

Preface

THE DEAN of the Odessa mobsters Froim Grach liked Benya Krik. “Benya speaks little,” he told the council of thieves when asked to size Benya up, then added, “But he speaks with zest. He says little but you feel you want him to say something more” (“How It Was Done in Odessa,” 1923). Maxim Gorky liked Isaac Babel and thought him better than Nikolay Gogol. Gorky’s praise of Babel is echoed by the fictional elder gangster promoting his brilliant protégé. Literature and gangland raids, literature and violence, literature and the Russian Revolution, Russian literature and the Jews—welcome to the world of Isaac Babel.

What Froim Grach said about Benya Krik encapsulates Isaac Babel and his legacy. A rather small body of work is all that has survived of Babel’s writings. But most of it is zesty and brilliant, leaving generations of readers gasping for more. The words are spoken by a gangster, an outlaw, with a slight local accent (Odessa) and lightly damaged Russian syntax, revealing the speaker to be a little more comfortable in Yiddish than Russian. The words of praise coming from one gangster about another are composed tongue-in-cheek, for they mark a sly intrusion by an outsider into the very serious world of Russian letters, suggesting, perhaps, that the gangster’s words mean the opposite of what they say, or the opposite of the opposite, or something in-between the opposite and the same. Was the statement just an aside to shape the character of the story as a man of few words but plenty of action? Or was this a joke, ostensibly about the gangster’s verbal parsimony, but made at the expense of the torrents of prose contained in Russia’s nineteenth-century “baggy

monsters"? Or was the marginality of the master of verbal economy, in fact, a claim to legitimacy in the upside-down revolutionary world? Was the slight Yiddishism of the phrasing a refreshing estrangement device, or was it an oblique claim by a marginal culture on a place of honor at Russian culture's high table?

The riddle of Babel is lodged inside an enigma, and it is definitely wrapped in irony—irony that is irreducible. A reader chasing the ultimate meaning of an ironic statement is not unlike the proverbial dog chasing its tail, but the questions prompted by Froim's laconic tirade allow the reader to see the world anew, to clear the air of drudgery, and to get rid of the cobwebs of received ideas—be they about life, art, revolution, violence, masculinity, Russian literature and culture, not to mention the Jews. Which is why one wants to hear something more from Isaac Babel. More, however, is not easily obtained because the author, like his creation Benya Krik, was on paper a man of few words and was unusually circumspect and sometimes misleading about his art and life. Babel was not even forty-six when he was executed in the Lefortovo Prison in Moscow, and his manuscripts and correspondence, which he kept under lock and key in a small chest, along with whatever other papers he had in his two houses at the time of his arrest, traveled with him to prison and to this day have not recovered.

AMONG MODERN RUSSIAN AUTHORS as well as the larger pool of stars of European modernism, Isaac Babel makes the most tantalizing case. He achieved world fame as he turned thirty with his cycle of stories about the Russian civil war; he was admired as the author of the no less famous, comical, and Rabelaisian *Tales of Odessa*; he set the pattern and tone for stories about Jewish childhood with the quartet of tales *Story of My Dovecote*; he left two powerful, enigmatic plays, *Sunset* and *Maria* (in which the Maria character never appears), and a scattering of newspaper reporting and promising stories—fragments of larger, unfinished cycles. The intensity of his readers' sentiment in Russia and elsewhere, and particularly in the United States, stands in reverse proportion to the extant volume of his work.

This collection, then, represents an attempt by a community of international scholars to tease out "something more" about Isaac Babel. This is a propitious time. Since the fall of the Soviet Union and the opening of the archives, we have come to know more about his works and days,

his milieu, the history of his time, and various contexts that frame his writings. We have aimed at a multidimensional view of the man and his legacy, hence the division of this volume into the three somewhat overlapping parts.

The first part, "Attempting a Biography," brings together essays by two Babel experts for whom Babel has come to be inseparable from his biographical context. Patricia Blake sketches out her portrait of Issac Babel using as a backdrop the early days of her biographer's journey—an American writer researching a book on Babel's life and death in Moscow during the cold war as she herself was being watched by the Soviet secret police. Gregory Freidin, who discovered Babel early in his youth and heard many stories about him from Babel's old friend, the sculptor Ilya Slonim, looks for the autobiographical "message in a bottle" in Babel's own writing, especially the little-understood play *Maria* as well as the stories of the 1920s and 1930s leading up to it. The result is a patchwork of historical fact and fiction from which the complicated and contradictory figure of Issac Babel begins to emerge.

The second part, "Babel in the Context of Russian History," attempts to locate Babel's legacy in the shifting sands of the political, cultural, and social circumstances of the Russian Revolution, a period that stretched from 1917 all the way to Babel's death in 1940. Historian Oleg Budnitskii offers a new and intriguing context for reading Babel's *Red Cavalry* and his civil war Diary: the history of the Red Army's attitudes toward the Jews, with a special focus on Semyon Budenny's First Cavalry Army for which Babel served as a reporter, propagandist, and staff officer in the Polish campaign in 1920. A longtime Babel expert, Carol Avins, examines Babel's work, especially his story "The Road," in the context of the written record of the Jewish experience of the Russian Revolution and offers a fresh reading of one of the most enigmatic stories of Babel's career. A literary scholar and linguist, Michael S. Gorham, offers yet another historical context for understanding Babel—the struggle for the authoritative postrevolutionary language of state, which ultimately came to dominate public discourse in Russia. His juxtaposition of Babel's *Red Cavalry* and Furmanov's *Chapaev* goes a long way toward explaining Babel's "silence" in the 1930s, when the "Furmanov model," a paired language of command adopted by the top-down ideological party state, came to dominate the print media as well as the officially sanctioned Soviet letters. A fascinating view of Babel's evolution as a writer and stylist in his interaction with the

body of Russian and Soviet Russian literature emerges from the chapter by the world's foremost expert on Soviet Russian literature, especially the 1920s and 1930s, Marietta Chudakova. Contrary to the prevailing view of Babel as a *sui generis* author with a limited genealogy in Russian letters and practically no following among Soviet Russian writers, Chudakova convincingly demonstrates that Babel, in fact, had a tremendous impact on Soviet Russian prose, which absorbed elements of his style even as it diluted its intensity and pungency to "safe" consumption levels. Paradoxically or not, Babel, too, found himself caught up in the "taming of Babel": as the author of his 1937 story, "The Kiss," Chudakova suggests, he was coming close to resembling his own Soviet epigones.

"Babel in the World of Letters and On Stage" is largely devoted to the examination of Babel's writings in contexts that are specifically literary. Alexander Zholkovsky examines the device of the "debut" in Babel's prose and compares it to its uses in Nabokov, Chekhov, Andreev, and Sholom Aleichem, among others. Robert Alter focuses on the emergence of a modern literary sensibility, juxtaposing the aestheticizing gaze implied in Flaubert's *le style indirect libre* with Babel's first-person narrator who, in Victor Shklovsky's famous quip, could speak "in the same voice about stars and gonorrhea." Zsuzsa Hetényi (Budapest), a Babel expert of long standing, inventories the world of Babel's childhood stories and examines them in the context of the Jewish childhood archetype in twentieth-century European and American literary tradition. Elif Batuman (Stanford) explores an important thematic leitmotif in Babel's writings—refusal to be a clerk—in terms of her own ingenious theory of literary double accounting, showing Babel's deep kinship with Flaubert and Cervantes. The eminent Babel scholar, Efraim Sicher (Beer-Sheva) contextualizes Babel's writings in the contemporary Yiddish and Hebrew literature, drawing our attention to another instance of Babel's "double bookkeeping": the subtexts in his writings that could only be appreciated by a certain trilingual segment of his audience, namely, those who were conversant in all the three languages in use by the Jews of the Russian empire: Russian, Yiddish, and Hebrew. Finally, in the concluding essay of the collection, Carl Weber (Stanford), who directed the Stanford production of *Maria*, shares his thoughts both on his direction of the play and the special concerns of a director producing the work for the twenty-first-century American audience.

EARLIER VERSIONS of most of these essays were solicited for and presented at the Isaac Babel Workshop at Stanford University in February–March, 2004. The workshop was attended, among others, by Babel’s two daughters, the late Nathalie Babel and Lydia, and Lydia’s mother, Babel’s companion in the last years of his life, Antonina Nikolaevna Pirozhkova. The workshop included the exhibition “Isaac Babel: A Writer’s Life,” put together with the generous support and assistance of the Hoover Institution Libraries and Archives, and the U.S. premiere of Babel’s play *Maria*. The centerpiece was the international conference that lent the title to the present volume.

The conference papers have been revised for this publication, and two papers were written expressly for this volume: “Staging Babel’s *Maria*—For Young American Audiences, Seventy Years After” by Carl Weber and “*Pan Pizar*: Clerkship in Babel’s First-Person Narration” by Elif Batuman, who has chronicled the Babel Conference and Workshop in her now famous essay, “Babel in California” (*N+I* 2 [2005]).

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Gregory Freidin, Stanford University, 2007