45 The Boy from Zima (March 2022)

Atrocities happen in all wars, and all wars *are* atrocities. As I write this in late February, things appear direr than ever in Ukraine with a full-scale invasion by Russian forces looking increasingly imminent, as Putin attempts to destabilise not just Ukraine but also the West. In his eyes Ukraine represents a threat to his masterplan to wrest power back to Russia and create a new 'Soviet' Empire. Since the demise of the Soviet bloc, Putin hasn't stopped trying to row back on any countries adjoining Russia who have the temerity to liberalise and enjoy the advantages of western-style freedom, democracy and accountability. He has already done this before, taking over Crimea in 2014 and Georgia in 2008, when he accused the government there of aggression against South Ossetia.

So, I turn to our battered 1962 copy of *Penguin Selected Poems* of Yevgeny Yevtushenko for a reminder of a saner voice coming out of Russia than Putin's coldly calculating mendacities. It's perhaps difficult for a younger generation who did not live through the Cold War to imagine how extraordinary it was in the early sixties - those increasingly uneasy years after the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956, the nuclear proliferation, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and later, the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia after the Prague Spring of 1968 – to have the "voice" of this poet from Russia. Like the Kennedys, he struck quite a sexy note – tall, athletic (at one time he had considered becoming a footballer) and youthful. In Russia he was becoming so popular he could fill stadiums! A *poet*! He was also speaking out in a way that would have been unthinkable only a few years earlier – Stalin may have departed the stage in 1953 but there had been little relaxation of Soviet policy or culture. So, the west was quick to welcome this new and exciting voice. All of the poems chosen here are from this Penguin Selection of 1962.

In terms of where he came from and how he grew up, it's nearly all there in the poems. Born in 1933, he grew up in the remote town of Zima on the trans-Siberian railway, to which he returned after a long absence in Moscow, where he had been an average student at the Moscow Literary Institute. He had written poetry from a young age (his parents were geologists and took him on some of their expeditions – he loved nature and there was music and singing in the family), but his poetic talents took some time to emerge. He was still under twenty when his first book of poems was published in 1952 (Stalin was still around. Just.).

His long and brilliant poem "Zima Junction" (1956) - a sort of Wordsworthian "Prelude" set in Siberia, where he grew up - gives an account of his childhood, the more fascinating, partly, because it is so…ordinary and lively. Here is his return from Moscow:

> At once from the very first expostulations,
> 'He's here!' 'Zhenka!' 'Come and eat something!'
> from the first embraces, kisses and reproaches,
> 'And couldn't you have sent us a telegram?'
> from, 'We were just lighting the samovar'
> from recollections, 'how many years is it?'
> Just as I thought, all indecision vanished,
> and things became peaceful and full of light.
> And anxious Aunt Eliza put forward
> the strong proposal I should have a wash
> since she knew what those trains were like, she said.
> Already tureens and kitchen-implements,
> already the table dragged to the living-room,
> and passing among the grey-blue onion shoots
> I went off for water from the well,
> waking the well with a Cossack song –
> the well kept the smells of my childhood,
> the bucket came up bumping on the sides,
> the chain was wet and sparkled in the light.
> So, I from Moscow, I the important guest,

hair damped down, clean-shirted,
sat in a crowd of radiant relations,
centre of questions, glasses, scurryings.
I'd got too weak for the great Siberian dishes
and now despaired at the sight of their abundance.
My aunt said, "Have another bit of gherkin.
What do they feed you on in Moscow, then?
You're eating nothing at all. It isn't decent!
Here, take a dumpling. Have some aubergine.'
My uncle said, 'I expect that Moscow vodka's
What you've got used to; try some of this.
Go on, go on – I do say all the same
It isn't good for you, not at your age.
Who taught you that? Look, down in one gulp!
Well, cheers and God grant it won't be the last.'

This is the visit he made in the summer of 1953, the same year that the Great Leader died. Stalin had died in March and lay in state in the Hall of Columns in Moscow. The details of his death (how nobody had dared check on his body for *hours*, how Beria, uncertain whether Stalin WAS dead or not, switched back and forth between crowing scorn and abject terror that he might not be quite dead) are incredibly funny in a very dark way.

The Politburo was buzzing with intrigue - ending with the rise of Nikita Krushchev who was abetted by the wartime hero, Marshal Georgy Zhukov, and the arrest and execution of the utterly evil, rapist thug, Beria, (and those linked with him) in December of that year.

Shortly after Stalin's death, the so-called 'Doctors' Plot' was revealed to have been a complete fabrication (from 1951-53, reports were circulating that Jewish doctors had been responsible for the deaths of senior soviet leaders, including Stalin). There's evidence that Stalin may have been ready to rig the old show trials again for the accused doctors, and then use that as a pretext for large-scale deportations of Jews to specified areas in Russia. Luckily, Stalin died before any of this could come to pass, but it shows how strongly the tentacles of anti-semitism reached into the core of Russian society.

References to these events are not explicit in “Zima Station”, but an unease hangs over the later stages of the poem. The small, grimy Siberian town of Zima seems another universe away from Moscow, but there are hints of corruption around and the persona in the poem resolves to set his face towards truth in what elsewhere appears an uncertain world:

> And the voice of Zima Junction spoke to me
> and this is what it said.
> ‘I live quietly and crack nuts.
> I gently steam with engines,
> but not without reflection on these times,
> these modern times, my loving meditation.
> Don’t worry. Yours is no unique condition,
> your type of search and conflict and construction,
> don’t worry if you have no answer ready
> to the lasting question.
> Hold out, meditate, listen.
> Explore. Explore. Travel the world over.
> Count happiness connatural to the mind
> more than truth is, and yet
> no happiness to exist without it.’

Truth actually mattered to him. Over the course of a long life as a successful poet, both in the west and more importantly, perhaps, in Russia, Yevtushenko inevitably had to steer a delicate course if he was to survive as a writer. More outspoken dissidents (including, notably the poet Brodsky, whom Yevtushenko had defended earlier) accused him of cosying up to the Russian authorities too much – but this is to ignore the fact that Yevtushenko, for all his popularity, never let the leadership off the hook. He spoke out against the invasion of Czechoslovakia, supported Gorbachev, and later Yeltsin, when he managed to ward off the hard-line parliamentary coup attempt to reverse ‘perestroika’, though he opposed Yeltsin’s invasion of Chechnya.

Before we come to his most famous poem, let's just enjoy the freshness of his voice. His first wife was the beautiful, talented and charismatic poet, Bella Akhmadulina. In this short poem, "Waiting", Yevtushenko describes young love in its earlier stages. Is it just his fantasy or was love between them really like this? (At all events, this marriage didn't last very long).

Waiting

My love will come
will fling open her arms and fold me in them,
will understand my fears, observe my changes.
In from the pouring dark, from the pitch night
without stopping to bang the taxi door
she'll run upstairs through the decaying porch
burning with love and love's happiness,
she'll run dripping upstairs, she won't knock,
will take my head in her hands,
and when she drops her overcoat on a chair,
it will slide to the floor in a blue heap.

It somehow seems so happy and innocent, even as a fantasy. (Memo – MUST read and report on some of *her* poetry! And Tsvetaeva's and Akhmatova's…) Another poem brimming with happiness is "On A Bicycle". It describes an innocent Sunday outing from Moscow to meet friends. Nothing much happens, everything seems relaxed and pleasurable, but the poem leaves us with a few questions unanswered.

ON A BICYCLE

Under the dawn I wake my two-wheeled friend.
Shouting from her bed my mother says to me,
'Mind you don't clatter it going downstairs!'
I walk him down, he springing step to step:
those tyres he has, if you pat him flat-handed
he'll bounce your hand. I mount with an air
and as light as a pair of legs as you'll encounter,

slow into Sunday ride out of the gates,
roll along asphalt, press down on the pedals,
speeding, fearless,
ring,
ring,
ring,
get clear of Moscow, frighten a one-eyed cock
with a broken tail, lend a boy a spanner
(his hair white as a mane) drink brown kvas* *a sort of low alcoholic beer
passing Kuntsevo in a cloud of dust,
lean up against the kvas tank (warmed with sun
hot on my back). The girl who's serving gives me
a handful of damp change from a damp hand,
won't say her name, 'You're artful all you boys…'
I smile, 'So long…'

Riding to a cottage, to a friend, I gather
speed and swish away again on the road.
My friend unhappy whittling away at a big stick
beside his garage in the shining grass.
'Stolen the balls!' he says, 'Infuriating!'
curses his housekeeper. 'What, my caretaker,
she's a good one…'
I have often seen
smiles in the background and the exchange of glances.
'How fat he is and look at his new shoes!'
Best to be silent.
As for you keep walking
you things of thinness, things of bare feet,
You'll not do it, your hands will never reach.
He in his life was one who could have done.
And I observe his wide and heavy shoulders,

and undiminished by his conversation
note the preoccupation in his eyes.
He finds it hard. Better in wartime.
Life passing.
When the war was over youth was over.
'Here's the shower. Here – dry yourself.'
Walk in the forest cursing films and poems.
Then at lunch on the cool, silent terrace
sitting between my friend and my friend's wife,
drinking the long taste of the dry wine.

Soon 'Goodbye Galya', 'Goodbye Misha',
she leaning on his shoulder at the gate.
I say he'll do it, I say he will write.
But if he doesn't, don't tell me about it.
Flinging along my happiness my fever,
incapable of breaking out of it,
overtaking the lorries on the road
taking each of them in a single swoop
flying behind the through cut open space
hanging on them uphill. Yes, I know.
It's dangerous. I enjoy it. They hoot
and lean out and yell,
'We'll give you a hand on the hills;
Give you some speed; after that
You tear along on your own.'
Careering full tilt, pelting along
in a flurry of jokes. Turn a blind eye
to my crazy career; it's the fashion.
You can't tell me how terribly I ride.
One day I'll learn how to ride.

And I spring down at a deserted
ancient lodge by the roadside,
in dim forest light I break lilac,
twine it with ivy on to the handlebars.
Flying on, flying,
sticking my face down into dark blossom,
get into the city not quite worn out.
Switch on the lamp and switch off the light.
I put my bunch of lilac into water,
set the alarm to go at eight o' clock,
sit at the table
write
these lines.

This seems to describe so vividly youth, freedom and happiness. He's still living with his mother in Moscow, a student. The atmosphere may be holiday-like and carefree, but there are ambiguities and oblique references that are left unexplained, as if there are secrets. "It's best to be silent." Is his friend a writer? Will he write…? It's telling – the phrase, "When the war was over youth was over", as if the war had brought with it a certain freedom and excitement if you were young. Now growing up, there are uncertainties and things left unsaid or undone. I think that this is the tension in the poem – a tension between carefree youth, and friendships or encounters that hint at more complex states of being – "Walk in the forest cursing films and poems."

The next poem, *Babiy Yar*, moves us into totally different territory and shows us what is great about Yevtushenko (he was nominated for a Nobel on the strength of it), in spite of the fact that it was written when he was still only in his late twenties. Atrocities are particularly difficult to write about - or write *poems* about – they are so removed from everyday life and so unbearably hard to understand or imagine. Perhaps you know all about what happened in the ravine of Babiy Yar at Kiev in Ukraine in 1941 but I didn't. One knows, of course, that atrocities do take place in wartime. In fact, I discovered one that had occurred in our own village (it is still, as far as I know, undocumented by official records of the events at Houdetot on the 11th and 12th June 1940 during the attempted evacuation of allied troops

from St Valéry-en-Caux - but Emile, an eyewitness who was 8 or 9 at the time, told me that after the battle that took place between Rommel's tanks and the 'Black Watch' (an infantry battalion of the Royal Regiment of Scotland, who had been desperately trying to hold up the tank advance on the small port), German troops had ordered the evacuation of the farm cellar, where the inhabitants of Houdetot were sheltering. But there were also wounded Scottish soldiers in that cellar. The villagers were ordered to leave them, and troops then went in armed with flamethrowers to finish off the wounded. They clearly didn't want to take prisoners). But what happened at Babiy Yar was on a completely different and unprecedented scale, both in terms of numbers, and in the savagery, the sheer inhumanity of what had been carefully and cold-bloodedly prepared.

Yevtushenko was not the first poet to write of the terrible massacre that took place at the ravine of Babiy Yar, just outside Kiev, but it was his poem that broke a widespread silence officially surrounding the events. In particular, he drew attention to the anti-semitism of this atrocity in a Russia which did not seem to want to accept that the atrocity had been specifically aimed at exterminating Jews. The party line was that it was an atrocity committed *against the Russian people*. It is true that Babiy Yar later became the scene of further massacres and executions - of the mentally deficient, gipsies, homosexuals, criminals or anyone deemed a threat or who had been denounced. But, what happened there over two terrible days, 29th and 30th September 1941 *specifically* targeted Jews, in the biggest numbers recorded in the war up to that time, and over just two days.

The German army had entered the city ten days previously as part of the advance on Russia in 1941. Following an explosion at the German army headquarters, 33,771 adults and children were rounded up in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, by the Nazis, and were led out, in the space of these two days, to the ravine known as Babiy Yar. There, having had to run a gauntlet between soldiers armed with clubs urging them forward, the wretched citizens were forced to strip naked and kneel in lines at the top of the ravine before being shot by machine-guns. Children were mainly burned to death. The details, even now with the distance of time, are almost too unbearable to take in. There were, miraculously, one or two survivors, who lived to testify to this unbelievably awful event (see Dina Pronicheva's testimony at https://www.yadvashem.org/education/educational-materials/learning-environment/babi-yar/written-testimonies.html)

Yevtushenko was not Jewish but here he strongly and bravely empathises with the Jewish victims and stands up against the antisemitism that disgusts him so much. This was written in 1961, at a time when it took courage to speak out critically about the Soviet state and Russian antisemitism. (The following is my modification of the Penguin translation with the help of several other versions in English I found on the internet.)

Babiy Yar by Yevgeny Yevtushenko

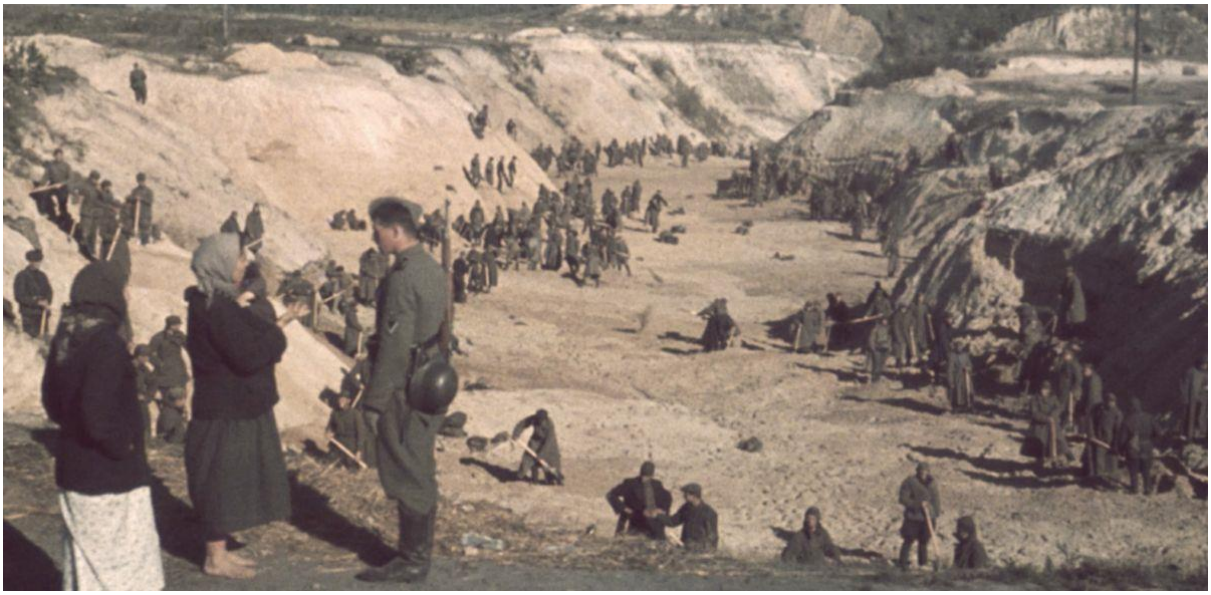
No monument stands over Babiy Yar.
A drop sheer as a crude gravestone.
I am terrified.
Today I am as old in years
as all the Jewish people.
Now I feel myself to be
    a Jew.
Here I plod through ancient Egypt.
Here I perish crucified, on the cross,
and to this day I bear the marks of nails.
I seem to be
    Dreyfus.
The Philistine
    is both accuser and judge.
I am behind bars.
Beset on every side.
Hounded,
    spat on
    slandered.
Squealing, dainty ladies in flounced Brussels lace
stick their parasols into my face.
I seem to be
    a young boy in Byelostok*.
Blood runs, spilling over the floors.

The barroom rabble-rousers
give off a stench of vodka and onions.
A boot kicks me aside, I’m helpless.
In vain I plead with these pogrom bullies.
While they jeer and shout,
"Beat the Yids. Save Russia!"
Some grain-marketeer is molesting my mother.
O my Russian people!
I know
you
are international to the core.
But those with unclean hands
have often made a jingle of your purest name.
I know the goodness of my land.
How vile these anti-Semites are –
without a qualm
they pompously called themselves
the Union of the Russian People!
I seem to be Anne Frank
transparent
as a branch in April.
And I love.
And have no need of words.
My need
is for us gaze into each other’s eyes.
How little we can see
or smell!
We are denied the leaves,
we are denied the sky.
Yet we can do so much –

tenderly embrace each other in a darkened room.
They're coming here?
Be not afraid. Those are the booming
sounds of spring:
spring is coming this way.
Come then to me.
Quick, give me your lips.
Are they smashing down the door?
No, it's the cracking of ice ...
The wild grasses rustle over Babiy Yar.
The trees look ominous,
like judges.
Here all things scream silently,
and, baring my head,
slowly I feel myself
turning gray.
And I myself
am one massive, soundless scream
above the thousands upon thousands buried here.
I am each old man
here shot dead.
I am every child
here shot dead.
Nothing in me
shall ever forget!
The "Internationale," let it
thunder
when the last anti-semite on earth
is buried forever.
In my blood there is no Jewish blood.
In their callous rage, all anti-semites
must hate me now as a Jew.

For that reason
I am a true Russian.

Byelostok* (formerly in Poland, then part of the Russian Empire) one of the the most important pogroms in which between 81-88 Jews were killed and a similar number wounded. One of a series of pogroms against Jews that took place between 1903 and 1908 (in Odessa, Kishinev and Kiev). You could think of them as a series of Russian *Kristallnachts*.



1st October 1941 Ukrainians being ordered to cover the 33,771 bodies the following day

Yevtuchenko died in 2017 in Tulsa, Oklahoma (he said he preferred the provincial feel of Oklahoma to the dense, metropolitan life of New York). The following poem, still from his S*elected Poems* of 1962, serves as a fitting obituary for him, perhaps, even though it was written in his twenties.

Talk

You're a brave man they tell me.
I'm not.
Courage has never been my quality.
Only I thought it disproportionate
so to degrade myself as others did.

No foundations trembled. My voice
no more than laughed at pompous falsity;
I did no more than write, never denounced,
I left out nothing I had thought about,
defended who deserved it, put a brand
on the untalented, the ersatz writers
(doing what had anyhow to be done).
And now they press to tell me that I'm brave.
How sharply our children will be ashamed
taking at last their vengeance for these horrors,
remembering how in so strange a time
common integrity could look like courage.