BABI YAR

Dmitry Shlapentokh

I had not been in Ukraine for thirty-two years. I was born there, in that part of the world, as were the ancestors of the vast majority of Ashkenazi Jews. My ancestors have been the subjects of various kaisers, emperors, and tsars. According to Russian chronicles, once some Jews approached Vladimir, the prince of Kiev, the city where I was born and the capital of mighty Kievan Russia (Rus'), and asked him if he would convert to Judaism. Vladimir asked, "Where is your motherland?"

"Our motherland is in Jerusalem."

"But why are you here?"

"For the sins of our ancestors the mighty Lord has scattered us all over the world."

Vladimir responded that he would like to live and die in his own land and sent them away.

The collapse of empires, emigration, and wars have scattered my own family all over the globe. Some of them still live in Russia, and on a return visit I decided to visit Kiev, although not entirely for sentimental reasons. I had received a grant from my university and thought to explore the Ukrainian archives. I was curious to see what had happened to this part of the USSR after the collapse of the empire. I also wanted to revisit some of the ancient monuments that tell the history of the region.

If I had decided to visit the city earlier, it would certainly have been for another reason: I would have been able to visit with the numerous relatives of my maternal grandmother who live there. She had a huge number of sisters and brothers and seemed to bring forth a new son or daughter every nine months. If I had visited earlier, I might have seen many of them, but time takes its toll. Most of my younger relatives, with or without family, were scattered throughout the world. They had emigrated to Israel, the United States, Germany, and who knows where. The elder folks were rapidly dying out. What I would find today would be their tombs, and there is no reason to visit Kiev just for this.

I arrived during the holidays, when the archives were closed, so I decided to do

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some sightseeing. The Sofia Cathedral is perhaps the most important monument visitors can see in Kiev. Built in the eleventh century as a copy of the Sofia Cathedral in Constantinople, it seems to be the only cathedral in Europe where frescos from the eleventh century have been preserved, not only their fragments but almost in their entirety. From the outside it is an imposing structure, with its great blue and white tower topped by a golden cupola. Inside I stopped in front of the huge fresco of the Virgin Mary Oranta, who stands erect, palms outward, as if she were blessing visitors. Her image was shaped from thousands of tiny pieces of *smalta*, calciferous glass melted in a special way. She has been placed inside a space of gold that glitters, and though it is very dim inside the cathedral, she seems to be illuminated by some twinkling light source.

I then remembered that the sarcophagus containing the remains of the founder of the cathedral, Yaroslav the Wise, was here. I observed attentively the big white coffin that had been made from a single slab of marble. I have always been interested in sarcophagi of all types, but especially Egyptian ones, which are great pieces of art covered with an intricate web of pictures that promise those placed inside eternal life. I spotted the custodian nearby, a middle-aged woman about the same age as I, and asked her if anyone had ever opened the sarcophagus before the Soviet era. She told me that no one had done this, except possibly the Mongols, who had taken the city in the thirteenth century. It was most likely they had opened it and stolen the valuables inside. I asked if anyone ever prayed for Yaroslav and the others who had found their final resting place inside the cathedral.

She stated this was impossible, mostly because of the New Ukrainian Church, which had split with Moscow, a move that had received the complete blessing of Yushchenko, the Western-oriented president. "This individual, this Philistine, who pretends to be the leader of the Ukrainian Church is a satanic person. He is driving all of us—Orthodox Christians—to the West, to spirits foreign to us. It will drive us to perdition." I gazed up at the cupola where the God Pantokrator seemed to be looking at me with stern open eyes. Since it was lunchtime, and I was interested in her viewpoint, we continued our conversation outside on one of the benches.

This is a special place. The cathedral is not only one of the most beautiful in all of Kiev; it is also considered sacred. It was the cradle of East Slavic Christianity, the bosom of Abraham. All his children—Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian—should come to this place to resurrect the dead and unite East European Orthodox Slavdom. "Resurrection is impossible," the custodian said. Her eyes had a strange glint as she continued. "There is only one way out, the last judgment, fire and brimstone."

We were now entering into one of those fascinating types of conversation that usually can be found only in this part of the world. "Why is resurrection impossible? As an Orthodox Christian, you should believe in resurrection. You know there was a Russian philosopher, Nikolai Fedorov, who believed that the goal of humanity should be to resurrect the dead."

"It will never be so," she said.

"Why? Because it contradicts Christian doctrine?"

"No, I simply feel that this would not work. My heart tells me so. Yes, I am a Christian—when I started to believe it was a spiritual revelation—but I am unable to discard everything I was taught before. I am a graduate of medical school and studied the human body for quite some time. However,

I shall confess I was a rather naïve girl." Here she paused to smile at me in self-effacing way, as if she were asking me to forgive her for something. "I suppose you think it strange for a medical student to be naïve. It seems I was attractive when I was young. Boys liked me. But for a long time I did not understand what they wanted from me."

Here there was another pause followed by that same smile, a seeking for forgiveness. She went on, "And later in my life, there was a certain psychological transformation. If I had gone to the doctor, he most likely would have found the cause for this. I don't understand why Fedorov's system would not work, but I think it does not."

The next day I went to the city archives. By that time, the files I had ordered had arrived. After spending several hours reading, I ventured outside to eat with an Armenian who worked in the archives and had spent the past twenty-five years in Ukraine. We found a comfortable place to have our lunch in a nearby park. I told him that I had recently been in Turkey for a conference and one of the speakers, a retired diplomat, had blasted Armenia "for accusing us of crimes we did not commit."

"What do you expect from them?" he exploded. "These are the people who have taken land that did not belong to them and created nothing. The instinct for killing us is in their blood. Many Armenians believe in authority and willingly marched to their own death at the hands of these beasts."

As a Jew, I feel a kind of bond with Armenians. This goes back to the Soviet era when our fates were often similar. I asked about the approach to Jews in Ukraine, which has been notoriously anti-Semitic since time immemorial. "Everything is the same," he said. "And it shall always be so."

"Look around," I said. "There are many signs of appreciation for Jews, for example, there are Jewish artifacts in the museums. The president even attended synagogue."

"All of this is for appearance's sake. Something like you have in America for minorities. For academics and government officials to be black, or a member of some minority, is a great advantage. As for the rest, the majority, business is the same as always. And this is also the case with the Ukrainian approach. The elite want to be civilized Europeans, and they are obsessed with the desire to become part of the European Union. And who would accept some anti-Semitic racist? It would be like inviting someone who is not toilet trained to a fashionable party. So today they cozy up to the Jews; but if you look at the bottom, at the masses . . ."

While he rambled on, I looked around the park. I spotted a midsize monument off in the distance. Although I couldn't be sure because of my aging eyesight, it looked like one of those monuments extolling the virtue of children that I had so often seen during my childhood. Soviet parks, including those in Kiev, were often decorated with plaster monstrosities, often images of young pioneers—the members of the Young Communist League. Their creation had provided justification for the employment of local artists and supposedly instilled an appreciation for art among Soviet youth. The youth were often portrayed as trumpeters, and their silent trumpeting announced some great victory for the Soviet cause, another triumph in the quest for social justice and peace.

Nothing has changed, I thought. The monuments only seem to be better designed and made of sturdier materials. The monuments of my youth were cheap and easily fell apart in the harsh weather, revealing the iron bones beneath the plaster. Since I was curious, I excused myself and moved closer for a better look. The children of this

monument were not trumpeters. Instead, they were small boys and girls, and one of the boys was wearing a yarmulke. Beneath there was a description that stated that thousands of children had been killed here. Their ethnicity—or, as Russians usually state, "nationality"—was not mentioned. I walked back to my Armenian friend.

"The Babi Yar is near here?" I asked.

He nodded. The Babi Yar, a ravine, is where in 1941 the Germans had killed around one hundred thousand Ukrainian Jews, in one of the most brutal examples of the "final solution" to the Jewish question. After World War II, with the rise of official Soviet anti-Semitism and Stalin's desire to send Soviet Jews in the Far East to populate the "Jewish Authority Region," the place did not even exist in official memory. Later, during the Khrushchev regime, the event was finally acknowledged as part of German brutality in the territory of the USSR, and the monument was erected. Still, the official line was that the victims of the atrocity were people of all ethnic backgrounds. Only after the collapse of the USSR did officials acknowledge that the victims had been mostly Jewish. By that time, Babi Yar had become one of the most well-known places in Kiev, a site that was almost an obligatory visit for official delegations and tourists, especially those, of course, from Israel and the United States.

"Is it indeed the Babi Yar?" I asked my Armenian friend.

"Yes, you can walk on the bones."

"Yes, yes," added a young girl, and her boyfriend who were sitting on a bench near us.

The girl was beautiful—well-shaped, leggy, and sexily dressed. There are more beautiful girls per square mile in Ukraine than any other part of the former Soviet Union; definitely more than there are in Europe and America. The girl assertively took the hand of her boyfriend and engaged in a long kiss and then turned to me. "You should definitely see the monument. It is an interesting landmark, but I don't know how to get there." My Armenian friend was of no help.

I spent my childhood in Kiev before moving away to Russia, only occasionally returning. The last time I was here was in 1974, maybe even earlier. I had always liked the landmarks, and when I visited Kiev, I always became a bit of a tourist. Yet I had never seen Babi Yar. Maybe because it wasn't old enough, at least in comparison to the ancient cathedrals, or maybe because it was that a visit to any World War II landmark was associated with official Soviet rituals and therefore boring and to be avoided. Or perhaps it was because Babi Yar was related to Jews, and every Jew in the Soviet Union of my youth had tried to forget that he was Jewish. But I needed to see it—right now.

Back in the archives I asked one of the clerks how to get to the monument. Someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned to see a middle-aged woman who told me, "Don't go there. There were no executions there. I'll show you the place." This is always a risky venture. During my travels, I have come across many natives who supposedly are eager to assist a helpless traveler from the West. These natives, however, are hardly altruistic Samaritans. I have found that they usually ask for money or some other benefit. But as I determined that she did not know that I came from the United States because of my native Russian, I decided to take the risk.

"Thousands of innocents were killed—God bless their souls," she said, as we moved away from the long park road to a footpath that was barely visible. It was clear as we moved through the thicket that I would never be able to find the place on my own.

The trees and bushes looked as if they had not been tended in years. We started up a hill, actually breaking through tall grass and shrubbery. Suddenly, there was an awful smell, and I asked my guide about it. She pointed to a heap of garbage that had either been dumped here by city residents or possibly by visitors to the park. I saw a large group of people, and I thought that it was possibly another group of visitors who had decided to visit the place of the executions. No, it was a group of teenagers, talking loudly and drinking beer.

"Why has no one built a monument here, the place the executions actually took place?" I asked.

My guide stopped to catch her breath. "Well, a monument must be visited by numerous delegations. And such a place must be accessible to cars. You see that here there is too much dirt and shrubbery. It would take much time and effort to clean, and besides this place—the place where the killing actually took place—is too horrible. One could easily imagine the process; the visibility of death would be too unsettling. The tourists, and especially the representatives of official delegations, do not want to be disturbed. They come to a foreign country to see pretty young girls in native costumes dance rather than an image of death and destruction."

She began to pray passionately. I looked at her, trying to detect if she had some Jewish features. "Are you Jewish?" I asked.

"No, I am half French and half Greek. I am Orthodox and Ukrainian in spirit. I left Russia to be here in my land with my husband who is pure Ukrainian."

It was extremely strange for a Ukrainian to have such a passionate love for Jews, unless she was married to one. She possibly felt some guilt, as I have been told that many Jews in Babi Yar were killed by Ukrainians.

We finally reached the top and she pointed out the place. Yes, the killing ground should be here. The edge of the ravine dipped down fifty to one hundred meters, and the whole thing was covered by jungle, seemingly flourishing on the remains of the dead bodies beneath. At the time of the war, the bottom had been swampland. It had been logical to stand the victims on the edge and shoot so that they would fall into the swamp. No huge grave site needed to be dug.

"Did they know their fate?" I wanted to know.

"No, many believed they were being led to a better place."

Indeed, this was quite likely the case with many. During World War I, the Germans and Austrians treated Jews nicely, much better than did the Russians and Ukrainians. My maternal grandmother even dated Austrian officers during World War I and destroyed their love correspondence only in the beginning of World War II. Russians suspected that many Jews were in active collaboration with the Germans, not without grounds. Thus, Russians were very suspicious of Jews as potential German helpers. Moreover, the German troops were quite likely well-groomed, polite chaps—nice shepherds to their piglets. Logically, then, one could assume that the piglets hardly suspected the shepherds of foul play. They seemed to care for them so selflessly with such devotion: grooming, feeding, and washing them, etc.—a sort of "quiet American" behavior.

The edge of the ravine had no monument but instead was covered with wild grasses and flowers. There were two simple metal crosses, though, and looking at them I suddenly remembered that the family of my grandmother's sister had been killed here. This was not just somebody else's grave, a historical artifact; it was a graveyard with personal meaning. As we moved downward,

I could easily imagine women and children dying in this spot. But at the same time, I felt that something kept me from seeing it as it had really been. This picture of incompleteness strangely disturbed me.

The last day of my visit to Kiev was to be dedicated to visiting the cemetery where my maternal relatives were buried. I was to go with my cousin who had decided to take me there with his mother, the wife of my late uncle. My cousin has the big fat mighty body of a sumo wrestler. He eats like a pig and smokes like a chimney and wears a huge cross around his neck. The point here is that my uncle was completely assimilated. He had married a Ukrainian village girl. He drank and ate pork as his fellow workers did in the factory where he worked. After his death, at approximately my age, his son married a Ukrainian girl; all his children had married Ukrainians and Russians. In any case, by Jewish law, he was not a Jew.

The trip to the cemetery was a long ride, and during the journey he told me that one of the most important Hasidic rabbis was buried in Uman. The grave was in the plot of a retired Soviet militiaman. The place had become full of pious Jewish pilgrims and tourists, so the Jews had asked the militiaman to sell the place to them, but he had refused and made a lot of money. We approached the cemetery and my cousin's cell phone rang. "You know, buddy," he said into the phone, "I'm at the cemetery. It's not convenient to talk business. Call later." Then he turned to me. "I hate cemeteries. Mother loves them. They give her a sense of comfort. I don't know why."

To get to our family's graves in the car was difficult. There was a shortage of space, with the graves jammed closely to each other. And each new resident arrived demanding space. I entered the big family plot, much bigger than I had imagined, definitely much bigger than it had been the last time I visited thirty-five or forty years ago. That time, my grandmother had escorted me to acquaint me with the family dead. But at that time, even though both my grandmother and I had been much younger, we did not visit all the graves, possibly because we did not have a car.

So it was that this was the first time I saw this particular grave. He died in World War II, in its last year, 1945. I never had the chance to meet him, because he died before I was born. I move to another grave of a man I remember well, as my grandmother had shown me his picture during our visit. He was killed in the first months of the war, when almost a half million Soviet troops had been surrounded near Kiev. How he died no one knew. His grave, as was the previous one, was empty, merely a symbol. His home I remember, and I know that his daughter is living in Israel. And there was the grave of a boy who drowned in the Black Sea. And another who died shortly before I was born; it seems he had eaten some food that had stuck in his throat. There were many other names I could not remember, nor could I place them in the hierarchical order of the family. The fact that I could not remember them doomed them to their final destruction, to complete annihilation.

In fact, all I saw was complete annihilation around me. This was an abandoned cemetery, a dying cemetery, a Jewish cemetery. Most of those who should have been there to take care of the graves had emigrated, scattered, died out themselves in other lands. The dead then were defenseless, and vigorous, pitiless life took advantage of them. Huge trees with mighty limbs sprang from the graves. Their branches were filled with green leaves as transparent as precious gems. From their tops birds chirped and sang love songs, and insects buzzed around them. The living had no compassion, no memory of the

dead, especially if the dead were ordinary folk, among the countless billions who have populated the earth.

We determined that we should visit the tomb of my grandmother's younger sister Mania. It took some trouble to get to her grave, which was submerged in the rampant shrubbery. The fallen trunks of trees had crushed the gravestones here and there. Some trees rose through the stones, splitting them. Stones from old graves were everywhere. Although this part of the cemetery seemed abandoned, my grandmother's younger sister's face was clear on her slab. Kievan Jews were apparently oblivious to the Jewish tradition that prohibited putting pictures or flowers on graves. Her face was young and kind, and at that moment I felt an overwhelming sense of love for her.

I felt that the dead were powerless, defenseless, and I needed to do something to make their rest comfortable, to prove to them that I loved them. I began to clear the debris from their graves, and the more I tugged and pulled at the fallen branches, the more I felt that these dead, these dry bones, loved me too. I felt that their love for me might be stronger than that of the living. I felt that I could give myself over completely to them because they loved me and would never betray me. And that someday they would rise and greet each other, greet me at some great party. At the party would be all those whom I never knew and whose countless graves were scattered all over the globe.

I grew weary of plucking the bushes and looked around. There were a countless number of graves. There was the grave of a fifteen-year-old who died when I was only two. And here the grave of a baby boy. And here one of an elderly man. And why shouldn't they be invited? Yes, the great feast should include all of them. In fact, the great feast should include all the living and dead.

My cousin had been watching me as I tried to clear the brush. "Do not try to clean up this mess," he told me and his mother. "Most likely the cemetery will not survive. The big pre-evolutionary Jewish cemetery was destroyed completely and a big housing project was built over it. And we have to hurry; we need to see the grave of my grandfather Valodia."

We got into the car and made our way to our last stop. It was a large grave, in which had been placed my grand-grandmother—she died when I was nine years old—my uncle and my grandfather. It was said that my grandfather participated in the Civil War and served in the secret police during the Great Purges of the 1930s. "My mother told me that he did not participate in all of these events," I said to my cousin.

"Of course he did. Life was tough. You needed to participate in such business if you worked in NKVD at that time. And we should all be grateful that he had taken grandmother out of Kiev. Otherwise, she would have ended up at Babi Yar and neither of us would have been born."

I pointed out several portraits of young women whose graves had 1941 marked as the year of death. "Do you think they died at Babi Yar?" I said.

"Most likely."

There is a big cemetery near Kiev, thirty to forty kilometers away, where the hundreds of thousands are buried, victims of the Red Terror. And here, suddenly, the picture of Babi Yar became clear to me. Those who died at Babi Yar were people from all walks of life. They were possibly members of the secret police and their wives and children. There were here members of the Soviet bureaucracy, quite a few were Jews, as was one of my relatives who had received a spacious apartment in 1938–39—the time of the Great Purges. He shot himself rather than be taken by the Germans. It was the enormous number of

Jews who had been eager to take advantage of the social advancement that the Soviet system afforded. It was Jewish workers and their families. It was old and young from all walks of life.

Finally, we arrived back home. I asked Stasia why no one cleaned the Babi Yar—the ravine. After all, not all those buried there had been Jews. There were thousands of others, possibly hundreds of thousands. There had been a prison camp nearby, and people were shot and died there, all types of people: Russian prisoners of war, peasants, Ukrainian nationalists, and common criminals. And all these corpses had been dumped into the same pit. The brush and trees could be cut down and the bones reburied. My cousin told me that, not only was it not possible to divide the Jewish bones from those of the non-Jews—there were hardly any bones left. In the 1960s there had been a great storm that had carried mud and bones to Kurinevka, one of the regions of the city. The mud had been cleaned up and possibly dumped all over the city's dump.

My knowledge of Judaism is extremely sketchy. I know only a few words of the prayers that my great-grandmother had taught me. But I know that the prayers should be collective. And here in Babi Yar, before the German or Ukrainian guards discharged their machine guns, those taken there—so different from each other, those who hated each other or had been indifferent to each other—all of a sudden, in the twinkling of a moment, may have come together in death. Their deaths may have been a collective experience, a moment of prayer.

This experience, our mortality, could be the cause for unity of the billions of the living and dead. The validity of this truth is confirmed every second; it is repeated in the books and treatises of those whom humans call geniuses. And yet even though this is true, somehow, it has never been fully understood and appreciated. This is precisely why Babi Yar is doomed to be repeated over and over, possibly to the end of the human race.