



Isaac Babel: 'My First Goose'



IN 1916, a year before the Bolshevik Revolution, 22-year-old Isaac Babel foretold another imminent revolution—this time, in literature. “If you think about it,” he wrote, “doesn’t it strike you that in Russian literature there haven’t been so far any real, clear, cheerful descriptions of the sun?” Paying due homage to a handful of Russia’s great modern writers—Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Gorky—he nevertheless finds their descriptions of life to be cold, gray, and gloomy, and insists that it is high time for new blood:

We are being stifled. Literature’s messiah, so long awaited, will issue forth from the sun-drenched steppes washed by the sea.

Babel emerged as a writer during the revolutionary surge that culminated in the formation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, led by Vladimir Lenin as the first head of government and by Leon Trotsky, a known Jew, as commissar of military affairs.

Who, then, could better serve as that long-awaited messiah of Russian literature than a great writer who, too, was a Jew by the name of Babel, born in sun-drenched Odesa? What better proof could there be that tsarism had given way to a nondenominational, egalitarian society?

Babel’s life moved in two directions: He married a cultivated, well-to-do, and very companionable Jewish woman named Yevgenia Gronfein. But rather than moving to Western Europe with her, as she wished, he plunged into the heart of the new Soviet experiment. Apart from several visits over the years to his wife and their daughter in Belgium and France, he would remain in Russia.

In 1919, when the Soviets launched their first foreign war against Poland, Babel saw his opportunity to be at the center of Russia’s history-in-the-making. For the new regime, this war was a means to consolidate control over its very diverse population. The newly formed Red Army, led by Trotsky, conscripted into its ranks numerous Ukrainian Cossacks whom it allowed to fight in their customary manner—that is, as horsemen under their own leaders. Within the army were also embedded a number of so-called war correspondents, functioning as internal propagandists. To serve as these “information officers,” the army recruited many Jews, the best-educated sector of the Russian public. Thus Jews, once the chief victims of Cossacks and still the prey of both contending armies in this Polish–Soviet war, were now the delegated agents of the new Soviet regime.

In 1920, the Bolshevik party in Odesa issued war-correspondent credentials to Isaac Babel. Joining the Cavalry Army under the command of General Semyon Budyonny, Babel spent that summer on the front lines under the assumed name of Kiril Vasilievich Lyutov. In the aftermath, basing himself on the diary he had maintained on the front, he compiled a series of 34 stories that would appear in 1926 as the book *Red Cavalry*, which made him famous—and controversial.

Our story, “My First Goose,” is the eighth of the 34. It opens when the war is already in progress, requiring the narrator’s—and therefore the reader’s—quick orientation to the circumstances:

Savitsky, the divchief six, rose when he saw me, and I was struck by the beauty of his giant body. He rose and—with the carmine of his breeches, the raspberry of his tilted cap, the medals pressed onto his chest—split the cottage in half as a standard splits the sky. He smelled of perfume and the sickly sweet freshness of soap. His long legs were like girls sheathed to the shoulders in shining riding boots.

There are at least five English versions of this story—I am using Peter Constantine’s—and every one of them makes you want to check it for accuracy. Isn’t “sickly sweet freshness” a contradiction in terms? How do the legs of a commander who is obviously a model of masculinity resemble girls wedged up to their shoulders in riding boots? If the narrator is so at home with military jargon as to refer to the commander of the Sixth Division as “divchief six,” shouldn’t he be focusing on something other than this giant’s “beauty”?

But just as commanders run wars, so writers determine how wars will be rendered. In the collection’s previous story, the reader will have learned that the narrator with the Russian-sounding name Lyutov is himself a Yiddish-speaking Jew embedded in a Cossack regiment of the Red Army fighting through towns where his fellow Jews have been victims of both sides. It follows that his narrator, a Jewish chronicler of Cossacks, will offer an unconventional view of what he sees: This is why Lyutov’s style is as striking as the man he describes. Instead of using adjectives like “dashing,” “impressive,” and “commanding,” he conveys the erotic force of Savitsky’s masculinity, “the beauty of his giant body.” This has the incidental benefit of letting us know that the narrator is not the only intricate character here. Savitsky is no less complex a creature—a point worth remembering when, further along, we meet his cruder soldiers.

Lyutov has arrived at his assigned post just as the commander is dictating orders for a certain Ivan Chesnokov to advance and destroy the enemy of a designated town. Savitsky writes out the last part of the order in his own hand: Should the lieutenant fail, he will “pay the full penalty” on the spot. Turning then to propaganda, the other side of the war, he asks Lyutov, “You read and write?”

“I read and write,” I replied, envying the flower and iron of that youthfulness. “Graduated in law from Petersburg University.”

“Well, don’t you stink of baby powder!” He burst out laughing. “Glasses on his nose, too. Look at the mangy little fellow! They send us your kind without asking, but here, glasses get you killed. Think you’ll manage with us, eh?”

“I’ll manage,” I said.

And so begins Lyutov’s test. Aware of what awaits Chesnokov should he fail in *his* assignment, Lyutov is sent off with the quartermaster to where he will be billeted, advised that his “glasses” may get him killed—by, that is, the soldiers on the Soviet side, his side.

We are by now aware of the weirdness of the situation. For “mangy little fellow,” Savitsky uses the Russian word *parkhatyi*—or “scabby,” a modifier commonly hurled as an insult against Jews. A man like Savitsky would never before have had to put up with such a “powderpuff” (as a different translation has it); indeed, only a decade earlier, thousands of young Jews like Babel had left Russia to avoid compulsory service in its armies. Yet here a young Jewish writer volunteers for the Russian front, admiring in the commander the very qualities that his Jewishness disallows. The new Soviet society, whose writer he aspires to be, espouses a set of values opposite to his own: Cossacks are valuable for how well they can fight wars, and Jews for whether they can reeducate the society as Leninists. The traditional Jewish emphasis on literacy that

formed him is now to be exploited in the service of propaganda.

The quartermaster who accompanies Lyutov amplifies Savitsky's warning that his soldiers are perfectly prepared to destroy persons of high distinction. And sure enough, when he comes among them, a young soldier tosses Lyutov's small trunk out the gate and then turns his rear end toward him to emit "a series of shameful noises." But our narrator, having already lived through this insult, is now the one in charge of telling the story. The following passage shows how a writer may control a situation he could not control in real life.

The young man [the farting soldier] walked off, having exhausted the limited resources of his artistry. I went down on my hands and knees and gathered up the manuscripts and the old, tattered clothes that had fallen out of my suitcase. I took them and carried them to the other end of the yard. A large pot of boiling pork stood on some bricks in front of the hut. Smoke rose from it as distant smoke rises from the village hut of one's childhood, mixing hunger with intense loneliness inside me. I covered my broken little suitcase with hay, turning it into a pillow, and lay down on the ground to read Lenin's speech at the Second Congress of the Comintern, which *Pravda* had printed. The sun fell on me through the jagged hills, the Cossacks kept stepping over my legs, the young fellow incessantly made fun of me, the beloved sentences struggled toward me over thorny paths, but could not reach me.

Ernest Hemingway, who prided himself on the spareness of his own prose, famously said of Babel's sentences: "Even when you've got all the water out of them, you can still clot the curds a little more." As cheesemakers get a superior product by squeezing out moisture, a writer may do likewise. To characterize farting as a Cossack's form of *artistry* registers Lyutov's bemused contempt for the contempt shown him, as well as his use of wit as a weapon. The phrase "manuscripts and old tattered clothes" reveals that he's been writing privately and is less concerned for his appearance than for

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the pages (which might become the story we are reading). Pork was of course the cheapest and handiest meat in the countryside; with no supply lines to feed them, this army must "requisition" its own food from the people it is occupying. But the very sight and smell that foretell a comradely supper for the Cossacks "mix hunger with intense loneliness" inside Lyutov, the outsider. Pork is forbidden to the Jew, who conducts an internal escape from his surroundings by turning his "broken little suitcase" into a pillow.

With a touch of self-pity, Lyutov/Babel comforts himself with reading, like the child he once was, but see what he has at hand: "Lenin's speech at the Second Congress of the Comintern, which *Pravda* had printed"! This historical anchoring point, at almost the exact middle of the story, was the opening speech at the Second Congress of the Communist International, which had been convened by Lenin to export the revolution to the whole world. Titled "Report on the International Situation and the Chief Goals of the Communist International," it was published in *Pravda* on July 20, 1920. This is now the literature that Lyutov is expected to impart to the men around him. With the approach of evening, "the sun," he writes, "fell on me through the jagged hills," and as the harassment continues, "the beloved sentences struggled toward me over thorny paths, but could not reach me."

Jagged, thorny: The insults of Lyutov's new companions prevent

the beloved sentences from bringing him the comfort he seeks. He may glorify the new Bolshevik literature as he does Savitsky's gorgeous strength, but how could this sensitive Jew with his exquisite intelligence be expected to win over these rude pork-eaters to Lenin's International?

Our narrator takes the quartermaster's cue by joining those he cannot beat. The poor woman in whose yard they find themselves appeals to him as an ally against the thugs, but Lyutov makes his move against *her*. Her goose is waddling around the yard "placidly grooming its feathers," evoking the still-bourgeois world that respects private property, honors women, shows compassion for the elderly and consideration for all living things. There will be no more of that!

I caught the goose and forced it to the ground, its head cracking beneath my boot, cracking and bleeding. Its white neck stretched out in the dung, and the wings folded down over the slaughtered bird.

Implicit here for his Jewish readers are the violated laws of kosher slaughter ensuring that Jews could never behave this way. Our narrator ingratiates himself with the Cossacks by ordering the woman to roast the dead bird for him. Since she has already told him that "all of this makes her want to hang herself," by his actions, he is symbolically killing her as well.

Lyutov's show of Cossack manliness works as intended. While he waits for the woman to roast his goose, the men invite him to eat with them. Illiterate, they ask him what's in the paper, and he reads them the speech, "rejoicing in the mysterious curve of Lenin's straight line." Like a teacher who takes pride in his students, the narrator quotes the squadron leader who responds to the reading by saying, "Truth tickles all and sundry in the nose. ...It isn't all that easy to wheedle it out of the pile of rubbish, but Lenin picks it up right away, like a hen pecks up a grain of corn."

The Cossack's wholesome, homespun appreciation of Lenin's

prose corresponds to that of the Petersburg University graduate. Once the men see that Lyutov can be as pitiless as they, he is able to initiate them into the Communist catechism. They all fall asleep together in entangled male camaraderie.



This would appear to be a proper Soviet story. The squeamish Jew does what he must do to win the trust of these men, and, for all their profound differences, Jew and Cossack independently recognize the truth of the new regime. Babel was writing this under Lenin's rule in the early 1920s, before Stalin imposed political correctness as a required rather than preferred literary standard. Yet in his writing, as opposed to his actions, Lyutov remains quite independent of the political program he endorses. "Hidden" behind his narrator Lyutov, Babel the writer knows that his changed behavior cannot change what he is made of. As he sleeps among the men, their legs now intermingled, his dreams reclaim him:

I dreamed and saw women in my dreams — and only my heart, crimson with murder, screeched and bled. [trans. Peter Constantine]

The sacrifice of Jewish (and Christian!) conscience was a requirement of the new regime, which had seized power by killing the tsar's entire family, shutting down democracy, and ruling by dictatorial decree. The extreme conditions of war had imposed still harsher demands. But Babel, who became an agent of this government, does not ascribe Lyutov's actions to *necessity*. In this story as in all of *Red Cavalry*, the narrator claims full responsibility for everything he does and declares through the story's title that this was only his *first* goose, his first such transgression against the old values and his commitment to the new.

Translator David McDuff says his heart "squeaked and overflowed"; Val Vinokur that it "oozed and groaned." But for all his translators,

that sound of screeching, squeaking, groaning, or cracking, and his heart's oozing, overflowing, and bleeding echo—and mirror—the butchery he has committed. His conscience monitors his deeds, and the story makes sure that we know it. Earlier, after killing the goose, he went out of the yard to clean the sword of its blood and felt the moon hanging overhead “like a cheap earring.” He has cheapened the universe to win over the Cossack soldiers, even as he scrupulously registers civilization's stifled qualms and protests.

Babel wrote many initiation stories, recalling experiences that irrevocably changed the narrator. This one simultaneously captures the society being remade, with several voices in the mix: the Cossack commander charged with winning the first Soviet war, the men of limited speech under his command, the Jewish intellectual charged with instructing these men, and the voice of Lenin that dominates the action, though it is heard and absorbed only indirectly. Lyutov describes himself reading Lenin aloud “like a triumphant deaf man”—that is, like a deaf man who has triumphed over his disabilities—and so, too, these horsemen have presumably come to appreciate the value of someone who can read and thereby induct them into this brave new world.

On a larger scale, Babel turned the 1919–21 war, which Russia actually *lost* to Poland, into a classic work about how the Soviet Union came into being. Tolstoy's *War and Peace* had put the Russian stamp on Napoleon's campaign of 1812. Just so, *Red Cavalry*—on a different scale, for an altered public—rehabilitated the sordid conflict of 1919–21. By filtering its brutality through his Jewish conscience and literary sunlight, Babel endowed it with qualities it never had.

Naturally, not everyone saw it this way. None other than General Budyonny himself would charge that Babel “invents things that never happened, slings dirt at our best Communist commanders, lets his imagination run wild, simply lies.” Implying that Babel could never understand the Cossacks, the general also mocked his petty-bourgeois outlook as a betrayal of the Communist cause. This prompted Russia's most prominent writer, Maxim Gorky, to argue the opposite—namely,

that Babel brought to life “the heroism of an army which is the first in history to know what it is fighting for and what it is going to go on fighting for.” With as fine a defense as any writer could have wished for, Gorky explains that “the contradictory present” needed a writer who lived by the truth and could reorient people who had been brought up with religious views on ownership. Babel's way of engaging human sympathies was the ideal way of changing people's deepest beliefs.

This exchange reminds us of the heightened importance of literature in Russia, where writers competed for allegiance with generals, and rulers tried to make their mark as writers. But the ranks of Babel's defenders shrank as the regime hardened. When he could not become the apologist for Stalin's murderous regime, he was arrested, tortured, and executed. The reader's heart cracks and bleeds for him. Yet he did become the great writer he set out to be. He gave Russian literature a unique record of that transformative moment when those who made the Revolution thought they were changing humankind. He supported the Revolution, leading many to transform themselves just as Lyutov desperately tries to do in this story. With his uncanny literary powers, Babel also shows us that Lyutov doesn't quite succeed, just as Babel's brutal authenticity never allowed him to entirely transform himself.

As for the Jews, the most serious moral and political question facing us as a people is how and why so many of us—a small minority, yet so many—championed modernity's most brutal social experiment. A people that forever awaits the Messiah has been prone to follow false messiahs, but those who embraced Communism allowed themselves to commit crimes they could never have committed *as Jews*. No one felt this contradiction as keenly as, no one ever described it as forcefully as, and no one ever paid a higher price for having done so than Isaac Babel. In stories like this one, he shows how a writer of genius can make fiction into the most comprehensive and unflinching interpreter of reality, leaving an honest record of an age of deceit. He is our writer of the sun who most clearly illumined how he, and his generation, were seduced. *