

Babi Yar By Yevgeni Yevtushenko



Return to Witnesses

Yevgeni Yevtushenko – Prominent poet during the Soviet era. His poem Babi Yar, condemning a 1941 massacre in Kiev perpetrated by Nazis, was later used by Dmitri Shostakovich in his Symphony No. 13.

“Growing up in Russia, I experienced antisemitism; personally directed, ubiquitous, and violent, covertly approved of by the government. Yevgeni Yevtushenko’s poem, written to expose the inhumanity of Babi Yar, and the subsequent injustice of the government’s refusal to raise a monument to the thousands of Jews executed there by the Nazi troops, produced a tremendous effect in Russia.

Overt antisemitism slowly decreased, and many Russians to whom this had been normal and accepted practice, woke up to a new realization.

I learned this poem by heart when I was very young, without understanding anything except the basic ideas. Recently, I saw a copy of it, and remembered.

I still cannot read it without tears.”

Benjamin Okopnik

NOTES

—1 – Alfred Dreyfus was a French officer, unfairly dismissed from service in 1894 due to trumped-up charges prompted by anti-Semitism.

2 – Belostok: the site of the first and most violent pogroms, the Russian version of Kristallnacht.

3 – “Internationale”: The Soviet national anthem.

BABI YAR

By Yevgeni Yevtushenko

Translated by Benjamin Okopnik, 10/96

No monument stands over Babi Yar.
A steep cliff only, like the rudest headstone.

I am afraid.

Today, I am as old
As the entire Jewish race itself.

I see myself an ancient Israelite.
I wander o'er the roads of ancient Egypt
And here, upon the cross, I perish, tortured
And even now, I bear the marks of nails.

It seems to me that Dreyfus is myself. *1*

The Philistines betrayed me – and now
judge.

I'm in a cage. Surrounded and trapped,
I'm persecuted, spat on, slandered, and
The dainty dollies in their Brussels frills
Squeal, as they stab umbrellas at my face.

I see myself a boy in Belostok *2*
Blood spills, and runs upon the floors,
The chiefs of bar and pub rage unimpeded
And reek of vodka and of onion, half and
half.

I'm thrown back by a boot, I have no
strength left,

In vain I beg the rabble of pogrom,
To jeers of "Kill the Jews, and save our
Russia!"

My mother's being beaten by a clerk.

O, Russia of my heart, I know that you
Are international, by inner nature.
But often those whose hands are steeped in
filth
Abused your purest name, in name of
hatred.

I know the kindness of my native land.
How vile, that without the slightest quiver
The antisemites have proclaimed themselves
The "Union of the Russian People!"

It seems to me that I am Anna Frank,
Transparent, as the thinnest branch in April,
And I'm in love, and have no need of
phrases,
But only that we gaze into each other's eyes.
How little one can see, or even sense!
Leaves are forbidden, so is sky,
But much is still allowed – very gently
In darkened rooms each other to embrace.

-“They come!”

-“No, fear not – those are sounds
Of spring itself. She's coming soon.
Quickly, your lips!”

-“They break the door!”

-“No, river ice is breaking...”

Wild grasses rustle over Babi Yar,
The trees look sternly, as if passing
judgement.
Here, silently, all screams, and, hat in hand,
I feel my hair changing shade to gray.

And I myself, like one long soundless scream
Above the thousands of thousands interred,
I'm every old man executed here,
As I am every child murdered here.

No fiber of my body will forget this.
May "Internationale" thunder and ring *3*
When, for all time, is buried and forgotten
The last of antisemites on this earth.

There is no Jewish blood that's blood of
mine,
But, hated with a passion that's corrosive
Am I by antisemites like a Jew.
And that is why I call myself a Russian!