the late Soviet years.

In his poem, Selvinsky writes "7,000 corpses ... Jews ... Slavs," specifying that Russians and Ukrainians were also murdered at Bagerovo. Although several hundred gentiles, including Communist Party members, prisoners of war, and guerilla fighters may have also been killed, an absolute majority of the victims were Jews.

"What Selvinsky did in January 1942 was really the uppermost limit of what could be said

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and printed," Shroyer explained. "Had he not mentioned "Slavs" being killed alongside "Jews," the poem would not have been printed."

During his visit to Kerch, Shroyer recreated the path Selvinsky had taken from the editorial office of his military newspaper to the Bagerovo anti-tank ditch to see the aftermath of the massacre. In the photo Shroyer had taken of the site, there are two memorials. The first monument, installed around 1975, commemorates "7,000 peaceful Soviet citizens."

In 2010, another memorial went up.

Engraved with a Star of David, it reads: "Here ... were murdered with horrible cruelty, by the hands of German executioners ... thousands of Jews ... who resided in the city of Kerch and its environs. They were annihilated so as to root out the Jewish people, wipe out the memory of Jewry and end the life of everyone who bears the name of Israel.

"So may their memory be for a blessing ... until the end of the days."



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