Foreshadowing the Holocaust: Boris Slutskii's Jewish Poetic Cycle of 1940/41

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The question of the treatment of the Holocaust in Russian Soviet poetry has remained largely unexplored. On the one hand, any examination of Jewishness in Soviet verse has inevitably turned to the Holocaust theme; according to a normative viewpoint, it was the Holocaust that prompted a number of acculturated Russian poets of Jewish origin to rediscover their Jewishness. On the other hand, analyses of such poems have not significantly drawn on the rich field of Holocaust literary studies and the critical paradigms engendered by it. Discussions of the Holocaust poems of Boris Slutskii (1919-1986) are a case in point: traditionally, they have been viewed as extensions of his pieces on the Soviet war against Nazi Germany in general.¹ Thus, their Jewish layer—intertextual, exegetical, and mythological—was ignored, being portrayed in purely factual and anthropological terms. This article, part of a larger project on the poet,² aims to investigate Slutskii's response to the Holocaust in a completely new critical light by focusing on his practically unknown cycle, "*Stikhi o evreiakh i tatarakh*" (Poems about Jews and Tatars), written over the period of a year from December 1940 to November 1941. This early verse demonstrates Slutskii not only responding to the horrific events of his time, but also working out through them the supreme elements of his poetics, such as translation and hermeneutic readings of Scripture.

Slutskii's poetics is a product of a Judaic genius, a potent exegetical mind, as Harold Bloom defines it: "All Jewish exegesis, from Hillel and Yeshua of Nazareth through the two Talmuds and Kabbalah on through Judah Halevi's *Kuzari* and Maimonides, and perhaps culminating in Kafka and Freud, can be termed a series of endeavors to open the Tanakh to the historical suffer-

ings of the people Yahweh chose as his own.”³ I would add that in the Russian language, it culminates, or rather both begins and culminates, in Slutskii. His sense and reading of Scripture permeate his oeuvre's entire creative cognizance, from its reverential and groundbreaking employment of the Russian language and tradition to its knowledge of time and chaos, embodied in the poet's era—revolutionary, military, Stalinist and the later Soviet. In what Vladimir Khazan pithily defines as “one of the key features of the Jewish artist as such,” Slutskii's creative modes methodically reengage scriptural “prototypes,” placing the poet's programmatic generative being into “a global biblical paradigm.”⁴ At the same time, on the level of poetics his worldview uniquely fuses Russian and Judaic modes of thinking where the most salient points of contact between the two are quotation, interpretation of sources, rereading, re-accentuation, allusion, intertextuality, and memorialization. Indeed, for decades Russian poetry has been rightfully seen as operating under the principles of quoting, misquoting, and revising other texts, with Osip Mandelshtam and Anna Akhmatova's poetics being the prime examples of this. These poetic practices, which in Slutskii's case acquire a specific, idiosyncratic Judaic content, are what I call hermeneutics.

Slutskii performs his hermeneutic work by translation. The most fundamental fact of his creative process is Paul Ricoeur's assertion “as soon as there is language there is interpretation, that is translation.”⁵ An idiosyncratic concept and practice of translation defines Slutskii's poetry, transforming its biblical layer, which otherwise would have been an elusive referential and philosophical framework, into a continuous and precise hermeneutic action. It operates similarly to a “conceptual metatropé,” to employ Natal'ia Fateeva's term, which “forms a realm where all threads of memory intertwine to engender a “creative memory,” which ensures the translation of one “possible world” of thought and language into another and thus, generates a mechanism of producing all new “possible worlds” from the same “credo sources.”⁶ Slutskii locates this credo source in the Hebrew Bible, thereby transforming his creative generative process into the one of reconstruction—of *recollecting* the old [*pripominanie*], in Yurii Lotman's term.⁷

The cycle consists of three parts: “*Rasskaz emigranta*” (An Emigrant's Tale), “*Dobraia, sviataia, belorukaia...*” (Kind, holy, with white hands...), and “*Nezakonchennye razmysleniia*” (Unfinished Thoughts). All three were dedicated to Viktoriia Levitina, Slutskii's love interest at the time, who published them, along with her recollections of the poet, in Israel in 1993 in an obscure

Russian language journal *Aktsent*, no longer in existence.⁸ Considering their addressee, the poems implicitly weave the lyrical and the deeply personal, even the erotic, with the historical and the poetic. The result is Slutskii's multi-layered artistic system, what Levitina calls a "tri-part Jewish suite."

1

The first poem, "An Emigrant's Tale," reads in full:

По вечерам (хоть их никто не просит!)	In the evenings (even though none asks them to!)
В берлинских подворотнях — там и тут Они бросают глупые вопросы — Зачем бьют?	In Berlin's back alleys—here and there They throw stupid questions at you— Why? Why are they beating them?
Как быть с евреем — это не вопрос. Как бить еврея — это да, вопрос. Есть мнения, что метод избиения, Хоть прогрессивен, но излишне прост.	What to do with a Jew—is not the question. How to beat a Jew—that is indeed the question. There is an opinion that the method of beating Is noble, though a bit simple too.
Они травой подножною растут! Не укрощать, а прекращать сей люд!	They grow like grass under one's foot! We should not tame, but put a stop to this peoplehood.
Четырёхлетним молодым еврейкам Ланцетом выковыривают блуд.	With a lancet, we are digging out lust From all four-year-old Jewish girls.
У девочек обыкновенный взгляд. (Котята под трамваем так глядят.) Но девочки не нянчат больше кукол, А это липко видеть, говорят.	The girls have an ordinary stare: (Kittens stuck under a tram have such a stare too). But the girls do not rock dolls anymore, And it's better not to see their eyes, the people muse.
Я думаю, не выйдет ничего. Пусть весь народ, хоть в прорубь головой Из синтеза простейших элементов Воспрянет вновь Еврей как таковой.	I think, this just won't work out. Let the entire people be thrown Headlong into an ice hole— From a synthesis of the simplest elements The Jew as such will reemerge.

Вам, сумеркам, не затемнить зари! ЗДЕСЬ НАЧАЛОСЬ! В усталости и злобе Еврейский Бог Адама сотворил По своему картавому подобию!	But dusk cannot prevent the dawn from rising! Here it commenced In disappointment and fatigue, The Jewish God created Adam In His burring image.
Он был устал, и человек стал чахл, И хилость плеч пошла по поколениям, Но звёзды заплутались в очах, Сырые звёзды первых дней творенья!	God was tired, and the man became feeble, And feebleness of shoulders passed on through generations, But stars got lost in human eyes, Raw stars of first days of creation.
А вы, широкоплечи и крепки, Мозгам противящие кулаки — ВЫ просто отклоненье от Еврея. Вот кто вы такие.	And you, broad-shouldered and mighty, Who throw fists against the brains— You are simply a deviation from the Jew. Here is who you are, you are.
Я никого обидеть не хочу. Я просто так, по глупости кричу. Конечно, криком не поможешь делу. Но очень душно, если промолчу!	I do not want to insult anyone. I am just screaming, silly that I am. Of course, screaming will not help anything. But I will suffocate, if I just stay put

In his tale, Slutskii responds to the historical horror in a cosmic light. He does so in 1940—before either the executions at Babii Iar or the chimneys of Auschwitz, but during the period of official friendship between the Soviet Union and the Third Reich in the aftermath of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The young poet inserts a cosmological and eschatological interpretation in-between a report and a statement of poetic irony. The first part of the poem, comprised of stanzas one through five, presents a deeply felt testimony, brutal in its honesty, about the atrocities in Germany, centered on the experiments of making the Jewish girls infertile, described here before such actions would actually take place en masse in Auschwitz.⁹ Here the poet serves merely as a conveyer, a transmitter of the other's story. He would perfect this reporting device in his later post-war poems on the Holocaust, most prominently in "*Kak ubivali moi babku*" (How My Granny was Killed).¹⁰ At the same time, he makes his poetic mark known through unobtrusive, but highly original parallel devices, such as the paronomastic usage of *byt'/bit'* (to be/to strike) in the first two lines of the second stanza.

The poem's second part consists of stanzas six through nine, presenting an intricate interlay of eschatology, historical memory and cosmogony. In 1940, Slutskii seems to have been convinced that Jews stood on the brink of a total annihilation, while the impending murder could not be stopped. Most pointedly, in reaction to this foreboding, he operates within the tradition of Jewish responses to catastrophe. In his seminal *Against the Apocalypse*, David Roskies defines what he calls "the Jewish dialectical response to catastrophe": "the greater the immediate destruction, the more it was made to recall the ancient archetype." Thus, any catastrophe that befell the Jews became "fixed in the mythic past ...," transforming "the punctual ... into the transtemporal."¹¹ In each generation, the Jews continuously compared the catastrophe of their time to various biblical episodes (most prominently from the book of Lamentations), thus ensuring that their calamity was part of the divine plan, which invariably brought the notion of redemption into history. Slutskii Russifies this biblical paradigm: the line "let the entire people be thrown headlong into an ice hole" unmistakably refers to Ivan's the Terrible massacre of the Jews in Polotsk in 1563, where three hundred Jews who refused to be baptized were drowned in the river Dvina. This episode was recounted in the famed *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Brokgauz and Efron*, published in 1893, with which Slutskii, a history buff, was undoubtedly familiar. The difference between 1563 and 1940, as Slutskii makes clear, is that the three hundred are to be replaced by the entire house of Israel. In his post-war Holocaust text, "*Cherta pod chertoiu...*" (The Pale's Impaled...), he would employ a similar, though a more radical strategy of inserting the Holocaust into Russian historical memory.¹² There he would link the Jewish annihilation with the destruction of the Russian princely families of Mstislavskii and Shuiskii, which, and this is the key element, were disseminated during the reign of Ivan the Terrible as well. Consequently, Slutskii employs both sides of Russian historical memory, the specifically Jewish and the overall Russian, to engrain the Holocaust in the Russian verse. "The Pale's Impaled..." and "An Emigrant's Tale" are thus inextricably linked both in terms of their realm of reference and, more importantly, interpretations of historical remembrance and its reconfigurations through lyric poetry's grasp of the catastrophe.

The lines "from a synthesis of the simplest elements/ the Jew as such will reemerge" are deliberately messianic. Slutskii was as a matter of principle always weary of any messianic prescience, which clashed with his sober perception of history. Only in his Holocaust verse does the reader encounter

direct messianic or eschatological statements, but even there they contain a great deal of doubt. Here the entire universe, its very physical makeup, bears the irreparable impact of the Jews' forceful demise. The question is, can nature defy itself and overturn the destruction, or will it remain powerless and incapable of breaching the abyss? The two visions, the eschatological and the one deprived of messianic hope, do not cancel each other out, but simultaneously exist in Slutskii's poetics, paradoxically reinforcing each other. Stanzas seven through nine step back from the messianic pronouncement to only offer yet another mythological construct—that of cosmogony. Slutskii refashions the dialectical paradigm of responding to catastrophe once again. He intimates the notion, which will become central to "The Pale's Impaled...", that the Holocaust is a cataclysm whose totality transcends time. It is no longer sufficient to evoke the memory of persecutions past, be they from recorded historical (Ivan the Terrible) or legendary biblical times. The poet, in a task akin to that of a mystic, must reexamine the very foundations of the earth, which, to use Bialik's imagery, have "darkened" as a result of the catastrophe, and look afresh at its creation, seeking to uncover its blemishes.

Ultimately, Slutskii's cosmogony aims to resolve the problem central to his messianism as well: is there anything on the planet that can reverse the process of this historical destruction? "Here it commenced," he proclaims, arguing that the causes of both the tragedy and the eventual salvation of Jewish existence are to be found in God's imperfect creation of this imperfect universe. In stanzas seven and eight, with their creationist subject matter, he uses an appropriately high style evocative of Hebrew diction and biblical stylistics. Thus, *sotvoril* (created) in stanza seven parallels *tvoren'ia* (creation) in stanza eight, while *podob'ie* (image/likeness) quotes directly from Genesis 1:26. Reiterating his hope for the dawn of a messianic era, Slutskii delves deep into pre-history in order to display where history's pit originates. Here *byt* (history) begins in *bytie*, both in the sense of eternity and Genesis, per the Russian Orthodox title for the first book of the Pentateuch. God created man in his burring image. In the Russian context, burring is traditionally the sign of the Jew's speech. Slutskii adds this feature to the biblical vision of Adam being formed in the divine image for one and only one reason: this God is a Jew. He is not the omniscient demiurge of creation, but the tired and disappointed character of the biblical Flood story, and the Israelites' wanderings in the desert. Slutskii would carry this notion of God as a weary deity who cannot compete with the self-erected pseudo-gods of the century, particularly

the Soviet tyrant, throughout his oeuvre. As in the cosmology of Lurianic kabbalah, the poet presents Creation as a troubled process fraught with fatigue, meanness, and dampness. In historical terms, this translates into Adam becoming a Jew who is beaten in the streets of Berlin. The traps of creation are embedded in his eyes and the gaze of four-year-old Jewish girls; hence their suffering in history.

To abuse a Jew is to abuse God, the poet suggests. Levitina mistakenly attributes Slutskii's depiction of Adam's frailty to either antisemitic images or Jewish self-hatred from the nineteenth to twentieth centuries. While the Jew may seem feeble, his is no ordinary weakness; it is not a sign of decline, but a secret of the Jewish and universal tragedy of existence pregnant with the hope for redemption. The stars, both signs of the grandeur of Creation and its dampness, embody this cosmic uncertainty, which can only be remedied through the messianic redoing of the Jew and thus the planet, however improbable it may seem. In stanza 11, undoubtedly weaker than the previous two, Slutskii posits the Jew as the ultimate ideal of a human being, almost a polemical substitution for Christ. These polemics would acquire their full force in the second part of the cycle. Here, indeed, taking on the cultural image of the Jew as a scholar, he makes it purely positive, pitted against the degenerates, who operate with fists.

Slutskii's cosmogony of 1940 foreshadows the Holocaust poetry of Yankev Glatstein, a major Yiddish modernist poet and one of the founders of the New York poetic Introspectivist (*In zikh*) movement. I would argue that his "Without Jews," written when the civilization of European Jews became a cause only for erecting memorials, works within a Slutskian framework. Slutskii's Jewish God, using the burring Jewish speech, creates the Jew in His Jewish image; in Glatstein's verse, the Jew shapes God in his likeness. It is thanks to Jews' existence in history that God's eternity may last; once the Jews are no more, their God perishes as well. Edward Alexander comments that Glatstein's "lines are not only an expression of the peculiarly intimate relation between the Jews and their God, or a skeptic's suggestion that God's existence is merely subjective, but a recognition that God had made the Jews the special instrument for the achievement of His purposes and their life His chief interest."¹³ A similar notion is apparent in Slutskii's text when God infuses Jews with His eternal tiredness. Glatstein's poem, with its textbook-like enumeration of the Jews' relations with God prior to the Holocaust, pinpoints the catastrophe as the moment that has shattered the idyllic encounter between

God and the Jews. In Slutskii's piece, the seeds of the catastrophe as well as of redemption are planted on the very first day of Creation, making his vision resound with kabbalistic gnosticism.

The last stanza of "An Emigrant's Tale" is the poem's most significant, revealing the roots of Slutskii's mature poetics. Slutskii, as his Holocaust verse indicates, be it "The Pale's Impaled..." or "*Ravviny vyshli na ravniny...*" (The Rabbis walked out unto the plains...),¹⁴ was haunted by the incapability of traditional symbolic and mythological schemes to express the origins, events, and consequences of the Holocaust. Producing poetry within the parameters of Russian tradition, rather than the sites of traditional or modern Jewish culture, paradoxically worked in his favor. Having composed a complex creationist poem, both deeply messianic and yet immediately historical, he assuages its purported grandeur and symbolic neatness with a statement of ironic rationality, both poignant and understated. In the finale, which switches into a fully colloquial mode, the speaker both diminishes his prophetic stature and the sense of moral certainty, while emphasizing at the same time an absolute, almost existential, need not to remain silent in the face of the historical and metaphysical horror: "Of course, screaming will not help anything./ But I will suffocate, if I just stay put." Hence, the "I" of the poem is multi-layered. In the report, the first part, it is absent, allowing the reportage to proceed unhindered. In the second section, it takes on a prophetic dimension, and in the third, becomes the self-doubting meager voice of the poet, thrown into history's whirlwind. The third element again ties the poem to "The Pale's impaled..." where Slutskii would similarly, though more solemnly, state, "A planet! Whether a good one or a bad one/ I do not know. I neither clap nor carp./ I don't know much. There is one thing I know:/ this plant burned to ashes long ago."¹⁵

Thus, "An Emigrant's Tale" encapsulates the principal dimensions of Slutskii's poetics. While it invites a comparative analysis with poetic responses to the Holocaust in Jewish languages by virtue of its operating either intuitively or deliberately within the same hermeneutic field, it occupies the status of a most imaginative, complete, and complex response to the Holocaust in both Russian and Jewish literatures, written uniquely on the eve of the destruction. Its analysis should reshape the current critical understanding of the treatment of the war and the Holocaust in Soviet poetry. In his insightful discussion of the war verse in both underground and semi-official Soviet literature, Il'ia Kukulin argues that while unofficial war poems almost saved

Soviet poetry from the dogma of Socialist realism, their stark naturalism and avoidance of clichés in confronting death and individual and collective suffering did not succeed in elevating the emotionally new poetic tone to an existential level.¹⁶ It is noteworthy that in his study, Kukulin does not mention Slutskii's poetry at all. But as our analysis demonstrates, not only did "An Emigrant's Tale" present a wholly original "existential" vision, it endeavored to resolve the inherent problems associated with it through the poem's very structure.

2

"Kind, holy, with white hands..." was written in May of 1941, on the eve of the Nazi invasion of Soviet territory. It reads in full:

Добрая, святая, белорукая,
О любой безделице скорбя,
Богородица, ходившая по мукам,
Всех простив, ударила тебя
И Христос послал тебя скитаться,
Спотыкаться межи град и сел,
Чтоб еврей мог снова посмеяться,
Если бы снова мимо Бог прошел.

Kind, holy, with white hands
Mourning over every trifle,
The Mother of God, who walked through hell,
Having shown mercy to everyone, struck you.
And Christ has sent you to wander,
To stumble in-between towns and villages,
So that a Jew could laugh again,
If God again were to pass him by.

...Смешанные браки и погромы, ...
что имеем в перспективах, кроме —
нация ученых и портных.
Я и сам пишу стихи по-русски —
По-московски, а не по-бобруйски,
Хоть иначе выдумал я их.

Intermarriages and pogroms,
What else does future hold for us, except for that—
Us, the nation of scholars and tailors.
I too write my verses in Russian,
As is the custom in Moscow, not Bobruisk—
Though I have imagined them otherwise.

В этот раз мы вряд ли уцелеем —
Техника не та! И люди злее,
Пусть! От нас останется в веках
Кровушка последних евреев —
В жилах!

This time we might not survive—
The technology is different and the people meaner!
Let it be! What will remain of us in centuries is
Blood of the very last Jews—
In veins!

Или просто на руках.¹⁷

Or simply on her hands.

This poem is drastically different from "An Emigrant's Tale." It abandons the messianic layout, offering instead a more sober historical perspective.

Furthermore, in a swift polemical gesture, it places what would become known as the Holocaust into the saga of Christian/Jewish difference, which Slutskii specifies in the terms of Russian literary and mythological traditions. In a short breadth of three stanzas, he offers a profoundly original response to both Russian Christian logic and art and the impending catastrophe, while chiseling a double-edged sword of poetics and Jewish hermeneutics. Slutskii reaches deep into Russian literary history in order to indict Christendom and particularly the Russian Orthodox civilization in its willingness to let the Jews perish. At the center of his vision, not merely ironic, but deeply sardonic and even scornful, is the image of the Mother of God, the Russian *bogoroditsa*. In the third line of the first stanza, he directly references a seminal apocryphal text of Old Russian literature, "*Khozhdenie bogoroditsy po mukam*" (The Mother of God's Journey in Hell), dating from at least the twelfth century.¹⁸ Evoked by Ivan Karamazov in Slutskii's most favorite of Dostoevsky's novels, its theme is close to that of Dante's *Inferno*: Mary walks through Hell, where she takes pity on the suffering sinners, causing her to ask God, both Father and Christ, to forgive them.¹⁹ It is noteworthy that it is only the Christian sinners who evoke Mary's compassion. Having come upon the Jews, who burn in the river of fire for once torturing Christ, she concludes, "Let it be according to their actions," but when witnessing the torments of the Christians, she exclaims, "Let me enter and be tortured with the other Christians because they called themselves the children of my son." In Russian popular and mythological imagination, she is seen as *zastupnitsa* (protectress) of the people; Anna Akhmatova seized upon this depiction of Mary in her World War I poetry, as did Pasternak in *Doctor Zhivago*, while the Russian Orthodox Church instituted a number of holidays in her honor. Nikolai Berdiaev provided an authoritative interpretation of her unique significance for the Russian mind, "The Mother of God takes precedence of the Trinity and is almost identified with the Trinity. The people have felt the nearness of the interceding Mother of God more vividly than that of Christ. Christ is the heavenly king, but scanty expression is given to his earthly image. Mother Earth alone is given a personal incarnation ... [T]he Russian people want to take shelter ... behind Mother Earth, behind the Mother of God."²⁰

Slutskii, a Jewish, or more resolutely a Judaic poet, who argues for a Russian literary pedigree, exposes the myth of the kind-hearted and merciful mother of God on his own ironic terms, which he nevertheless solicits

from this very myth. He packs his poem with the terminology redolent of the apocryphal text, embodied in the adjectival descriptions of Mary (“with white hands” is particularly scathing, as the poem’s ending will illustrate), her actions through the poem’s verbs, and even borrowings from Church Slavonic (*mezhi grad*). Mother of God mourns over every trifle, but beats the Jew, the fundamental human being. To recall, in the first poem of the cycle, Slutskii makes it clear that to beat a Jew is to beat God; thus, his polemics become principally hermeneutic through his argument with Christian mythology for its erasure of the Jewish deity. Slutskii’s usage of the pronoun “you” in lines five and six is suggestive of this strategy, as he does not explicitly modify it, enabling it to refer to both Jews and God. The remaining three lines of the first stanza complicate this even further: “Christ sent you to wander,/ to stumble in-between towns and villages,/ so that a Jew could laugh again,/ if God again were to pass by him.” Precisely because the “you” is deliberately ambiguous, the literal and yet the most revealing reading of these verses is that Christ banishes God—“you”—to stumble in the world. If the Jew, accustomed to his lot over the centuries, were to see God trotting by again, he would laugh, in accordance with the Jewish survival principle of laughter through tears. Furthermore, the usage of *proshel* (walked by) is particularly ironic as it alludes to the divine passing over Jewish houses, commemorated in the book of Exodus and the Passover Hagadah, and evocative of the saving of the Israelites’ first-borns.²¹ Here not only do Jews find themselves again in peril, but God’s passing, or, in a hermeneutical twist, wandering, carries neither redemption nor punishment of their enemies.

Thus, Slutskii is drastically rewriting the myth of the wandering Jew, which itself constitutes a major subversive trope of modernist Jewish verse. Most prominently, in “Oracle to Europe,” composed in the wake of devastation suffered by Jews in World War I, Hebrew poet Uri Zevi Greenberg depicts Ahasver the Wandering Jew as the true Jewish Messiah, nailed to the cross instead of Jesus.²² Slutskii radicalizes this daring, though still normative interpretation—by marking God as the perpetually wandering victim of Mary and Christ, helpless and utterly incapable of staving off the destruction. In a twist of tragic irony, the Gospels acquire the characteristics of *Oedipus Rex*. I would argue that Slutskii derives this astonishing and audacious vision, both in terms of its rebuttal to Christianity and indictment of the Judaic notion of divine omnipotence and justice, from Vladimir Zhabotinskii’s groundbreaking translation of Hayim Nahman Bialik’s “In the City of Slaughter”

(*Skazanie o pogrome*), the key modern Jewish text of destruction, in which God proclaims himself a pauper. But if Bialik famously condemns the Jews' passive behavior, Slutskii abstains from any preaching, fully identifying with both the Jewish fate and the Jew's ironic take on the calamity.

The poem's second stanza, in defiance of any totalizing responses, brings the poet down to earth. Speaking once more from the depth and breadth of Jewish history, he concedes that nothing but complete assimilation (mixed marriages) and destruction (pogroms) await the Jews, "the nation of scholars and tailors." What follows this arguably accurate, at least as far as the Soviet Jews were concerned, though undoubtedly flat evaluation is an intimation of the cornerstone of Slutskii's artistic program, which, significantly, he begins to formulate in this measured Holocaust piece. "I too write my verse in Russian,/ as is the custom in Moscow, not Bobruisk—/ though I have imagined it otherwise," the poet confesses. Like an unfinished refrain from another text, these lines appear to be misplaced. The speaker whispers them like an incantation, which conceals the very source of his translational poetics and the primary Jewish text, which he never wrote. "Who am I to talk about these Jewish matters?" he seems to be asking. After all, he too is fully assimilated and writes his verse in Russian. Slutskii goes to the very heart of the question of whether it is possible to produce and sustain Jewish poetics, directed both inward and outward, in a non-Jewish tradition. Indeed, he writes in muscovite, not the language of Bobruisk (in other words Yiddish) or a composite Jewish language. The force, ingenuity, and openness of Slutskii's formulation demand that Bobruisk be read as a metonymy for *Yiddishkayt*. In fact, this town in Belorussia was indeed a center of Hebrew publishing and Jewish learning, both Hasidic and *mitnagdic*, secular Jewish politics, including Zionism and the Bund, as well as the birthplace of Pauline Vengeroff, author of the famed Russian-Jewish memoirs,²³ Berl Katsnelson, Zionist socialist thinker and leader, and Hebrew poet David Shimoni. Slutskii does not write in the language of Bobruisk, but he had imagined his poems differently—that is, differently from the language of Moscow. The usage of the dubious and playful verb *vydumat'* (to make up, or even to lie) positions Slutskii as a Jewish trickster in Russian tradition. Rooted in both the Bible, whose greatest swindler, Jacob, would occupy a special place in his oeuvre, and the work of Isaac Babel', whom he revered his entire life and directly called a "liar" (*vydumshchik*) in a poem-homage to the Odessan genius ("Who was Babel?..."),²⁴ Slutskii's creative con artistry marks his translation project as a

daring, wishful, and ambiguous one, transforming his oeuvre into a polyphonic but unified system.

Slutskii demands for his verse to be translated from his underlying Jewish tongue. In adapting translation as the principle of his poetics at the moment of historical loss and destruction, he places it in a “catch-22” predicament. Slutskii is unquestionably a logocentric poet, both in terms of his poetic lineage, embodied in the figure of Velimir Khlebnikov, and his worldview. His logocentricity pledges allegiance to the Russian tongue, but what of its Jewish groundwork? While his relation to Russian was certainly not as volatile and tragic as Celan’s to German, the coexistence of the two linguistic realms, for historical, literary, and religious reasons, is hardly attainable for the poet. Yet both, perpetually threatening each other, are required for Slutskii’s artistic survival. Thus, his notion of translation was dramatically different from how other modern Jewish artists practiced it. Very seldom does his translation evolve into an actual incorporation of Yiddish or Hebrew lexicons into his language. Slutskii was painstakingly trying to make sure that his Russian would remain organic and unencumbered, in touch with both his era and Russian literary history. Rather, the borrowings occur on the level of both hermeneutic macro-poetics and stylistic micro-poetics, as in his adaptation of biblical parallelism for his prosody. Slutskii’s Jewish language is embedded into the very fabric of his artistic thinking; it ought to be decoded.

The last stanza’s tone is fatalistic. The poet expresses a resolute despondency, having managed to identify the two main features of the approaching catastrophe: its unparalleled evil, and the cold technical means through which it will be carried out. The Jews, and he among them, will perish. A faint memory of the people is to be perpetuated either through blood “in veins,” referring presumably to the progeny of mixed marriages, or as bloody stains on the perpetrators’ and bystanders’ hands. This last line brings the poem full circle, as it makes the depiction of Mary’s hands as white fully come to light: their whiteness and that of Christendom is to be soaked in Jewish blood. Slutskii exhibits the Jewish dialectical approach to catastrophe, but, as in “An Emigrant’s Tale,” he russifies it and, despite the last lines’ bitter sense of resignation, daringly, though implicitly, locates a glimpse of redemption not in the sacred biblical past, but in the Jewish potential of his verse. The cycle’s final poem would portray the pitfalls embodied in the concept of translation in stark historical terms.

3

Slutskii spent the first year of the war as a military prosecutor on the battlefield, until he was severely wounded. "Unfinished Thoughts" is his first catastrophe poem to be written after the start of the war. Composed in October-November of 1941, it coincided with the killings at Babii Iar but preceded the extermination in his native Kharkov, which took place in December-January of 1941-42 at Drobitskii Iar. Most likely, Slutskii learned in 1943 of the killings in his town, of which he informed his brother, who was evacuated from the city, in a letter from the front: "In Kharkov, 16,000 Jews were killed in the barracks of the machine factory."²⁵ "Unfinished Thoughts," the longest installment in the trilogy, is divided into two parts. The first one approximates most closely Slutskii's poetic diction, unabashedly conversationalist and starkly prosaic, features which would become a defining mark of his post-war verse. The poem is an example of what he himself would later identify as his ballads, "an explosion, concentrated in the dimension of 40+/- lines... shortened, compressed, pithy tragedies."²⁶

The first 44 lines of the poem depict a scene in a crowded train car, filled with soldiers and officers headed for the front. The verse has a distinctly Maiakovskian feel, both rhythmically and visually: the lines resemble a staircase. Its allusions, however, are immediately coeval. Slutskii evokes Ehrenburg's articles of the time, which called on Soviet citizens to feel nothing but hatred toward the Nazi aggressor:

Чего нам нужно для нашей души?
 Нам нужно злости для нашей души,
 Столетней,
 Стоялой
 Злости.

What do we require for our souls?
 We require anger for our souls,
 A hundred-year old
 Stagnant
 Anger.

The cycle's title, "Poems about Jews and Tatars," is unlocked in this first part as well. A Tatar, a soldier, begins to sing on the train about the tragedy of his people, who once ruled over Russia but were later brutally defeated by it. Others have joined him in the lament and thus, "with paradoxical sadness/ the Russian people are singing about the people that once ruled over Rus'." The poet quotes from the song and later reiterates its chronicle yarn, which spans Russia's imperial history,

Здесь был Татарстан. Здесь погиб
Татарстан.

Измена его подкосила.
Донской порубал.
Изрубил Иоанн.
Екатерина казнила.²⁷

Here used to be Tatarstan. Here perished
Tatarstan.

Betrayal brought it down.
Donskoi slaughtered it.
Ivan butchered.
Catherine executed.

In his notes from the war, written directly in its aftermath, Slutskii comments that for the first time the myth of Soviet internationalism and the friendship between multiethnic Soviet peoples was truly tested at the front. He concludes that the experiment miserably failed. The reclamation of Russian imperial history and military glory, undertaken by Stalin, fuelled Russian xenophobia. Slutskii ironically notes, “It is strange to electrify the Tatar population with the memories of Donskoi and Mamai. A military mixture of languages led to the re-acquaintance of peoples—from “the Moldovan to the Finn.”²⁸ The situation depicted in the poem is more poignant, but it speaks to the same blemish on both Russian and Soviet histories, which Slutskii dares to give voice to in 1941.

The verse’s second part returns to Slutskii’s Jewish concerns, exposing the “Tatar” woe at the heart of his being, and turning a Tatar song into a Jewish *nigun*. It reads in full:

Еврейские старцы в подвал собрались,
Чтоб там над лежанкой глиняной
Случайно
Меня
Наректи
«Борис» —
Татарского мстителя именем.

The Jewish elders gathered up in a basement,
So that there above a cradle of clay
To name
Me
Accidentally
“Boris” —
The Tatar avenger’s name.

И так я родился. Я рос и подрос,
А завтра из смрада вагона
Я выйду на волю и стану в рост:
Приму по реке оборону.

And thus I was born. I grew and grew up,
And tomorrow from the smog of the train
I’ll exit to freedom and stand at full height:
Will take on the river defense.

Тоскуют солдаты о смерти своей, А лошади требуют корму. Убьют меня — скажут — чужак был еврей! А струшу — скажут — норма!	The soldiers are pining over their death, While horses are pleading for forage. Should I perish—they'll say—what a nincompoop that Jew was! Should I chicken out—they'll say—that's the norm.
Я снова услышу погромный вой О том, кем Россия продана. О мать моя мачеха! Я сын твой родной! Мне негде без Родины, Родина!	Again I will hear the pogroms' howl About those who sold Russia out! O mother my stepmother! I am your native son! I am nowhere without the motherland, motherland!

The first seven lines present a Judaic nativity scene—a naming ceremony, associated with the ritual of circumcision, which takes place here clandestinely. They evoke, or perhaps even directly reference Eduard Bagritskii's poem "Origin" (1930), with which Slutskii was undoubtedly familiar, where "over my cradle rusty Jews/ crossed rusty blades of crooked beards."²⁹ Slutskii, however, completely alters the (ostensibly) self-hating tone of Bagritskii's expressionist verse. Levitina somewhat naively points out that in 1919, the year of Slutskii's birth, he was most likely named Borukh rather than Boris. Clearly, in the context of Slutskii's translation, the Russian Boris conceals the Yiddish Borukh and the Hebrew Barukh, with its meaning of blessing. It is important to recognize, however, that Slutskii's recollection is a construction which describes, first and foremost, not a biographical episode but the birth of a poet, imbuing the artist's name with an irreverent symbolic meaning. Thus, the poet's name is nothing but accidental; like Osip Mandelshtam, Slutskii would remain preoccupied with his name throughout his oeuvre. On the one hand, the name Boris, Slavic in origin, signifies a warrior who is blessed in battle; this element contributes to Slutskii's initiation into a soldierly life. On the other, he associates it with some Tatar avenger, thus turning his name into an intertextual cipher. The "Tatar avenger" alludes to Tsar Boris Godunov, a prominent figure, of course, in both Russian history and literature.³⁰ Indeed, Godunov's kin was Tatar in origin. What is more significant is that in Pushkin's drama "Boris Godunov," Prince Shuiskii describes him as "a former slave, a Tatar,

Maliuta's son-in-law, the henchman's son-in-law who is himself at heart a henchman."³¹ Godunov, a profoundly troubling figure both for Pushkin and in the popular imagination, suits Slutskii's crisis. While in critical literature it is usually the false Dimitrii who is identified as an avenger, Slutskii applies the term to Godunov and thus himself in order to link his predicament with that of a Tatar soldier who mourned his people's fate in the first part of the poem. Not only is the poet's relationship with Russia ambivalent and perhaps doomed, considering again the Godunov connection, but it is also saturated with the same sense of vengeance and anger that marks the Tatar's song.³² After all, in the cycle's second poem, it is the Orthodox Mary's hands that are about to turn bloody in the wake of the Jews' destruction. The poet directs his anger at both the Germans and the Russians, for his fate and artistic vocation are inextricably linked with that of his "Tatars"—the Jews. Thus, the terms of translation acquire a palatable historical meaning, exposing Slutskii's constructed origins—"Thus I was born"—which he has to submerge in order to now become the country's defender.

As noted by Kukulin, the best and most daring Soviet war poetry presents death in a fresh, unforgiving, and hard-bitten light; a great deal of such verse, however, was written only after the war.³³ Slutskii begins already in 1941, coolly, and yet almost apocalyptically, noting, "The soldiers are sorrowful about their death." This image of living ghosts sharply contrasts with the major themes of official Soviet war poetry—the soldiers, bound to survive, pining for the homeland. Lines 14-16 link this contemplation of death with the poet's Jewishness. He is doomed no matter what: should he be killed, he would be branded a "nincompoop" for fighting too hard for the country that had not historically shown much favor to his people; should he try to stay alive, he'd serve as confirmation that the Jews are cowards. The last stanza adopts a seer's tone. In its first line, the future tense of "I will again hear the pogroms' howl" is pivotal, as the poet foresees the antisemitic scourge that will overtake his country, as did indeed happen. The "again" of the line and the evocation of the Black Hundreds' motto about the Jews who sold Russia out reveal the poet operating within the parameters of the Jewish dialectical response to history, which, crucially, he revises in reaction to the Holocaust but leaves intact in relation to popular Soviet Judeophobia.

The poem's last two lines can strike one as platitudinous. After all, much of the thematically Jewish poetry written in Russian in the last three

decades of the past century describes the relationship between Russia and Jews as that between a stepmother and her children.³⁴ Conversely, there is an earlier tradition of identifying the bond between a Russian poet of Jewish origins and Jews in this same manner. Ehrenburg's poem "*Evrei, s vami zhit' ne v silakh...*" (Jews, having no strength to live with you...) of 1914 is a paradigmatic case in point. The context and Slutskii's wholly original perception of Jewishness are critical for grasping his game. It is astonishing that a young poet, born and raised in a Soviet country and about to function as the accusing party at military tribunals at the front, would call his Soviet homeland *machekha* (stepmother), a term that in Russian, much more than in English, carries the connotations of wickedness and cruelty.³⁵ Mikhail Kul'chitskii, who to a large extent introduced Slutskii to poetry and whom Slutskii always considered to be his teacher, wrote in an unfinished narrative poem, "*Samoe takoe (Poema o Rossii)*" (That Very Precious [Poem about Russia]), in 1941, two years before he would perish at the front in Stalingrad, "*Ia ochen' sil'no/ liubliu Rossiю...*" (I love Russia so strongly...).³⁶ Undoubtedly, Slutskii did share in this feeling, but his poetic worldview constitutes a precarious double-edged sword of Jewishness and Russianness, both historical and logocentric, polemical and symbolic. Unlike the other soldiers on the train, he has come apart: Russia is his double-headed mother/stepmother; he is fatalistically her native son. Thus, his woeful cry at the end, so unusual for his poetry, "I cannot be anywhere without the motherland, motherland," is a confession to the actual homeland, the addressee, that he cannot survive without the other native soil—his, I would argue, Jewish hearth, what in the central post-war poem "Uriel Acosta," he would define as his "kinless kin."

This "kinless kin" denotes Slutskii's poetic space. Thus, thanks to the spatial organization of his poetics, whose breadth interweaves a plethora of sources into a coherent hermeneutic whole, he manages to resolve the crisis depicted so powerfully in "Unfinished Thoughts." What might have been another normative Russian-Jewish paradigm, resulting in insolubility or the relinquishment of Jewishness, is transformed thereby into the birth of an artistic system. Slutskii's identification with Godunov, which denotes his difference, does not lead to the politics, or aesthetics of a minor literature, but positions him as a supreme voice in both Russian and Jewish traditions.

In the poem “Evreiskaia babushka” (The Jewish Grandmother), written most likely in the early 1960s, Slutskii personifies his Jewishness in the image of a Jewish matriarch, beautiful and benevolent:

Как еврейская бабушка, что во главе
Праздничного
заседает
стола,

Не идет эта строчка к угрюмой Москве.
Не идет совершенно. А шла!...

Like a Jewish grandmother, who at the head
Of the festive
Table

Sits,
This line is not becoming to the morose Moscow.
Not becoming at all. But how it used to!...

Как еврейская бабушка эта строка.
Но не вычеркну, не зачеркну.³⁷

Like a Jewish grandmother is this line.
But I won't cross it out, will not cross over.

The poet does not and cannot erase his Jewishness, which here unequivocally refers to his poetics. The cycle of 1940-41 emerges at precisely that moment in Slutskii's creativity when Jewishness “was becoming” to the “morose Moscow,” when the composite language of Bobruisk became instilled in the actual language of Moscow. Indeed, the radical terms of Slutskii's artistic myth-making were drawn then as well, but the result overpowered the potential hazards: original, profound, and powerful verse on the Jewish destruction was written in Russian. An understanding of the correlation between publishable and clandestine literature in the Soviet context requires reconsideration. In 1957, Slutskii stepped into official Soviet literature. Unquestionably, a great deal of his verse was not made accessible during his productive years; some of the poems were printed in truncated versions. He wrote, desiring to be published, but this instinctive inclination was secondary to his artistic designs. Thus, there are no poems in his oeuvre, composed *na zakaz*, to satisfy the ideological order of the day. Again this supposedly devout Soviet figure had his first collection of poems published only in 1957, thanks to Il'ia Ehrenburg's efforts, prior to that being known primarily through crumbled-up typeset pages. It would be limiting to frame Slutskii's breakthrough solely in terms of the liberalizing climate of the Thaw. Factually, it did enable his exposure to the reader, imbuing the poet with hope; but the roots of his poetics did not shift as a result, having been sown already, as this essay demonstrates, in his earliest verse on his generation's Jewish destruction. Indeed, the Jewish line

would never become erased from his verse, amounting to a single uninterrupted poem, whose first word always concealed the last.

Notes

- ¹ A vivid and most recent example of this is the first Russian-language biography of Slutskii. See Piotr Gorelik and Nikita Eliseev, *Po techen'iu i protiv techen'ia: Boris Slutskii: zhizn' i tvorchestvo* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2009).
- ² See Marat Grinberg, "I Am to be Read not from Left to Right, but in Jewish: From Right to Left": *The Poetics of Boris Slutskii* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011). This essay draws on the materials of the book, particularly pp. 86-106.
- ³ Harold Bloom, *Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Divine* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 206.
- ⁴ Vladimir Khazan, *Osobennyi evreisko-russkii vozdukh: k problematike i poetike russko-evreiskogo literaturnogo dialoga v xx veke* (Jerusalem: Gesharim, 2001), 144, 145.
- ⁵ Paul Ricouer, *On Translation* (London: Routledge, 2004), xvii.
- ⁶ Natal'ia Fateeva, *Intertekst v mire tekstov: kontrapunkt intertekstual'nosti* (Moscow: URSS, 2007), 64.
- ⁷ Iurii Lotman, *Stat'i po semiotike i topologii kul'tury* (Tallin: Alexandra, 1992), vol. 1, 11-23.
- ⁸ Viktoriia Levitina, "Tak nachinal...", *Aktzent* (March 1993): 65-74.
- ⁹ As research presented in this volume suggests, Soviet Jews could learn of the persecution in Germany from a number of sources, such as the Yiddish press and interactions with Jews from the Western Ukraine. Most importantly, the information about the Nazi policies was disseminated in the Soviet Union at least prior to the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and then later during the war as well as in its immediate aftermath.
- ¹⁰ See Milton Teichman and Sharon Leder, eds., *Truth and Lamentation* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 469.
- ¹¹ David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 17.
- ¹² See Boris Slutskii, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1993), vol. 2, 340; Boris Slutskii, *Things that Happened*, trans. J. S. Smith. *Glas New Russian Writing* 19 (2000): 187-88.
- ¹³ Edward Alexander, *The Holocaust and the War of Ideas* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 27.
- ¹⁴ *God za godom* 5 (1989): 95.
- ¹⁵ Smith, *Things that Happened*, 187-88.
- ¹⁶ Il'ia Kukulin, "Regulirovanie boli." At http://www.eurozine.com/articles/article_2005-05-03-kukulin-ru.html (accessed October 30, 2013).
- ¹⁷ In Levitina, "Tak nachinal...", 73.
- ¹⁸ *Biblioteka literatury drevnei Rusi* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1999), v. 3, 306-21.

- 19 Slutskii's allusions to *The Brothers Karamazov* are intricate. Not only does Ivan quote from the apocryphal text in the novel, but he also cites from Tiutchev's poem, "These Poor Villages," which describes Christ walking through Russian villages. Slutskii engages in an intertextual polemic with this poem by reversing the "poor Russian villages" into the Jewish *shtetlakh*, which, unlike the villages, are not blessed, but dispersed by Christ.
- 20 Nikolas Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea* (London: The Centenary Press, 1947), 6-7.
- 21 I am grateful to Harriet Murav for pointing out this allusion.
- 22 For an illuminating discussion of Greenberg, see Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse*, 266-74.
- 23 Polina Vengerova, *Vospominaniia babushki* (Jerusalem: Gesharim, 2003).
- 24 See Slutskii, *O drugikh i o sebe* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2005), 173-76.
- 25 "Desiat' frontovykh pisem Borisa Slutskogo," *Zvezda* 5 (2004): 166.
- 26 Slutskii, *O drugikh i o sebe*, 191-92.
- 27 The poem refers to Dmitrii Donskoi (1350-1389), Ivan the Terrible (1530-1584) and Catherine the Great (1729-1796).
- 28 Slutskii, *O drugikh i o sebe*, 118-19.
- 29 See in Maxim Shrayer, *Russian Poet/Soviet Jew: The Legacy of Eduard Bagritskii* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 21, 133.
- 30 Slutskii was quite taken with this connection. In the poem "Patria and Patronymic," he writes, "That's how it is indeed: with princely Shuiskii/ I share a surname; Boris Godunov's/ my namesake..." Smith, *Things that Happened*, 186.
- 31 The Russian text is available at <http://www.rvb.ru/pushkin/01text/05theatre/01theatre/0837.htm> (accessed October 30, 2013).
- 32 As Harriet Murav points out in this volume, vengeance (*nekome*) constitutes one of the key themes of Soviet Holocaust poetry. Slutskii's poem predates most of it and thus in fact foreshadows the trope.
- 33 This, of course, includes Slutskii's own post-war poetry, along with Alexander Mezhirov's, David Samoilov's, and the unpublishable Naum Korzhavin's. Semen Gudzenko, however, was prolific during the war, as were Ian Satunovskii and Iosif Degen.
- 34 Already in the 19th century, Nikolai Leskov employed this paradigm in his report on the state of Jews in Russia, benevolently arguing, "Let Russia today treat them [Jews] like their mother rather than step-mother would and they will be ready to forget everything that they've endured in the past and become her good sons" (At http://az.lib.ru/l/leskow_n_s/text_0142.shtml [accessed October 30, 2013]).
- 35 Of course, the major Soviet slogan unveiled at the start of the war was "*Rodina-Mat' zovet!*" (The Motherland calls on you), whose most memorable representation was the poster created by artist Iraklii Taidze at the end of June, 1941.
- 36 One should keep in mind the special emphasis on Russianness, as opposed to Sovietness, which was undertaken by Stalin during the war to promote patriotism among a disaffected population.
- 37 Ada Kolganova, ed., *Menora: Evreiskie motivy v russkoi poezii* (Moscow: Jewish University, 1993), 381.