Asia Kovrigina*

Babi Yar from Outside the USSR

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Abstract: This paper analyses the reception of *Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel* outside the USSR (England, United States, France). Actually, the censored version of the novel was more critically acclaimed than its full version published after Kuznetsov's defection to the West. The poor reception may be partly due to the fact that *Babi Yar* did not match the canon of Holocaust literature.

Keywords: Kuznetsov, Babi Yar, censorship, literary testimony

Anatoly Kuznetsov's "document in the form of a novel" had a tormented fate in the USSR, but also outside its borders.[1] The Western reader received the integral version of the novel 20 years before the Soviet reader. In Russia, the full text of the novel was published after the fall of the USSR, in the wave of "returned literature" publications. In 1970, *Babi Yar* "in its true form" (Anatol 1969, 31), was published in England, the USA, and France. Western countries were already living in the "era of the witness" (Wieviorka 1998), but Kuznetsov's testimony about the disappearance of the Jews from Kiev goes almost unnoticed. In 1979 and in 1982, the novel is republished in English before being almost forgotten. In 2004, an article about Kuznetsov (Toker 2004) is included in a volume on Holocaust novelists of *Dictionary of Literary Biography* and another in the volume on Russian Prose after the Second World War in the same publication (Tishler 2005), but these are among the few mentions of *Babi Yar* in a literary landscape.

When Editions Laffont in Paris brought the book out of the closet in 2011, they hoped to attract the public, which had just discovered the "Shoah by Bullets" thanks to the well-publicized work of Yahad – in Unum[2] and the film *Einsatzgruppen: Les commandos de la mort* ["Einsatzgruppen": The death squads] broadcast by France 2 (Prazan 2009). The publication was meticulously prepared: the translation was revised and corrected, and a detailed preface was added that traced Kuznetsov's fate

1 See Aleksey Kuznetsov's reflections on the lack of reaction after the publication of *Babi Yar* in the URSS in 1991 (Kuznetsov 2014).

2 Yahad – In Unum led by Father Patrick Desbois seeks to locate the mass graves of Jews in the former territories of the USSR and to collect testimonies about the murders.

***Corresponding author: Asia Kovrigina**, CERILAC, Université de Paris, Paris, France,
E-mail: asiakovrigina@gmail.com. https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4409-980X

and explained the role of censorship in the world of Soviet literature (Epelboin 2011). But again, the document in the form of a novel did not captivate the reader. In 2019, Editions Taillandier reissued *Babi Yar* in pocket format (Kouznetsov 2019), still without success either among the public or among French critics.

Why is this book, undoubtedly a valuable testimony of the Shoah, struggling to find its place in the Library of the Catastrophe?

1 A Soviet Writer Missing in London

On July 30, 1969, the press announced the disappearance in London of "one of Russia's top writers," Anatoly Kuznetsov (Shuster 1969, 1; *The Washington Post* 1969, 11). A day later, it emerged that Kuznetsov was a defector. His "passage to the West" created a sensation because it was unimaginable that a well-known official writer, promoted to a brilliant career, could abandon his duties together with his country. "Mr. Kuznetsov, 39, a man who joined a communist party at an early age, who was at the peak of his career in the Soviet intellectual world, decided last week to abandon his homeland, his family and his colleagues to remain in Britain. Why? Why?" asked Gwertzman (1969a, 14), *The New York Times* correspondent in Moscow who wrote a series of articles on Kuznetsov.

Kuznetsov defected to the West only a week after his elevation to the editorial board of the journal *Iunost* had been made public. He seemed to enjoy the privileges and prerogatives of a conformist Soviet writer; his fame in the USSR was at its height. Hardly anyone could think that he would ever emigrate. His first novel, *Prodolzhenie legendy* (*Sequel to a Legend*), which had put him in the first rank of Soviet writers, was too correct, from the Soviet point of view, to suggest that its author was, in reality, a budding anti-Soviet intellectual.

The Anglo-Saxon press burst out with headlines: "Mystery of the Russian Author Deepens" (*Belfast Telegraph* 1969), "The Russia Kuznetsov Couldn't Take" (Crankshaw 1969), "Soviet Police Raid Home of Defector" (*The New York Times* 1969b), "The 'Truth Generation' Produces a Defector" (Gwertzman 1969b, 4). *The Times* published a long article on Kuznetsov where the sensation caused by his flight was compared to the one caused by Svetlana Alliluyeva, Stalin's daughter, when she had left the USSR two years earlier: "Kuznetsov is the most important literary figure to defect from the Soviet Union since the end of World War II and the best-known personality within Russia to flee since Svetlana Stalin left in 1967 and wrote her recollections in *Twenty Letters to a Friend*" (*The Times* 1969, 29). Kuznetsov's flight took first and foremost a political dimension. Soviet tanks had crushed the Prague Spring a year before, and the Cold War was experiencing one of its peaks.

Kuznetsov made statements, one after another. He wrote an official letter to the government of the USSR, in which he canceled his membership in the Party and wrote that Marxism-Leninism was "utterly obsolete, rigid and naïve … utterly incapable of resolving the contradictions in society today, and what is worse it has led, continues to lead and threatens to go on leading to frightful social tragedies" (*The Times* 1969, 31). He rejected his works written in the USSR, and would adopt a pseudonym because, he came to believe, "Kuznetsov [was] a dishonest conformist, cowardly author" (*The New York Times* 1969a, 1). He violently accused the Soviet censorship: "absolutely everything that was published under my name was castrated" (Kuznetsov 1969a, 26). He revealed that his first censors were his colleagues, the writers themselves; he blamed the corruption of Soviet literature, and disclosed deplorable personal features of chief editors of important magazines: Soviet literature was "controlled by people who [were] ignorant, cynical and themselves very remote from literature" (Kuznetsov 1969a, 26). He published excerpts from his diary in which he described, darkly, the climate of repression in the USSR and the grip of propaganda: "The Soviet Union is a fascist state … It is as impossible to have a writer in the true sense of the word in Russia as it is to have a wild lion in a circus. Russia is in fact one gigantic circus in which the animals sit in cages, while the life of society is one long performance in the ring … It was a sad day for me when I was born in Russia … It means that I have been condemned to fear for the whole of my life" (Kuznetsov 1969a, 26). He also described the caricatured everyday life of the Soviets, the shortages of everyday goods, and even mentioned the price of chicken and eggs on the black market (Harrison 1969).

Finally, he openly and naïvely admitted to having collaborated with the KGB since 1961, when he was recruited before his first trip abroad, to France. The information was immediately republished by several newspapers. Kuznetsov tried to justify himself, to explain that cooperation with the KGB was the rule rather than an exception: "The KGB tentacles reach, like cancerous growths, into every branch of life in Russia. And in particular into a world of Soviet literature. I do not know a single writer in Russia who has not had some connection with the KGB" (Kuznetsov 1969b, 1).

In all these articles, however, the "documentary novel" that is *Babi Yar* is only mentioned in passing. And if some articles present Kuznetsov as an author who "was born and lived hard by Babi Yar" (Shenker 1969), there was very little interest in him as a direct witness of the occupation of Kiev and the Babi Yar massacres. In the West, he was seen as a denouncer of the communist regime.

In September 1969, CBS broadcasts Kuznetsov's interview, almost an hour long, with the reporter Morley Safer. Kuznetsov is clearly moved; he does not feel comfortable in front of the camera and the famous interviewer. He has difficulty answering questions about his family that he left in the USSR: "You called Russia a

concentration camp, yet you have left your own family back in that concentration camp," says Safer. At one point, Kuznetsov even gets carried away: "Oh God! How I am tired of all that! I don't want to have anything to do with politics. You put to me political questions, but my answers are answers of a dilettante. I really like writing. Writing literature … I couldn't do it there. So, I am trying to do it here. That's all I am hoping for" (The Ordeal of Anatoly Kuznetsov 1969). It is obvious that Safer is not interested in Kuznetsov the writer, and the question about *Babi Yar* appears only at the end of the interview: "The Soviet authorities were very unhappy with your novel, *Babi Yar*. Now I know that book and it is a simple account of how the Nazis slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Jews and Ukrainians in the Ukraine. What on earth did they object to in that?" Kuznetsov replies that antisemitism is rampant in the USSR and that the Soviet authorities deny the fact of the genocide of the Jews as such, but notes that his book is more complex than "a simple account" of Safer's formulation: "my novel went rather further than this."

However, it is not quite true that "The Soviet authorities were very unhappy with *Babi Yar*. As Kuznetsov himself wrote: the book "was declared one of the 10 best Soviet books about life in the country and was awarded a diploma by the Central Committee of the Communist youth organization" (Kuznetsov 1969a, 26). *Literaturnaia Gazeta* published a favorable review by Alexander Borschagovsky,[3] which stated that Kuznetsov's novel had a promising future:

> Kuznetsov has written a book whose destiny is beyond doubt. Millions of people eagerly read it as soon as it appeared in the pages of the magazine *Iunost*. Tomorrow, the circle of its readers will greatly expand. It will be translated into many languages … People with different literary tastes will read it, setting aside their debates about the fate of the contemporary novel. This book brings together the honest moral thoughts of an artist, the authoritative power of a document, and the most serious historical information. (Borschagovsky 1966, 8)[4]

In *Novy Mir* Ariadna Gromova mildly reproaches the author for the absence of underground fighters and partisans among the characters of *Babi Yar*, but immediately justifies this by saying that "this aspect of the occupation – the life of ordinary people – was hardly ever mentioned elsewhere … Anatoly Kuznetsov writes only about what actually happened, and about the people he knew; and what he tells [not heroic behavior] is not an exception either" (Gromova 1967, 248–49).[5]

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3 In the early 1990s, Alexandr Borschagovsky will publish a detailed and comprehensive description of the anti-cosmopolite campaign, as well as conduct investigations into the repressions against the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (Borschagovsky 1991; Borschagovsky 1994).

4 Unless otherwise indicated in Works Cited, the translations from Russian are mine.

5 Ariadna Gromova, literary critic and science-fiction writer, experienced the occupation of Kiev firsthand.

The only negative point made by Georgy Radov in his review for *Literaturnaia Rossiia* was that the chapters describing the massacre in Babi Yar lack artistic qualities. However, Radov acknowledges that these chapters are transcriptions of witness accounts, and witness discourse prioritizes factual accuracy over artistry. The chapters about Babi Yar are not intended to be *belles lettres*:

> While reading the chapters devoted to Babi Yar, you don't think about literary adornments. There is no space for artistic embellishments! It's only later, after calming down a bit, that you realize these chapters in the novel may seem paler and drier compared to those where the story is narrated in the first person. In those chapters, the prose is richer, as if touched by the grace of God, while here it is strict, almost like a protocol record, but very detailed and concise at the same time. But I repeat, it is a record, not a portrayal. (Radov 1966, 5)

In the Soviet Union, literary criticism, as well as all literary production, was tightly controlled by the regime and reflected its attitudes. Therefore, it can be inferred that the authorities were not dissatisfied with the censored version of Kuznetsov's novel *Babi Yar*. In fact, it seems that the novel was published at an opportune moment and likely with a specific purpose in mind.

The version of *Babi Yar* that Kuznetsov considered the only true one was published in the West six months after his escape. It included the cuts made by the censors, which were then restored by Kuznetsov in italics (in bold face in the English edition), along with passages written "in freedom" (in square brackets), politically branded and intended for the Western reader. But, if the comments of the author who, as in the title of an earlier defector's, Viktor Kravchenko's 1947 book, "had chosen freedom" were often published on the front pages of periodicals, the book of his life fascinated the press and the public much less.

2 The Generation of the Sixties and Children of the Holocaust

Kuznetsov's novel is one of the most significant texts written about Babi Yar in the USSR, yet it is not the only one. The Holocaust was a problematic topic in the Soviet Union, but it was not completely absent from Soviet literature. During and after the war, many texts were written and published by war correspondents and official writers. These texts were typically Soviet in form and socialist in content, as Soviet authors had to adhere to the official version of history and the aesthetics of socialist realism.

As a student of the Gorky Literary Institute, Kuznetsov would have inevitably crossed paths with Lev Ozerov, who had written an essay about Babi Yar for

Ehrenburg and Grossman's *Black Book* (Ozerov 2002) and the poem "Babi Yar," published in the magazine *Oktiabr* in 1946 (Ozerov 1946). In this poem, Ozerov, a native of Kiev, depicted the genocide using the word "Jewish" only once. However, *The Black Book* was not released in the USSR, and Ozerov's poem was not reprinted after 1946. Among the few published texts about the Holocaust, perhaps only Selvinsky's poem "I Saw It" and Ehrenburg's novel *The Storm* were reprinted during the darkest years of the antisemitic campaign.[6]

Yet with these exceptions, from 1948, when the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee faced repressions, until 1961, when *Literaturnaia Gazeta* published the poem "Babi Yar" by Yevgeny Yevtushenko (Yevtushenko 1961), the Holocaust had been a taboo topic in Soviet literature. What is less known is that Yevtushenko's poem is only the tip of the iceberg of what was written by the generation of sixties (the *shetidesiatniki*) about the abandoned ravines and mass graves. In fact, among this generation of the "children of the 20th Congress" (Yevtushenko 1980, 310) some were children of the Holocaust. They had miraculously escaped extermination, most often thanks to evacuation. Upon their return at the end of the war, they found smoldering ruins and mass graves.

In Ehrenburg's archives, there are letters from Yuri Kaplan, who, as a child, was evacuated with his mother from Kiev at the beginning of the war. In these letters, Kaplan expressed his desire to bear witness and sent Ehrenburg his long poem "Babi Yar," which he had written in 1959 and which was not accepted for publication (Kaplan 1961). In 1962, after Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar" had reverberated throughout the country, Kaplan shared his pain with Ehrenburg, stating, "While I was reading Yevtushenko's 'Babi Yar' in *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, I was crying, I swear. And it wasn't out of jealousy, but rather because I was hurt: why wasn't I allowed to speak about it in my own way?" (Kaplan 1961, 17). Kaplan's way of writing about Babi Yar, even though his poetic voice had not yet fully developed, is more direct, sincere, and painful than that of Yevtushenko. His poem is written without any internal restraints, without any self-censorship, and it vividly describes the antisemitic conversations in the crowd rushing into the street to watch the funeral march of the Jews to Babi Yar. Publishers in Ukraine rejected his work with the same formula that

6 The poem by Selvinsky "Ia eto videl" ("I saw it") was first published in the newspaper *Krasnaya zvezda* on February 27, 1942. Between 1943 and 1953 the poem was included in the collection edited by V. Kazine *Ballady i pesni* [Ballads and songs] (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1943); and in Selvinsky's collections *Voiennaia lirika* [War poetry] (Tashkent: Goslitizdat, 1943); *Krym, Kavkaz, Kouban': stikhi* (Crimea, Caucasus, Kouban': Poems) (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1947); *Lirika* (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1947); *Izbrannoe* [Selected works] (Moscow: Pravda, "Biblioteka Ogoniok" collection, 1948); and *Izbrannye proïzvedenia* [Selected works] (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1953). Ehrenburg's *Buria* [*The Storm*] was published in 1948 (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel'), and reprinted in 1950 (Moscow: Goslitizdat) and, by the same publishing house, as vol. 2 of the five-volume 1953 publication *Sochineniia* [Works].

echoed through the bureaucratic corridors: "The poem 'Babi Yar' needs to include the torments and suffering of other nationalities" (Kaplan 1961, 18). Kaplan found it impossible to falsify the voice that emerged from his memory of Babi Yar, which he had discovered at the age of six, upon his return from evacuation, in May 1944.

While books by the children of deportees published in the United States and Europe mostly explore "emptiness, absence, and blankness" (Rosenman 2007, 35),[7] the poetry of the Soviet "1.5 generation" primarily conveys protest against institutionalized lies. The hidden Western children whose parents had disappeared in Auschwitz inherited a fragmented memory that they strive to articulate, while the children of Babi Yar inherited a suppressed narrative that encompasses pervasive anti-Semitism, collaborationism, and the obliterated and distorted ravines. They refuse to adopt the discourses and voices prescribed by the state. They grew up in close proximity to the ravines, a painful reminder of the dark past that swallowed so many lives. They carry a deep-seated unease and are shaken by the ongoing official antisemitism that continues to pervade their society. As adults, they took up the fight for remembrance, demanding the installation of monuments to mark the mass graves and memorialize the victims. This semi-clandestine movement of the "children of the ravines" was at the heart of spontaneous demonstrations that erupted in the 1960s at the sites of massacres: in April 1963 in Rumbula near Riga, in September 1966 at Babi Yar in Kiev, and in October 1966 at the Ninth Fort in Kaunas.

Kuznetsov's novel, subject to censorship and revisions, had been partly adapted to conform to Soviet ideology. By contrast, the works of the "children of the ravines," such as Kaplan, Gorenstein, and Korzhavin, were fundamentally different and incompatible with the Soviet discourse.[8] Their dark themes and direct confrontation of the Holocaust's atrocities made it impossible to align their works with the social realism promoted by the Soviet regime. The representatives of the "fifth category" ("nationality" was the fifth paragraph in Soviet passports) whose past was massacred and whose present was being suppressed by latent antisemitism, were at odds with both the notion of the brotherhood of nations and the emerging cult of the Great Patriotic War.

The novel-documentary *Babi Yar*, written by a non-Jewish author, was recounting the horror of the occupation in general, rather than the genocide in particular. It was narrated by a Ukrainian-Russian boy who became a popular and proper Soviet author. The text was strong and sincere, but its discourse was softened

7 Unless otherwise indicated in Works Cited, the translations from the French are mine.

8 I mean the novel *Iskuplenie* [Redemption] by Friedrich Gorenstein, written in 1967 in the USSR but published only abroad, in Israel, in the magazine *Vremia i my* in 1979 (Gorenstein 1979), and "Poema sushchestvovaniia" [Poem of existence] by Naum Korzhavin published in Germany in 1976 (Korzhavin 1976).

compared to the direct, pain-ridden speech of the children of the Holocaust, which was unpublishable. Along with Yevtushenko's poem, articles by Viktor Nekrasov about Babi Yar (Nekrasov 1959) and Andrey Voznesensky's "The call of the lake" (Voznesensky 1966) about abandoned places of mass shootings were published during that time. Their voices – the voices of the protest generation – were in line with the non-official ideas of the 1960s, as was the voice of Kuznetsov, who represented the movement of the so-called confessional prose.

In the USSR, the censored version of Kuznetsov's text, along with other texts that were published in large print runs, was intended to serve essentially the same purpose as the tombstone that appeared at Babi Yar in late October 1966. This was a few weeks after the demonstration that had taken place at Babi Yar on the 25th anniversary of the massacre, an "unauthorized gathering." However, the tombstone was located far from the site of the mass shooting and only announced that a monument would be erected there in the future. Both the censored texts and the tombstone were attempts by the Soviet regime to control the narrative and channel the memory of the genocide, while producing the appearance that the topic was not being silenced. The Victory Day holiday, which had been abolished by Stalin in 1947 but reinstated in the Soviet calendar in 1965, served as another shift in the government's attempts to shape public memory. The representations of war and the various rituals associated with it were now elevated to a cult (Tumarkin 1994; Weiner 2001). Only official mourning was allowed and only the commemoration of de-ethnicized Soviet victims was possible.

3 Boris Polevoi: Witness and Censor

In the preface to the second edition of novel published by Posev in 1973, reprinted in Russia in 2014, Kuznetsov writes that Mikhail Suslov himself gave approval for the publication of *Babi Yar* after reading the manuscript, and that Boris Polevoi worked on editing it (Kuznetsov 2014, 13).[9] Indeed, the chief editors in the USSR also acted as censors: "You cannot get around Polevoi, because he will see things the censor will miss. He will immediately mark your best passages with a thick green pencil: 'Cut' or 'Unsuitable'" (Kuznetsov 1969a, 26).

According to Kuznetsov, after receiving the "castrated novel" (Kuznetsov 1969a, 26), he said to Polevoi: "You are a frightful cynic." Polevoi's face "broke into a smile of self-satisfaction and he simply said: 'Yes' and he added: 'So what you think you are going to write and I am going to carry the can? The writing is yours, the back-sides are ours'" (Kuznetsov 1969a, 26). Twice a recipient of the Stalin Prize, Polevoi was always

9 In both the English and French editions, the author's preface was published in a shortened version.

at the forefront of official writers, completely subservient to the government. Nevertheless, he was one of the first to see and describe the traces of genocide.

In late 1941 and early 1942, Polevoi was stationed as a war correspondent for *Pravda* on the Kalinin front during the Soviet offensive. It was during this time that he wrote the story "Mamasha" [Mummy], which tells about the rescue of a Jewish woman named Sarah Fainshtein in the kolkhoz "Budionny" near Kalinin. Although the annihilation of the Jews is not the central focus of the story, it serves as a haunting backdrop and resurfaces in several scenes:

> Instantly, Sarah Markovna recalled the harrowing accounts of refugees about the brutal atrocities committed by the Hitlerites against the Jews. About the town of Sebezh, where the Jewish population was summoned to the local synagogue, the doors were nailed shut with logs and the old wooden building was set ablaze. (Polevoi 1942, 185)[10]

> But then, on the gates of the fire storage, a standard order from the commandant's office appeared, stating that all Jews must immediately register at the nearest commandant's post. Those who had Jews residing in their houses, as well as those who knew their whereabouts, were ordered to report to the same location within 24 hours. Failure to comply with this order would result in the threat of execution by firing squad for both parties. (Polevoi 1942, 187)

The main drive of this story is to glorify the actions of Soviet citizens who put their lives at risk to hide an old Jewish woman:

> She said that… I've lost my mind, if I thought she would throw a living person to the beasts to save her own skin. She said that if I dared to think of her in such a way, it must be because the Soviet government did not raise me properly. (Polevoi 1942, 187)

In conclusion, Polevoi asserts that the members of the kolkhoz did not perform a heroic deed by saving Sarah Fainshtein: "We cannot simply commend people for merely being Soviet citizens" (Polevoi 1942, 189). Indeed, all Polevoi's literary works, in one way or another, are paeans to the Soviet people.

In the spring of 1944, Polevoi arrived in Bershad, a shtetl in southwestern Ukraine. Bershad had been an important center of the Hasidic world in the 19th century and was renowned for its "tallits" (prayer shawls). The shtetl had just been liberated, and traces of annihilation were everywhere. In this devastated Yiddishland, Polevoi wrote "Rasskaz ravina" (The story of a rabbi). Told from a first-person perspective, this story differs from Polevoi's typical impersonal literary chronicles where "they" are the good Soviet citizens. "The Story of a Rabbi" begins with "I":

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10 I could not find confirmation that the Jews in Sebezh were burned alive. They were shot during the severe winter of 1941–1942, shortly before the city was retaken by the Red Army. Apparently, Polevoi was writing on the hot trail and did not have enough information. The Jewish women were burned in Novosokolniki, 100 km from Sebezh (Altman 2002, 251).

> I met him in the streets of Bershad, a shtetl in the Vinnytsia region. Tall, thin, stooped with age, he walked among the crooked houses, holding a long silk levite [lapserdak] in his hand. His face was emaciated, as if molded from dark wax; white curls descended from his greasy hat … I understood, from his accent, that he was one of those unfortunate Jews from Bukovina, who were driven from Chernivtsi here by the Romanians, on the orders of the Germans. (Polevoi 1944, 211)

The author's first person singular, will be transformed, two paragraphs later, into the survivor's "I" giving his testimony: "Who am I? I am Berko Ikhil, a rabbi, the only one of the seven rabbis to survive here" (Polevoi 1944, 211). The rabbi invites the authorial persona to follow him into the small, smoke-filled room he occupies and relates his story of deportation to Transnistria:

> In the morning, our huge caravan set out towards the East. The Romanian convoy guards armed with whips and sticks marched on the sides. They forced us to hasten our pace as if we were cattle and killed those who were exhausted … I won't tell you all the hardships of this march. We crossed rivers on foot, and children drowned in front of their mothers. We climbed the mountain on a winding road … People, exhausted by hunger, were falling by the dozens, by the hundreds. (Polevoi 1944, 211)

This dark testimony presents a striking contrast to the sanitized and impersonal account of the rescue of Sarah Fainshtein in "Mummy." "The Rabbi's Tale" was supposed to be published in the magazine *Oktiabr* in July 1944, but it never was. The magazine's archives contain the last version of the story, which had been reviewed by censors. Only one sentence was crossed out: "Soon I will appear before my God" (Polevoi 1944, 211). Moreover, the rabbi's testimony does not appear in Polevoi's war memoirs *Eti chetyre goda* [These four years] (Polevoi 1974), even though there is a chapter with a detailed account of the reporter's arrival in the liberated town of Bershad.

As for the story "Mummy," it was renamed "Her Family" [Ee semia] to emphasize the cohesion of the Soviet people, and included in the collection of war stories titled *My – Sovetskie liudi* [We are Soviet people], which was published in 1948 and awarded the Stalin Prize (Polevoi 1948).

In 1945, Polevoi was attached to the First Ukrainian Front, which liberated Auschwitz-Birkenau. On January 29, 1945, he sent a report about the camp to his superiors (Polevoi 1945a), and several days later *Pravda* published his article titled "The Death Factory" (Polevoi 1945b).[11] "The term 'The Death Factory' was not

11 In his report, Polevoi mentions that "Jews were immediately sent to the so-called death factory," while in his article, as well as in other Soviet articles about the extermination's camps — for example, by Konstantin Simonov (Simonov 1944) or Boris Gorbatov (Gorbatov 1944), the nationality is suppressed. Only Vasily Grossman, describing the camps, persistently inserted the nationality of the victims (Grossman, 1944a; Grossman, 1944b).

originally coined by Polevoi: reflections on industrialized annihilation and on the organization of camps as factories were already present in the Soviet press following the discovery of the first extermination sites in late July and August 1944.

In the months leading up to Kuznetsov's escape, *Roman-gazeta* [Novel-Newspaper] published Polevoi's "Nuremberg Diaries," which provided insights into his work as a correspondent at the Nuremberg trials. From this text we learn that Polevoi entered Kiev with Red Army units on the day of liberation, November 6, 1943, and was among the first witnesses of Babi Yar:

> Real life in the city had not yet begun. The blown-up Khreshchatyk lay in ruins. The debris of an ancient church behind the walls of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra stood out starkly against the trees covered in hoarfrost … Whoever we spoke to, we always heard: "Babi Yar." And we went to the southwest suburb. What we saw couldn't be forgotten since then. It lives in me. It will probably live until the grave – a steep slope of a large ravine and, like a geological deposit, a mixture of human bodies along the cut of the slope. A two-meter layer. At that very moment, sappers were opening it up. Their faces were wrapped in wet towels – the stench was so strong, despite the frosty day. Even we, who had already seen the ravine in Kharkov and piles of people shot on the outskirts of Poltava, froze, stunned by this sight. And there was some gray, disheveled woman wandering around, crying or laughing, and a dark-skinned girl trying to lead her away. (Polevoi 1969, 52–53)

The passage does not mention the nationality of the victims, except for a reference to a "dark-skinned girl." Polevoi was always cautious about addressing the specific suffering of the Jewish people during the Second World War. Moreover, in 1969, the political context was different from the early and mid-1960s, and direct references to genocide in the Soviet establishment became almost impossible again. After the Six-Day War in 1967, a significant anti-Zionist campaign gained momentum in the Soviet Union, which was then pursuing a pro-Arab policy. Polevoi was a staunch conformist and always maneuvered according to the political directive of the moment, feeling the limits of what he could write about. At the same time, the extract about Babi Yar conveys a powerful sense of despair and sorrow; the pathos gives way to the description of a post-apocalyptic world: a world in the aftermath of catastrophe.

Furthermore, the passage contains a slip-up on Polevoi's internal sensations as a witness: "What we saw couldn't be forgotten since then. It lives in me. It will probably live until the grave" (Polevoi 1969, 52). Even though most of Polevoi's experience as a witness and discoverer of the genocide was never revealed, Babi Yar lived within him, and when he was censoring Kuznetsov's "Babi Yar," he forced Kuznetsov's painful discourse into permissible boundaries, which was precisely his expertise.

4 Babi Yar and State Antisemitism

The emergence of the Babi Yar discourse on the international scene in the 1960s is closely linked to the issue of Soviet antisemitism. The Kurenevka tragedy in the spring of 1961, when a torrent of mud destroyed the dam built to retain the liquefied soil that had been used to fill Babi Yar, was already perceived by some Western media as a hyperbole of state antisemitism (Kumpa 1961; *The New York Times* 1961, 1). After Yevtushenko's poem, the Babi Yar ravine became, in the West as in the USSR, an emblem of the oppression and harassment of Soviet Jews.

Babi Yar was absent from the memory of the extermination for a long time, or, to be less categorical, it was very little present. There are many reasons for this. They are, of course, political, but also conceptual, because the Shoah was constituted as an event but also as a paradigm and an aesthetic object based on the camp system.

The extermination in the gas chambers by Zyklon B is the abyssal point in the post-Auschwitz thought. The extermination that interpenetrates with the production, effected on an assembly line in the factory of death, is set up as a paradigm of the destructiveness of the century. In 1949, Martin Heidegger uses the formula "fabrication of corpses" as an image of a new type of destruction, a perverted industrial production.[12] Hannah Arendt took up the formula in her reflections on totalitarianism; she sees "the mass manufacture of corpses" in the camp as the essence and culmination of the totalitarian regime, as the stage that follows "the historically and politically intelligible preparation of living corpses" (Arendt 1994, 701). The Frankfurt School pondered the relationship between Auschwitz and Western modernity: Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer saw Nazism not as a relapse into barbarism, but, conversely, as a by-product of technical and industrial progress.

The focus on the method of destruction by gas, on the technocratic side of the Nazi genocidal enterprise, weighed heavily on the reflection. The massacre in Babi Yar was not an industrial genocide, nor a distorted mirror of technical progress. Forgotten or pushed to the margins of thought, the massacres committed by the "Einsatzgruppen" in the USSR simply did not fit into the configuration of this paradigm.

When, in 1965, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* sent Elie Wiesel across the Iron Curtain, the task entrusted to him was, above all, to investigate Soviet antisemitism. Yet while visiting Kiev and Babi Yar, Wiesel grasped the particularities of the genocide as it had been perpetrated in the USSR: poorly organized, disorderly,

12 In his Bremen lecture, "Insight into That Which Is" (1949), Heidegger said: "Agriculture is today a motorized food industry, in essence the same as the fabrication of corpses in gas chambers and extermination camps, the same as the blockade and starving of countries, the same as the fabrication of atomic bomb" (Presner 2006, 87).

pervasive massacres, with eyewitnesses, whose traces do not fade away despite the efforts of the state. The mass grave remains a grave even if it is not marked by a monument or a tombstone; one comes there to mourn.

After the publication of Wiesel's *The Jews of Silence* in 1966, the West could no longer ignore the existence (or rather the non-existence, due to the Soviet authorities' efforts) of Babi Yar. That same year, 1966, thanks to a pirate recording, Shostakovich's Symphony No. 13 reached the West, and then the score was smuggled by Rostropovich to Eugene Ormandy, who gave the first American performance of it with the Philadelphia Orchestra, in 1969 (Schonberg 1970). In October 1967, the Darmstadt Symphony premiered it in the United States. The same month, the trial of the "Einsatzgruppe" 4A, responsible for the shootings in Kiev on September 29 and 30, 1941, began in Darmstadt. One of the witnesses at the trial was the Babi Yar survivor Dina Pronicheva, whose account was included by Kuznetsov in his documentary novel. Thus, Babi Yar, often from the perspective of Soviet anti-Semitism, appeared regularly in the Western media in the late 1960s.

It does not seem so paradoxical that the publication of the censored version of the novel received much more attention than the one from 1970. The novel became a sensation precisely when a Soviet author, being inside the USSR, wrote and published, despite state antisemitism, a whole novel about a cursed ravine, forbidden to be remembered, and even placed the name of this ravine in the title. Kuznetsov thus counterposed the official monologism; he violated the silence imposed on what the Jewish people suffered specifically and in its entirety.

Seen as breaking the state taboo, the publication of the novel in the USSR was extensively covered by the media in the West, e.g.:

> A graphic description of the roundup and shooting of Jews during the Nazi occupation of Kiev, capital of the Soviet Ukraine, is given in a new Soviet novel. The Soviet Union has been hesitant in the past to publicize the facts that Jews were the main victims of the Kiev massacre … The new novel is being serialized in the Soviet Union's most popular magazine. Written by A. Kuznetsov, it is entitled "Babi Yar." (*The Washington Post* 1966, 7)

> The first detailed sympathetic account of anti-Jewish pogrom by a non-Jewish writer. (Shapiro 1966, 5)

> For the first time since 1941, Soviet readers could find a detailed description of the massacre of tens of thousands of Jews by the Germans at Babi Yar. (*Le Monde* 1966, 11)

> It still takes courage for a Soviet writer to mention the massacre of Jews…, let alone to condemn antisemitism. This is the significance of Baby Yar by Anatoli Kuznetsov. For nearly twenty years, the murdered Soviet Jews had been turned into "unpersons" by the authorities … [Kuznetsov] uses "the Aesopian method" of hiding where it is still dangerous or impossible to speak openly.

> He not only refers to the murder of Jews – a taboo subject until now – but gives a picture of Ukrainian reactions. (Sherman 1967, 10)

The New-York Times published a long article on "Babi Yar" on the front page:

> In a documentary novel about the mass executions in September 1941 a Soviet writer Anatoly Kuznetsov rebuts a contention, advanced here when Nikita Khrushchev was Premier, that the victims at Babi Yar included not only Jews but also Ukrainians and Russians. (Anderson 1966, 1)

In fact, Kuznetsov writes not only about the Jewish victims of Babi Yar. Even in its uncensored version, the novel starts with a metaphor of international ashes that he picks up from the bottom of a ravine after the liberation of Kiev. But in *Babi Yar*, Kuznetsov clearly depicts the genocidal nature of the destruction of Jews, reflecting the postulate later articulated by Viktor Nekrasov: "People of different nationalities were shot here, but only Jews were killed for being Jews" (Nekrasov 1986, 4).

Despite the censorship, the Western press was able to identify the rebellious character of the novel and its importance to Soviet society. The novel was seen as an evidence account about the extermination of Jews but also as a finally realistic chronicle of the occupation, one that reflected the trauma of the war experienced by a child and, unlike usual Soviet literature, did not divide the world into "bad occupiers" and "good resisters." *Babi Yar,* purged by Soviet censorship, is read then as a complex multi-faceted book, as an "uneven book, hovering between reminiscence, documentation, straight biography and eyewitness testimony" (Bearne 1967, 10).

The critics were able to discern in the text a part of what censorship had obstinately tried to hide. In fact, a few years earlier, the French reader already had access to one of Kuznetsov's texts purged, as it were, from censorship; however, this text was not authorized by Kuznetsov.

5 Unmasking Censorship

In 1958, Editions Vitte published a novel by Kuznetsov under the title *L'étoile dans le brouillard* [The star in the fog] (Kouznietsoff 1958). Presented under an enticing cover, a star rising above a barbed wire setting, this novel was, as it were, translated by priest Paul Chaleil. Formerly a mentor at the "St. Nicholas" high school in Harbin, Chaleil was arrested by the Soviets in 1949, sentenced to 25 years of hard labor, and deported to Ozerlag near Irkutsk, where prisoners were working on the construction of the Bratsk hydroelectric station. After reading Anatoly Kuznetsov's novel *Prodolzhenie legendy* ["Sequel to a Legend"] which was set in the Irkutsk construction site, Chaleil, instead of translating the original literally, deleted some passages to convey the spirit of the events he himself had witnessed. "[W]e read the opening lines

of the novel and … immediately found ourselves immersed in real life, in the life we experienced from 1948 to 1955 during our seven years of detention in Soviet concentration camps, precisely in the places where the events of the story unfold," he writes in the preface (Chaleil 1958, 7). He also informs the reader that he has chosen to remove some "lengthy" and "descriptive" chapters. And each time, instead of the lengthy passages, he provides a brief, slightly sarcastic summary of the elided content directly in the text. Thus, the two most triumphant chapters in Kuznetsov's novel, which depict the launching of the dam and the struggle against the rising Angara River, are summarized by Chaleil in just a few lines:

> Spotlights and cameras. Mountains of concrete blocks … The crowd gathers to admire this grandiose spectacle – a veritable carnival … The drivers forget to eat, drink, and sleep – they are all eager to set records … Everyone strives to transport the largest number of blocks … even the "parasites." (Kouznietsoff 1958, 308)

However, two years later, Editions Julliard published the same novel under the very different title of *Sibérie heureuse* [Happy Siberia] (Kouznetsov 1960) while Kuznetsov sued Editions Vitte for forgery. At the trial, experts proved that the Julliard version was the only authentic one.[13]

Chaleil did not submit to this decision and tried to justify himself by clarifying the situation. In a letter to the *Figaro littéraire,* he explained that in both cases it was not a translation of the same text by Kuznetsov: "In fact, I translated Kuznetsov's novel which appeared for the first time in the magazine *Iunost* in July 1957. This is stated in full at the beginning of my preface. The Soviet authorities probably did not appreciate the text of this novel, so Kuznetsov had to change it, and a second, contradictory version was published later in a large and cheap magazine (500,000 copies): *Roman-gazeta*, in February 1958" (Chaleil 1961, 7). This letter led to the discussion about the power of Soviet censorship and the ability to read between the lines. Surprisingly, even *Combat,* a newspaper close to the French Left, sided with Chaleil:

> the details given by Chaleil on the different Russian language editions of the incriminated novel seem to us to correspond to the truth. All those who have the opportunity to read Russian … know that, since the death of Stalin, novels have appeared in the Soviet Union, … relatively "tendentious," either in the form of parables or denouncing, … certain aspects of production, of the life of kolkhozes … It is clear that sometimes it takes only a little to turn these generally mediocre works into pamphlets against the regime. But let us not delude ourselves: a work like

13 The trial lasted from 1960 to 1969 and, in the end, it was the publishing house and the author of the translation who were found guilty. The literary expertise was conducted by the Parisian literary and artistic agency, an organization in charge of cultural exchanges between East and West, created and chaired by Louis Aragon, a committed communist.

> Dudintsev's *Not by Bread Alone* was not an isolated novel in the Soviet production.[14] … Only the author had a little more talent than the others. So, he was spotted by Western publishers on the lookout for sensationalism, just as Kuznetsov's novel was probably spotted by Father Chaleil. (Cazals 1961, 9)

Thus, in the 1960s, critics understand the backstage of Soviet literature and the institutional mechanisms of censorship. Anyone who has read Boris Pasternak's letter of supplication and obedience addressed to Khrushchev after his refusal of the Nobel Prize has perfectly understood the methods used by the regime against a disgraced author.[15] In the closed and strictly controlled space of Soviet literature, the margin between glory and rejection, rise and fall, was infinitesimal. "Reworked editions" were common practice, and each new version was meant not to seek perfection but to toe the official line. As a result, texts that dared to touch the taboos of history reached the recipients illuminated, like icons with the right colors, with the obligatory ideological positions, and often preceded by public penitence of a would-be guilty writer. Yevtushenko had to repent in public after Khrushchev's criticism of his poem "Babi Yar" and to commit himself to "correcting the passages that needed clarification" (Izvestia of the CCPCUS 1990, 201). He reworked the poem overnight, replacing the most daring stanzas with conformist lines. These radical changes seem particularly absurd if one thinks of the very high circulation of *Literaturnaia Gazeta* which had published the first version a few months earlier. Shostakovich's 13th Symphony was performed and recorded with the words of this revised text.[16]

In 1969, after Kuznetsov had asked for political asylum in England, he sent a letter to the French Minister of Justice asking him to rehabilitate Chaleil (Kouznetsov 1969b). He also wrote to Chaleil to apologize and explain that the Soviet power forced him to file a complaint and that *L'étoile dans le brouillard* was "the only translation that had captured the essence of the novel" (Kouznetsov 1969a).

The Soviet author had been forced to play the game imposed by the state, to accept the constraints. The great novelty of the 1970 edition was that Kuznetsov was not satisfied with restoring the text, but revealed the degrading manipulations of the censorship. He wanted to share the exemplarity of an experience that he knew was

14 *Not by Bread Alone* by Vladimir Dudintsev was translated in France from the version published in *Novy mir*. The book was very warmly received and read as a novel denouncing the growing gap between the nomenclature and the Soviet people. Soviet readers did not see this version in book form. Dudintsev had to rework the text, and write an "explanatory" preface after which it was published by Sovetskii pisatel' (Dudintsev 1957).

15 Pasternak's letter to Khrushchev was published in *Le Monde,* on November 4, 1958 (Pasternak 1958).

16 The first performance of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 13, with the original text of the poem, took place on December 18, 1962.

common to all Soviet writers; he explicitly undertook the task of showing the intrusions of censorship, serious and fundamental.

The typographical play establishes a reading in relief, and reveals the prohibition of thinking imposed on Soviet citizens. It draws our critical attention not only to the content of the censored passages but also to the reasons for the Soviet censorship, to the logic of this editorial sabotage. Thus, we hold in our hands not only "the document in the form of a novel" about Babi Yar but also a valuable and subversive document on the censorship of the time, which allows us to grasp every turn of the propaganda and the stakes of official truth. The text becomes revealing in its very falsification: *falsum index sui et veri*. We see how the work of censorship can serve as a source: by hiding what needed to be said, it reveals it. The documentary novel of Kuznetsov is a prominent example of a "political palimpsest" (Leichter-Flack 2015) that the critics of the time did not know how to use.

Kuznetsov was a pioneer in employing different font styles to convey the multilayered nature of the novel and to expose the traces of state violence within the literary text. He showed that it would be wrong to consider only the tip of the iceberg, that part of the text, which, once published, constitutes its visible surface. We are dealing here with a parallel history of a literature that requires a new approach, another poetics, and the setting up of new instruments of reading. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, during the glasnost period and the collapse of the USSR, many works would be published this way. In the *Black Book of Russian Jewry*, the process of censoring is shown with the help of type-switching as well.[17]

6 A Document in the Form of a Novel – Literature of Testimony

In the preface of 1970, Kuznetsov delves at length on the dilemmas that a Soviet writer necessarily goes through: to what concessions should he resign himself, to what extent should he allow himself to be manipulated? Moreover, his documentary novel is not just a literary work, it is a testimony. The writing of testimony is an act of emergence of the subject; it does not support the intervention of an external authority. A testimony can only have one author. Testimony is a discourse addressed, personalized, authenticated, and signed by the one who knows that he has the moral responsibility to relate the things he has experienced or seen, and known. This

17 The publication of *The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry*, edited by Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman, was banned in the 1940s. Its documentation was confiscated by NKVD with the archives of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. The *Black Book* was published in full in 1993 (Ehrenburg and Grossman 1993).

discourse cannot have any other origin than experience itself, and this experience is not only individual. The witness says "I," but this "I" enters into an intimate relationship with the "we" of the victim.

The 20th century gave birth to a new kind of literature: literary testimony – a testimony that has literary form and message. Though the social practice (to witness in writing) emerged already in the trenches of the First World War and during the Armenian genocide, the development of this kind of writing was definitely triggered by deportations to Nazi camps and by the Jewish Catastrophe in Europe. Elie Wiesel famously observed that "if the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, then our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony" (Wiesel 1977, 9).

Literary testimony seeks to render a seemingly unspeakable atrocity, to reproduce and to implant it into reality. It is well known that literature was not stopped by Auschwitz, nor even *in* Auschwitz. Sonderkommando manuscripts, called "Auschwitz Scrolls" prove that writing poetry still had a meaning for the condemned. After the end of Nazi camps, three different characters appeared on the Western historical landscape: a survivor, a witness, and a witness who becomes a writer. A survivor tries to adapt himself to normal life and, in some cases, to forget everything about the past. A witness takes the floor and talks about how he survived and about those who did not. Finally, witness-writers talked about what they saw behind the barbed wires through the artifice of literary writing (Rosenman 2007).

A new dimension appeared in the 20th century literary testimonies, not characteristic of the 19th century memoirs: the attesting function. Testimonial literature stands closer to a legal document or report, to a testimony in court, than to *belles lettres* (Detue and Lacoste 2021). The purpose of this "legal report" is to write and publish an account about the atrocities witnessed, and to present this account for public judgement. And even if these texts could not be added to an indictment now or back then, they are written for some future historical tribunal.

Literary evidence is characterized by a special narrative mode and by the author's experience and personal involvement. In the literature of the Catastrophe, the vital functions of art are evident, but they are inflected by the act of bearing witness, which limits the flights of the imagination and obliges the authors not only to recount the "truth" as experienced but to swear about it by their presence at the event, to guarantee truth-telling (Coquio 2007).

The witness of the Catastrophe takes an oath to the living in the name of the dead: by the truth, he enunciates, he must try to do justice to the disappeared and to re-establish a continuum destroyed by historical violence. It is this demand that has given rise to the literature of testimony.

The critical approach to this literature has been developing since the 1970s. In the United States, the tendency of "Holocaust literature" is to see the Holocaust as,

above all, deportation, and thus as an event in the history of Judaism. Sometimes this approach transcends the cultural sphere to analyze these texts in terms of theological reflection.[18] In France, where there is a tendency to minimize the Jewish specificity of the deportation and of the writings which result from it, the term in use is "concentration-camp literature." This expression, borrowed from David Rousset's *L'Univers concentrationaire* ["The concentrationary universe"], published in English as *The Other Kingdom*, reflects a perception of history and writing that is more political than ethnoreligious. This paradigm changed after the release of Claude Lanzmann's film in 1985, which led to discussions about art as testimony and founded the topos of murder "without witnesses." The survivors' narratives then became the only visible element of an invisible event. It appears to counter the Nazi project of absolute destruction; the interior of the camp is made known to all.[19]

Yet this paradigm is no longer sufficient. As soon as one looks at the Shoah in the USSR, it is not the camp and the deportation that designate the annihilation, but the ravines and the mass graves. The annihilation of the Jews in the USSR was particularly radical, as the "Einsatzgruppen" left behind them *judenfrei* territories – places "freed from the Jews," in Nazi jargon. Moreover, the antisemitic campaign within the USSR at the end of the war led the few survivors to hide their past, to conceal themselves among the others, to fade away, and to become invisible. Under such conditions, the survivors could not become witnesses, could not speak out to transmit their unheard-of experience to others.

Thus, Soviet literature was deprived of the voices of the survivors of the Shoah. It is true that when Kuznetsov's novel was published in 1966 in *Iunost*, the reader in the USSR had already been able to read Maria Rolnikaite's account of the deportation, which had been published a year earlier.[20] But the survivors of the ravines had not yet testified in the space of Soviet literature, and, reading Kuznetsov's novel, one understands why. Whereas the images of the crematoria and barbed wire in distant camps revealed the absolute evil of Nazism and did not contradict the official truth about the struggle with Nazism in the USSR, Kuznetsov's book subverts this picture.

Kuznetsov's text is the narrative of an indirect witness, not a survivor. In the East, where the genocide was an event *with* witnesses, non-Jews who were not at the epicenter of violence were the witnesses, but in the sense of *testis*. Giorgio Agamben reminded us that Latin had two words for witness: *testis*, which originally meant the

18 Thus David Roskies claims a quasi-liturgical status of the texts composed by Jews during the Second World War, more precisely those from the Ringelblum archives that bore the code-name *Oneg Shabbat* [Joys of the Sabbath] (Roskies 1994).

19 For a comparison of the development of research in France and in the United States cf. Grierson 2003, 63–68 and Coquio 2015: 53–65.

20 Rolnikaite's "camp diary," which originally was not a diary but a series of poems in Yiddish, was published in a censored version by the literary magazine *Zvezda* (Rolnikaite 1965).

one who stands as a third party between the two parties in a trial, and *superstes*, the one who has lived through an event (Agamben 2003, 17). In his novel Kuznetsov combines first-person narrative with the stories of those, who survived in Babi Yar. The genocide is transmitted not only from different positions and perspectives, but also at different points: the part before Babi Yar, witnessed by the author, the execution itself, retold by survivor Dina Pronicheva; and the Syrets concentration camp and removing the traces of the genocide, described by Vladimir Davydov. The author compensates the lacunae in his knowledge by the testimonies of the *superstites* and by documents.

Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar* follows the witness discourse to the letter. It is written in first person – it is "I" who recounts the story, but, in addition, the book gives us an opportunity to hear polyphony. The author emphasizes the importance of testimony, constructing his novel to resemble a speech in court: "**I am writing it as thought I were giving evidence under oath in the very highest court and I am ready to answer to every single word**" (Anatoli 1970, 17). In the paragraphs in which he addresses the reader, we seem to sense the author's gestures on a physical level. This is intuitive writing, a type of narrative born out of an absolute impasse. Hence the recurrent intrusive emphasis on credibility.

Aleksei Kuznetsov, Anatoly Kuznetsov's son and one of his finest critics, notes in the preface to the Russian edition: "The confessional character of his prose, its maximum frankness, and openness – it is no longer realism, it is something more. If you like, it is not quite literature anymore" (Kuznetsov 2014, 17).

The writer-witness seeks to make the reader feel the breach of history; he is in search of new techniques and new literary forms. Kuznetsov also goes through this painful quest for a form of writing, the result of which is his "documentary novel":

> **Time and again I set about the task of writing an ordinary documentary novel on the basis of my notes, but without the slightest hope that it would ever be published.**
>
> **Apart from that, something rather strange happened to me. I had been trying to write a straightforward novel in accordance with the rules of "social realism."**… **But the truth of real life, which cried out from every line written in my child's notebook, immediately lost all its vividness and became trite, flat, false and finally dishonest when it was turned into "artistic truth."**… **I am writing this book now without bothering about any literary rules** … **This book records only truth – AS IT REALLY HAPPENED.** (Anatoli 1970, 13–14)

The aesthetics of socialist realism implies writing about the would-be order of socialism; it serves to conceal the real and to propose a falsified discourse – for to live in totalitarianism is to live in a pseudo-reality. Its principles are in absolute contradiction with the nature of the testimony, which tends to be spontaneous, impulsive, revelatory of the destruction of the "self," as well as of the loss of the human and of atrocious death. The texts that follow the doctrine of socialist realism, even if they

report on harsh physical conditions, seek to stage not the suffering "I" but the positive character who, amid suffering, turns into a fighter for the just cause. The text reproduces a binary scheme: a hero confronts an evil. The art that speaks of the Shoah must be the art of deformation; it cannot be either heroic art or the art of beautiful forms. Soviet literature is the antithesis of such art.

The censor was able to bring Kuznetsov's novel closer to the official version of history, but could not change the tone of the book, could not confine it to the strict frameworks of the official aesthetic. The book testifies, with a particular strength – because it is the testimony of a child, therefore the speech is direct, raw, not veiled – of the fall of civilization, of the animosity and violence of humans, of the destruction of social bonds, of the cancelling of morality by an animal instinct of self-preservation. The child is like a sponge: he absorbs cruelty and adapts to this new world where he must survive at all cost.

Indeed, it is not the narrative about the genocide that jarred on the censor (the chapters on Babi Yar and the Syrets camp are little affected by the censorship), but the perception of the world by the child who is being subjected to the violence of history.

Here are some of the excerpts that the censor hunted down:

> **I fell really vicious, ready to kill the dog with the saw, attack it with my teeth or poke its eyes out with my fingers** … **All dogs are afraid, just like people who behave like dogs, if you go for them or throw something at them. You have to attack them, to go for them, otherwise you are lost.** (Anatoli 1970, 236)

> I realized that my grandfather, that great admirer of the Germans, was a fool. That there is in this world **neither brains, nor goodness, nor good sense, *but only*** brute force. Bloodshed. Starvation. Death. That I was alive and siting there with my brushes beneath the stall, but no one knew why. **That there was not the slightest hope, not even a glimmer of hope, of justice being done. It would never happen. No one would ever do it.** (Anatoli 1970, 204)

In 1967, critics noticed that the transmission of reality through a child's voice allowed the discarding of pre-formatted language and injunctions of official discourse:

> Seeing events through the eyes of a child is a literary technique much favored by the contemporary generation of Soviet writers. It enables them to present events with a clarity and "objectivity" which the clouded and prejudiced adult "I" narrator will not convey. (Bearne 1967, 10)

In the Soviet Union, Kuznetsov worked under conditions where thought was fettered and disconnected from the process that was taking place in Western literature "after Auschwitz." Nevertheless, he was able to create a text which corresponds to literary testimony in the fullest sense of this term. He intuited the many specific features of this genre, including the role of literature in the transmission of a testimony. He offered a document that was created with the aid of literature.

It is not surprising that in 1970, when the research on the literature of the Catastrophe was in its infancy, neither critics nor readers could identify this singularity of Kuznetsov's documentary novel. In the censored version of *Babi Yar* published in 1967 by The Dial Press, known for its numerous publications on Eastern Europe, the translator Jacob Guralsky misconstrued the innovative nature of the genre and gave *Babi Yar* the subtitle, "a documentary novel." In the French translation of 1967, André Robel was more attentive to the original title, having kept the definition "A Document in the Form of a Novel." For unknown reasons, the 1970 edition shortened the preface "To the readers," and the French reader received neither the explanations of Kuznetsov about the tormented course of his testimony, nor about the choice of subtitle.

In 2011, the Laffont publishing house, hoping to attract the public that was now interested in testimonies, wrote in capital letters on the cover: "a great work of testimony on the Holocaust in the USSR." But *Babi Yar* is not a testimony about the Shoah as such. This book speaks of several phenomena at once, of the interweaving of violence. A place of huge massacre, Babi Yar becomes throughout the story an image of a "system" of destruction, of the destructive madness of history. "**The world was just one big Babi Yar**," concludes the teenage protagonist, and this formula is, of course, cut by the censor (Anatoli 1970, 204).

Thus, Kuznetsov's "document in the form of a novel" does not really align with Holocaust narratives of the first generation, though it is like them: autobiographical, realistic, written in the first person and in chronological order. On the other hand, it is too traditional to fit into the second-generation or "Post-Testimony" Holocaust literature, where the genocide becomes, in its own right, a subject of literary fiction.

Even if research has advanced considerably in recent decades, Soviet texts have not yet been fully integrated into the reflections on the literature of the Shoah.[21] This corpus implies a re-evaluation of the category of testimony. The literature of

21 A turning point in literary studies took place in 2011 when we saw Soviet literature of the Holocaust enter the research scene. For example, in 2011, Harriet Murav, in her book M*usic from a Speeding Train: Jewish Literature in Post-Revolution Russia* analyzed the poems of Ilya Selvinsky and Perets Markish, as well as the texts of Der Nister (Murav 2011). In the same year, Maxim Shrayer published an article on Ilya Selvinsky, Lev Ozerov, and Ilya Ehrenburg (Shrayer 2011). Two years later, he published a study reconstructing Selvinsky's experience as a war-correspondent Holocaust witness (Shrayer 2013). The year 2012 saw an article by Boris Czerny, on testimonies and literary works of the 1940s about the Babi Yar Massacre (Czerny 2012). In 2013, Leona Toker published "The Holocaust in Russian Literature" (Toker 2013). In the same year, Annie Epelboin and Asia Kovrigina published *La Littérature de Ravins* (Epelboin and Kovriguina 2013), a study on the specificity of Soviet Holocaust literature, and organized a conference on the same topic. Leona Toker in her book *Gulag Literature and the Literature of Nazi Camps: An Intercontexual Reading* explores Soviet Holocaust texts alongside Gulag stories (Toker 2019). Marat Grinberg analyzed responses to the Holocaust in Soviet poetry (by Satunovsky, Slutsky, Lipkin, Galich) (Grinberg 2020). Gennady Estraikh has recently analyzed the Diary of Masha Rolnikaite (Estraikh 2022).

testimony has, in fact, a geography and a history. The unearthed corpus of "khurbn literatur" – poems, chronicles, diaries written in the Polish ghettos – has already shown that the critical model and generic categorical mold established in Western literary history are too narrow. Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar* has the power to influence our view of testimony because it demonstrates that the effects of Soviet terror must be taken into account in order to examine the constraints that weighed on testimonial writing. The specificity of testimonial texts is associated with the context, including the political context, in which they were born.

The novel about Babi Yar that has made its mark on the public in the West (especially the English-speaking reader) is not Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar* but D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, published in 1981. This novel, whose "accuracy" and "evocative power" are emphasized by Pierre Pachet, a work "in which the confrontation between intimate and public history, between Freud and Babi Yar, lacks neither grandeur nor emotion," cannot be compared with the testimony, a heart-rending account of the collapse of civilization, left by Kuznetsov (see Pachet 1982, 11). Ironically, the publication of *The White Hotel* brought the name of the author of *Babi Yar* back to the pages of newspapers. Thomas was criticized for plagiarizing Kuznetsov's testimony of Dina Pronicheva, whose figure, since the trial in Darmstadt and also, in part, thanks to Kuznetsov, has become famous.[22] This was the last scandal, the posthumous scandal of Kuznetsov. Apart from Solzhenitsyn, few authors who immigrated to the West have caused as much stir as Kuznetsov did in a very short time.

In Britain, having access to works not published in the Soviet Union, Kuznetsov realized the transformations of literature in the 20th century and came to the conclusion, right or wrong, that he was a witness rather than a writer. In fact, he was a witness who became a writer in order to testify.

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22 We can conclude, thanks to the research of Karel C. Berkoff, that the accusations against Thomas are unfounded: although Kuznetsov met Dina Pronicheva on a personal basis, in his novel he reproduced the public sources that she had given him: her questionnaire collected by the historians of the Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War and her 1946 deposition in court in Kiev (Berkoff 2008).

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