

Memory Is Inseparable from Imagination

MIKHAIL KRUTIKOV

The literary career of Alexander Goldstein, who lived from 1957 to 2006, was unusual in many respects. Though born in Tallinn on the Baltic coast, Goldstein grew up in the cosmopolitan and multicultural city of Baku on the Caspian Sea. While these cities are now capitals of independent states, Estonia and Azerbaijan, in Goldstein's lifetime they represented two extreme poles of the Soviet empire, west and east. This dichotomy runs through the core of Goldstein's thinking and imagination. He envisions himself as a mediator between the two worlds, and in this respect, Israel — more precisely, Tel Aviv — became his natural home.

He envisioned Russian culture as decentralized and diasporic, a kind of virtual textual reality with no clear divisions among the original and the translation, the old and the new, the local and the global.

What might seem surprising is that he achieved recognition and fame in Russia after his immigration to Israel. To understand Goldstein's unique position in Russian culture, one has to keep in mind that he never physically lived in Russia proper, and his immigration to Israel was in some sense a move from one corner of the Russian speaking cultural universe to another. No less important is his perception of Baku and Tel Aviv as cosmopolitan European seaport cities in the midst of the Islamic world of the Middle East.

Having graduated with a degree in Russian literature from the University of Baku, Goldstein found employment in the local Russian press, writing reports and articles about the life of the Soviet Azerbaijan. The collapse of the Soviet Union, which was partly initiated by the bloody war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory of Nagorny Karabakh, was accompanied by violent anti-Armenian pogroms across Azerbaijan, and left the Russian-speaking Jews of Baku with little choice but to emigrate — even though Jews were not the target of those pogroms. The outburst of ethnic violence left a powerful impression on Goldstein, and the problem of cohabitation of Muslims, Christians, and Jews remained central to his writing.

Immigration to Israel was for Goldstein less of a cultural shock than for Russian-Jewish

intellectuals from Moscow or St. Petersburg. He found the bohemian atmosphere of South Tel Aviv congenial to the Baku of his youth, and soon carved for himself a niche in the burgeoning world of the Russian-language press. His weekly literary columns in the major Russian-Israeli weekly, *Vesti*, recently collected in a book entitled *In Memory of Pathos*, are written in an uncompromisingly cerebral style that seems hardly suitable for an immigrant paper. These essays, published in the late 1990s, are astonishing in their thematic diapason and erudition. Goldstein navigates with amazing ease and confidence among V. S. Naipaul and contemporary Russian philosophy, Isaiah Berlin and Bertolt Brecht. But his position vis-à-vis Russian culture was always on the outside; he once called the notion of unity among Russian cultures “unappetizing,” calling upon his colleagues, émigré writers, to “move as far as possible from the language metropoly” and cultivate their foreignness. He envisioned Russian culture as decentralized and diasporic, a kind of virtual textual reality with no clear divisions among the original and the translation, the old and the new, the local and the global.

Goldstein was the most cosmopolitan — and perhaps least “Israeli” — among Russian writers in Israel. While the details of Israeli life — particularly found in the poor neighborhoods of Tel Aviv, Lod, and Ashdod, which were populated by a motley mix of Jewish immigrants from the FSU and Arab countries, as well as migrant workers — often serve as a point of departure for his brilliant cultural associations, the idea of Zionism or Israel as a Jewish state seems of little interest to him. In this part of the world, where he happened to spend his adult life, “nations fight over primogeniture and miseries” and every nation takes a “savage pride in disaster.” In Baku, Goldstein learned that “There is no word more powerful than nation. ... It gave blood to the veins, semen to the scrotum, vision to the eye, and I am a voluntary debtor to its generosity.” He admits to once having a dream about “strolling, like a rootless vagabond in some Pax-Atlantic city, [...] and, opening a hotel door, to announce hastily my rootless name to the concierge. For half a century I wanted to wander from one hotel to another, making a

Mikhail Krutikov is an associate professor of Slavic languages and literatures at the University of Michigan and an associate professor at the university's Frankel Center for Judaic Studies. A columnist for the *Yiddish Forverts*, Krutikov holds a doctorate in Jewish literature from the Jewish Theological Seminary and a diploma in mathematics from Moscow State University. He is the author of *Yiddish Fiction and the Crisis of Modernity, 1905-1914* (2001) and *From Kabbalah to Class Struggle: Expressionism, Marxism, and Yiddish Literature in the Life and Work of Meir Wiener* (2010).

sour face when asked about roots: it has become irrelevant long ago.” (*Remember Famagusta*, pages 20-21) Then, ironically, he condemns this dream as a sin.

This passage (which defies all my attempts to translate it into English and convey adequately its intricate grammar and rich synonymic word play) has three different words for “rootless,” all of which were, incidentally, used in late Stalinist rhetoric to denounce the Jewish presence in Russian culture. Cosmopolitan at his very core, Goldstein nevertheless takes nationalism very seriously. Dissolving himself in the comfortable, post-nationalist Pax Atlantica would mean losing his own self, a fate that, he believed, befell Joseph Brodsky in America. In the obituary for Brodsky, Goldstein remarks: “He has long been in separation from that speech that was once so congenial to him.” (*In Memory of Pathos*, p. 83) For Goldstein, Brodsky the man has outlived Brodsky the poet.

Goldstein lived and died in literature. He

was finishing his last novel, *Quiet Fields*, literally in his last hours, breathing with the aid of an artificial respirator and refusing the morphine that would quiet his pain but blunt his consciousness. He achieved fame in Russia a few years before his death and won a few prestigious literary prizes. His books were published by the elitist NLO Press with introductions by prominent contemporary Russian writers. His works differ in themes and genres, but they all have in common an inimitable combination of arcane baroque style and precision of thought. Goldstein’s erudition was enormous, ranging from medieval Armenian and Persian poetry to contemporary American literature. He lived in the world of high culture, residing in squalid rented rooms near Tel Aviv’s bus station. He described his way of writing as “literature of existence,” meaning that the writer must bear full responsibility for his words. “I have become convinced that memory is inseparable from imagination.”

Subscribe or Give a Gift Subscription

Join the *Sh'ma* conversation, stay informed, and subscribe today!

TEN issues: \$29 | Gift subscriptions: \$22

To subscribe: Call (877) 568-SHMA

E-mail shma@Cambeywest.com

Online www.shma.com

AND SIGN UP FOR the digital edition



Editor-in-Chief: **Susan Berrin**

Founding Editor: **Rabbi Eugene Borowitz**

Publisher: **Josh Rolnick**

Art Director: **Linda V. Curran**

Webmaster: **Hyung Park**

Sh'ma Advisory Committee:

Yosef I. Abramovitz, Aryeh Cohen, Charlotte Fonrobert, Neil Gillman, Lisa Grant, Richard Hirsh, Shawn Landres, Julian Levinson, Shaul Magid, Noam Pianko, Or Rose, Danya Ruttenberg, Carol Brennglass Spinner, Devorah Zlochower

Contributing Editors: Michael Berenbaum, Elliot Dorff, Arnold Eisen, Leonard Fein, Barry Freundel, Rela M. Gefen, Neil Gillman, Irving Greenberg, Joanne

Greenberg, Brad Hirschfield, Paula Hyman, Lori Lefkowitz, Richard Marker, Deborah Dash Moore, Vanessa Ochs, Kerry Olitzky, Riv-Ellen Prell, Harold Schulweis, Elie Wiesel, David Wolpe, Michael Wyschogrod

The opinions expressed in *Sh'ma* do not necessarily reflect those of the editors.

Sh'ma Partners: Hebrew College Rabbinical School; Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion; Jewish Theological Seminary of America; Reconstructionist Rabbinical College; The Robert A. and Sandra S. Borns Jewish Studies Program, Indiana University; Frankel Center for Jewish Studies, University of Michigan; Taube Center for Jewish Studies, Stanford University; Lippman Kanfer Family Foundation; Carol Brennglass Spinner; Bruce Whizin; Marilyn Ziering

Donations to *Sh'ma* are tax deductible.

Sh'ma is available in **microfilm** from University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Mich., and in **audio format** from the Jewish Braille Institute.

Subscriptions: \$49/2 years in U.S.; \$29/1 year; \$59/2 years international; \$39/1 year international; \$21.97 for one year senior/student. Bulk subscriptions are available at reduced prices. Please notify the subscription office in writing if you prefer that your name not be given out on rented lists.

Address all **editorial correspondence** to *Sh'ma*, P.O. Box 1368, Menlo Park, CA 94026, or E-mail: SBerrin@shma.com. Tel. 650-330-1545

Send all **subscription queries** and changes of address to *Sh'ma*, P.O. Box 439, Congers, NY 10920-0439. Telephone: 877-568-SHMA. E-mail: shma@Cambeywest.com.

We welcome your **feedback**. Send to Josh Rolnick, Publisher, at Jrolnick@shma.com.

Sh'ma is **published** by the Sh'ma Institute, an independent nonprofit established by Lippman Kanfer Family Foundation.

© 2010 Sh'ma Institute. All rights reserved.

ISSN: 0049-0385 DECEMBER 2010. WITH ALL SPONSORSHIPS, *SH'MA* RESERVES COMPLETE EDITORIAL CONTROL OF CONTENT.