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TROTSKY'S NIECE'S MILD REBELLION? VERA INBER'S «КАК Я БЫЛА МАЛЕНЬКАЯ»

Inber's "Как я была маленькая" clearly appears to have been influenced by another book, written by a different Vera, and featuring virtually the same title, "Как я была маленькой". The author of that childhood autobiography was Vera Zhelikhovskaia (1835–1896). Zhelikhovskaia was not Jewish; instead she belonged to a very old and distinguished aristocratic family with plenty of royal connections. But this other Vera also spent part of her childhood in Odessa. Her *When I Was Small* came out in 1891, when Inber was a year old, and it became one of the most popular children's books at the time. From then on, it was reprinted virtually every other year until the 1917 revolution. Inber, who describes herself as a ferocious reader as a child, undoubtedly read Zhelikhovskaia. If Inber's *When I Was Small* was meant to be a secret tribute to the pre-revolutionary author, then what were the possible reasons behind it?

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My favorite book in elementary school, which I kept re-reading, was Vera Inber's "Как я была маленькая" (*When I Was Small*). It is a largely autobiographical narrative about a little girl who was the only child in a relatively well-to-do family and often had her cousin, about the same age as her, for a companion in her childhood adventures and discoveries.

It came out in 1954 and had a powerful attraction for me. That was partially, I am sure, because my parents told me that Inber and her little protagonist were, like us, Jewish, although there was no trace of that in the book. The childhood Inber described happened in the last years of the nineteenth century and in Odessa, rather than Leningrad, but I could

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Figure 1. The 1956 edition of Inber's book

still easily relate to it because her mother, like mine, was a teacher, and she also grew up with a nanny, loved her dolls, and hated piano lessons.

Because of my own childhood memories, this book of Inber's held a very special place in my heart during all the subsequent years, while my knowledge about the writer and her early life in Odessa were greatly expanding as part of my own research and teaching. I did not know back when I was a child, for example, that Inber's father was Leo Trotsky's cousin, and that her mother taught and was a headmistress at a school exclusively for Jewish girls, whose last names would have obviously been very different from the Russian-sounding ones Inber gives them in her narrative.

Leaving no trace of her Jewishness in the book appears to have been quite deliberate. Like many Jews after the war, Inber, no doubt, was hopeful that the unspeakable losses of Jewish lives during the Holocaust would lead to a dramatic reduction in anti-Semitism. A fluent speaker of Yiddish, which was her family's household tongue, Inber soon after

the war started translating some Yiddish poets into Russian, including some poems by a fellow Odessa poet, Rachel Baumwohl (1914–2000). To contribute to the world's understanding of what had happened to Jews in the Nazi-occupied territories she also wrote about the murders of Jews in her native Odessa for the so-called "Black Book of Soviet Jewry", prepared for publication by the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (founded, ironically, by Stalin in 1941). Inber's contribution was very personal, and even alluded, indirectly, to her own childhood. "Once they had occupied Odessa", she wrote in the beginning of her account, "the fascists began by killing the physicians first. These professional murderers hated those whose calling was to prolong people's lives and alleviate their suffering. Sixty-one doctors and their families were murdered during the first few days. On the list of the dead were the names of doctors known from childhood to every Odessan: Rabinovich, Rubinstein, Varshavsky, Chatsky, Polyakov, Brodsky..." [Inber 2002, 56]¹. The 1946 book, however, appeared only in parts, and not in Russian but in English, and then the prepared Russian type galleys and the manuscript were destroyed in 1948, the same year several of the most visible members of the Committee — including two leading Moscow State Yiddish Theater actors and directors, Solomon Mikhoels (1890–1948) and Benjamin Zuskin (1899–1952) — were arrested and eventually executed or assassinated for allegedly trying to promote "Jewish Nationalism"².

That was the beginning of Stalin's brutal purges focusing on the so-called "rootless" and "cosmopolitan" Jews. And soon Stalin, just like the fascists in Odessa, was arresting and murdering Jewish doctors, whom he blamed for plotting to poison and otherwise kill Soviet leaders. They were called "врачи-убийцы" ("doctors-killers") and "убийцы в белых халатах" ("killers in white gowns"). Stalin's actions were even more personal to Inber than what had happened in Odessa during the war: Inber's husband, Ilya Strashun, was directly affected. A highly-trained medical specialist as well as medical historian and Professor of Medicine at the First Moscow Medical Institute, he had lost his job in 1949 on charges of "esthetical cosmopolitanism". He was also accused of "viciously attempting to hide the leading role of Russian medicine and greatness of Soviet medicine" ("злонамеренные попытки скрыть передовое значение русской медицины и величие советской медицины") [Ерегина 2009]³. Strashun was released and got another academic job two years later but was so shaken by his experience that he spent much time between the two jobs in a mental institution. Inber's signature is conspicuously absent from the letter prominent Jewish literary and cultural personalities — among them two well-known Jew-

ish children writers, Samuil Marshak and Lev Kassil — published in *Pravda* early in 1953 denouncing “the spying group of doctors-killers” (“шпионская группа врачей-убийц”) and supporting Stalin’s overall campaign against “Israel-aided”, “cosmopolitan” and “Zionist” Jews⁴.

Stalin died soon after the letter was published. But having so far survived and even prospered despite being Trotsky’s relative (she was awarded the Order of the Badge of Honor before the war, as well as, soon after the war, the all-important Stalin Prize for a book about the Siege of Leningrad) Inber must have felt that, for her to stay politically afloat, her Jewish self still needed to go into deep hiding and leave no trace of itself in the autobiographical book she was writing. It should be noted here that Inber’s contemporary and another Jewish author Aleksandra Brushtein, writing her own, and likewise widely popular, autobiographical novel for children “Дорога уходит в даль” (*The Road Goes off into the Distance*), made a very different decision. The first volume of her trilogy came out in 1955, just a year after Inber’s “Как я была маленькая” and in it the fictional family is not only unmistakably Jewish but their Jewishness plays a vital role in the narration. Sasha’s father, who is a doctor, thus instructs an illiterate peasant that “жид” (“yid”) is a bad word to use when talking about Jews. He also screams at his rich patient to get out of his house when the latter, a factory owner, insinuates that Jews do not care about the “Sacred Rus” and that is why they welcome strikes and revolutions [Бруштейн 2018]. Book One ends with Sasha, as well as several other Jewish girls, being subjected to much harder exams than non-Jewish children in order to be accepted into a prestigious female gymnasium. This was of course because of the strict limits that applied to Jews trying to enter state schools (10% in the Pale of Settlement, where Sasha’s family lived; 5% in most of the rest of the empire; and only 3% in St. Petersburg and Moscow). Sasha aces the entrance exams but most of other Jewish girls are not as lucky. While it is easy, when comparing Inber and Brushtein, to brand the former a coward for not revealing her Jewish roots in “Как я была маленькая”, we do, I believe, need to take Inber’s family history into account, especially in the light of Strashun’s arrest and its consequences still so fresh in her memory⁵. And also maybe, just maybe, Inber did try to do something less than utterly timid with her book as well.

As I was re-reading “Как я была маленькая” recently in connection with a different project, I all of a sudden realized that Inber’s seemingly risk-averse volume could have nevertheless been her feeble protest against at least one Soviet practice she may have disagreed with: that of banning favorite books of her own childhood which authorities now



Figure 2. One of Zhelikhovskaia's early editions

considered to be “harmful.” To wit, Inber’s “Как я была маленькая” clearly appears to have been influenced by another book, written by a different Vera, and featuring virtually the same title, “Как я была маленькой” (also *When I Was Small*; the difference being just in the grammatical case of the adjective: Nominative versus Instrumental). The author of that childhood autobiography was Vera Zhelikhovskaia (1835–1896)⁶, sister of the famous Theosophist Madame Blavatsky. Zhelikhovskaia was not Jewish; instead she belonged to a very old and distinguished aristocratic family with plenty of royal connections. But this other Vera also spent part of her childhood in Odessa. Her *When I Was Small* came out in 1891, when Inber was a year old, and it became one of the most popular children’s books at the time. From then on, it was reprinted virtually every other year until the 1917 revolution.

Inber, who describes herself as a ferocious reader as a child, undoubtedly read Zhelikhovskaia and probably still even had the volume

in her possession when she sat down to write her own autobiographical fiction for children. The book by Zhelikhovskaia, however, like all her other works, was never republished in the Soviet times: the pre-Revolutionary author's privileged childhood was clearly deemed to be of no relevance and perhaps even ideologically poisonous to the little Soviets. As Andrew Wachtel points out in *The Battle for Childhood: Creation of a Russian Myth*, it was precisely these "gentry myths of childhood" that the godfather of early Soviet literature, Maxim Gorky, had tried to supplant when he wrote his pre-Revolutionary autobiographical narrative on his early years (*Childhood*, 1913) [Wachtel 1990, 134]. After the Revolution it was this new Gorky's model of describing an impoverished childhood under the tsars, very much unlike that of a privileged little girl in Zhelikhovskaia's book, that needed to be emulated and propagated instead⁷. That, like her sister, Zhelikhovskaia was a Theosophist obviously did not help her post-1917 reputation either. Therefore many Soviet readers in the early 1950s, including little children and their parents, would not have been aware of Zhelikhovskaia's work while enjoying Inber's. Several places in Inber's *When I Was Small*, as I will detail below, smack of not just profound influence but direct plagiarism. Yet, this is plagiarism which seemingly equals a tribute — it does not hide but virtually parades itself, beginning with the very title that appears to directly signal Inber's debt to what was, perhaps, her own favorite book as a child.

Both Zhelikhovskaia's "Как я была маленькой" and Inber's "Как я была маленькая" dwell on small, "telling" episodes from childhood when their fictional protagonists were five years old. Zhelikhovskaia's book, which is longer, has 36 such chapters; Inber's — 20 (22 in the expanded 1961 edition)⁸. Many similarities that occur can of course be easily attributed to the standard shared experiences of any well-to-do Russian childhood before the revolution: summers with doting grandmothers, peasant nannies, the excitement of Christmas trees and gifts (even though Inber's real family, being Jewish, most likely, never celebrated Christmas), hated lessons of piano or English, and even, perhaps, falling asleep while at the theater or symphony for the first time (ch. "Мой первый театр и бал", *My First Theater and Ball* in Zhelikhovskaia, and "Бис, Бис", *Encore, Encore* in Inber's). But then there are much more striking and particular echoes of Zhelikhovskaia's book which go beyond the common shared experiences: there are three episodes that, like the titles, are nearly identical. In one, both Veras (for different reasons) wash their dolls with water, which ruins them. In another, both girls unintentionally become parties to killing a small

domestic bird and experience severe pangs of guilt (as well as the stinging disapproval of grown-ups). In the third, they contemplate, in a remarkably similar fashion, the nature of snowflakes.

The episodes with a doll damaged by water occur in the “Крестины куклы” (*The Baptism of a Doll*) chapter of Zhelikhovskaia's book and “Кукольная клиника” (*Dolls' Clinic*) chapter of Inber's. The reason for the dolls being exposed to water by the two Veras are different: the earlier Vera wants to baptize her doll before she gives her a name; the later Vera, who gets her doll from Moscow, feels that the trip was long and exhausting, so the doll can well use a bath. Plenty of small girls, of course, have washed their dolls not knowing any better, yet the inclusion of this particular episode by Inber becomes more conspicuous in combination with other, even more striking, parallels between the two books.

The killing of domestic birds involves, in Zhelikhovskaia's case, a gosling (“На пруду”, *At the Pond*), and in Inber's, a baby turkey (“Индюшонок”, *A Baby Turkey*). The earlier Vera sees a family of geese and wants to watch them all, including the tiniest one, swim. Her older sister (the future Madame Blavatsky) and teenage aunt start throwing sticks and rocks at the resting geese to make them jump into the pond while Vera, by now fearful that the girls would hurt the birds, is trying to stop them. A baby goose gets killed, making Vera feel very guilty because it was her wish to see them swim that started it all. When grown-ups learn of the incident, Vera's sister insinuates that it was Vera who had killed the poor gosling, at which point the adults in the family proceed to lecture all three of them on the virtues of not lying and not doing harm, even if unintentionally. Inber's fictional Vera and her male cousin see a family of turkeys in a shed but want to introduce them to the ducks and ducklings at their pond so they too can observe them all swim. They chase the turkeys towards the pond with sticks and, in the process, a baby turkey gets killed either from running too fast or from being unintentionally struck too hard. The children at first deny to their grandmother and mother that they did anything wrong and, just like the grown-ups in the earlier account, here too the elders admonish the young not to be callous and not to lie.

The discussions of the snowflakes occur in the “Даша и Дуняша” (*Dasha and Dunyasha*) chapter of Zhelikhovskaia's book and the “Снежная королева” (*The Snow Queen*) chapter of Inber's. Surely, many children wonder about snowflakes and why they look so perfect, yet the development of these two discussions is similar in a remarkable way. In Zhelikhovskaia, little Vera, who is now in Saratov, on the Volga,

is playing with two daughters of their serfs (the book takes place prior to 1861) when, after Vera complained about having to study hard, one of them challenges her to explain why sun shines and where rain and snow come from. Vera is embarrassed to admit she does not know the answers. Later that day, when she is riding with her grandmother, Vera starts to examine the snowflakes as they “settled on my little dark fur coat” (“садились мне на темную шубку”) [Желиховская 1922, 25]. She finds them to be amazingly beautiful little stars and asked her grandmother, who is a bit of a scientist, all the questions that the serf girl was challenging her with. The grandmother proceeds to explain, mostly in scientific terms, the natural phenomena and the universe. When it comes to the beauty of snowflakes and their perfect design, however, she attributes it all to God.

Even though in Odessa, a southern city, it hardly ever snowed, Vera Inber also starts thinking about snowflakes as they “settle down on the sleeve of [my] little fur coat” (“сядет на рукав твоей шубки”) [Инбер 2015, 89], but she of course knows better than to attribute their perfection to God. As if arguing directly with the other Vera’s grandmother, she tells the little Soviet readers that “[s]cientists have already discovered about two thousand different kinds of snowflakes” (“Ученые открыли уже около двух тысяч видов различных снежинок”) [Инбер 2015, 89]. Vera most likely obtained that bit of information from her father, who in an earlier chapter (“Как устроена луна”, *How the Moon Functions*) serves the same role as the other Vera’s grandmother in explaining to his daughter and nephew how the universe works. Interestingly, in a new chapter introduced to the 1961 edition, *A School Bench*, which continues the topic of science and education, Inber again seems to borrow from Zhelikhovskaia when her Vera talks about her school experience with two daughters of the family’s domestic servants, and her mother then admonishes her not to consider herself smarter than they are just because she can go to school and they cannot.

All these parallels are, indeed, hard to overlook, and, unless we decide it was a blatant case of plagiarism from a forgotten pre-revolutionary work, we are faced with the question as to what Inber’s true intentions were in paying such a tribute to a banned book. For that it is most helpful, I believe, to retrace here, in a bit more detail, what — outside of her Jewishness — Inber’s particular personal and professional challenges had been before she started writing “Как я была маленькая”.

Since the early 1930s Inber was known mostly as a poet and essayist firmly grounded in the government-sanctioned Socialist Realist tradition. She had gotten her start, however, as a literary innovator of

sorts. Decades earlier she, like Anna Akhmatova, considered herself an *Acmeist* and later belonged to the *Constructivist* group of writers and poets, which would be disbanded by the end of the 1920s. She made the switch rather painlessly, and by 1926 would already refer to the *Acmeist* period of her artistic life as simply following others who were “slowly sucking the life around them in through a straw and thus finding it palatable” (“Целое поколение интеллигенции потягивало действительность сквозь соломинку и в таком виде находило ее сносной”) [Инбер 1929, 142].

Inber's familial ties with Trotsky had served her quite nicely for the first eight years following the Revolution. “By the light of the lamps — green light/ Usually at the end of the day/ In an office with six columns/ You are receiving me”, she wrote about visiting her uncle in a volume of poems that came out in 1925. “Bright red thick cloth covers the floor/ And like cannons on a cliff/ Four black fierce telephones/ Shine on your writing desk” (“При свете ламп — зеленом свете —/ Обычно на исходе дня/ В шестиколонном кабинете/ Вы принимаете меня. // Затянут пол сукном червонным/ И, точно пушки на скале/ Четыре грозных телефона/ Блестят на письменном столе...”) [Инбер 1925, 12]. That was, however, the last year of Trotsky's power and influence. Soon his phones were much less “fierce” than the criticism and rage directed against him. In the span of just three years Trotsky was removed from all his posts, exiled into Central Asia, and then, in 1928, expelled from the Soviet Union altogether. Many of Trotsky's relatives would be executed or sent to camps in the next ten years for their connection to him. The list included not just Trotsky's first wife, his sister, his brother, a son (another son was assassinated), and two sons-in-law, but also three nephews who were likewise arrested and later shot⁹ Yet Inber managed to avoid their fate by becoming a determined at-all-costs survivor for the rest of her life.

It was far from easy. In 1933 Inber went with many other prominent Soviet writers, including Viktor Shklovsky, Mikhail Zoshchenko, Valentin Kataev, Evgeny Petrov and Ilya If to Belomor Canal, which was being built by prisoners in an early Stalin Gulag, in order to connect the northern White Sea with the Baltic Sea. She then became instrumental in creating a thick volume “Беломорско-Балтийский Канал имени Сталина: История строительства 1931–1934 гг.” (*Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal: History of Construction 1931–1934*) glorifying the project. We know from later reminiscences that many participants at the time thought that the prisoners subjected to forced labor — “каналоармейцы” (“canal army soldiers”), as they were sarcastically

called — were all sent there for “real” crimes while hard work and proper Soviet re-education were constructively transforming them into proper Soviet citizens. Most visitors in fact were apparently still so naive about the dawn of Stalin’s purges that they were taken aback when they occasionally would come across some of their fellow literary colleagues imprisoned there¹⁰. Inber probably knew better than most, given her politically complicated family history, but in her published notebooks she insisted on calling the Belomor Canal prisoners “бандиты” (bandits) and marveling at how their instinct to destroy was exploited there for constructive purposes: “Бандиты больше всего любят скальные работы, другими словами — взрывать скалы. Жажда разрушения, обращенная на созидание...” (“Bandits most of all like working on cliffs, in other words, blowing the cliffs up. Their craving for destruction turned into creation...”) [Инбер 1967, 18]. Among prominent writers who visited Belomorkanal only Shklovsky, whose own brother was one of the prisoners there, ended up being as prolific as Inber in designing and contributing to the volume. In that they worked closely with Maxim Gorky who, according to Inber, envied them their youth and potential to glorify many more Soviet victories in the future: “Черт вас возьми, я вам завидую, что вы так молоды и что вы можете писать такие книги” (“Goddamn it, I envy you that you are so young and can write such books”) [Инбер 1967, 22].

Probably in order to get even more absolution for “bad” blood relatives, both Inber and Shklovsky were among the authors of one of the most, by now, horrifying chapters in the book, called “Заключенные” (*Prisoners*), where a passage about imprisoned engineers who were designing the Canal reads: “Чекисты Медгоры смотрят с уважением на это ученое племя и хотя знают их души, но все же им кажется странным: почему, читая жизнь и технику жизни на многочисленных языках, эти ученые не прочли самого главного, что только социализм способен переделывать, исправить, выточить новый мир, новую землю, черт возьми!” (“CheKa men from Medgora look with respect at this learned tribe and even though they know their souls they still find it strange as to why, while reading about life and the technology of life in many languages, these scientists had not discovered the most important thing in their readings, that only socialism is capable of transforming, correcting, chiseling the new world, the new earth, goddamn it!”) [Горький 1934, 136]¹¹.

Inber’s painfully-gained “absolution” was severely challenged, however, in 1936, the year of the first Stalin-era show trial of Bolsheviks who were accused of being members of the so-called “Trotsky-Zinoviev

Center". Inber again found herself in a frightening spot. The official report to the Soviet secret police (by then NKVD) described her behavior at a meeting of the Writers' Union — called to condemn the "traitors of the Revolution" and "enemies of the people", including, of course, her exiled uncle — as definitely falling short of the expected mark: "Inber is a relative of Trotsky, his cousin's daughter. Inber gave a bad speech at a meeting of writers, and in the hallways she said she had been forced to speak..." But then, according to the same report, Trotsky's niece hastened to repent: "V. Inber admitted that her speech at the meeting had been bad and said that she was Trotsky's relative and sought to come out very decisively in demanding the execution of the counterrevolutionary assassins"¹². Still scared that she did not condemn her uncle and his alleged co-conspirators decisively enough, Inber immediately began planning a long poem about Lenin.

Two years later she wrote in her diary: "No, one can still be happy. One needs only to rebuild everything in one's soul... One should not rejoice or even feel satisfaction from the fact that someone got chewed out while you are safe" ("Нет, можно все-таки быть счастливой. Надо только все перестроить у себя в душе... Не надо также радоваться или хотя бы ощущать удовлетворение оттого, что кого-то выругали, а ты в сохранности") [Инбер 1967, 47]. It was probably in order to rebuild her deeply compromised soul and "still be happy" that Inber started thinking about writing a book for children. Roy Pascal in *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, astutely suggests that the real point in autobiographical writings is often "more the revelation of the present situation than the recovery of the past" [Pascal 1960, 11], and for many Soviet writers the recovery of their old, private, pre-Soviet, and therefore much less troubled, selves through means of autobiographical fiction indeed became a form of present-day therapy¹³.

Inber felt so strongly about children's literature that in her diary, which she knew authorities would likely read whether or not they "officially" search her apartment, she allowed herself the rare liberty to criticize what for most of the 1930s was the official edict for writers of children's books — to hold science and realism over imagination and fantasy:

Very difficult (and very unpleasant) to remember about how, relatively recently, animals, birds and insects — in short all living creatures — were taken out of children's literature. So unpleasant to remember how through all these books walked boys and girls who knew perfectly well that animals and birds do not speak because they do not have the proper organs of speech and

the well-attuned apparatus for thinking... The nature around those stillborn children was as dead as they were (Трудно [и очень неприятно] вспоминать о том, что сравнительно недавно звери, птицы и насекомые, — короче говоря, почти все живое было изъято из детской литературы. Неприятно вспоминать, как по страницам детских книг разгуливали мальчики и девочки, отлично знающие, что звери, птицы не разговаривают, ибо лишены органов речи и хорошо налаженного мыслительного аппарата... Природа вокруг этих мертворожденных детей была также мертва, как и они сами) [Инбер 1967, 49].

She wrote it in Peredelkino, the summer resort near Moscow for prominent Soviet writers, where one of her favorite neighbors was Kornei Chukovsky (1882–1969), the most popular children’s writer at the time (who also had spent a part of his childhood in Odessa). Throughout the 1930s it was Chukovsky, in fact, who was criticized, often in *Litgazeta* (*The Literary Newspaper*), the main organ of the Soviet Writers’ Union, for the lack of “realism” in his fairy tales and poems for children, forcing him to issue obligatory mea culpas in print. In another Peredelkino entry that year Inber talked about how her conversations with Chukovsky were giving her much joy (“много радости”) and therapeutic warmth: “Он говорил, и мне казалось, что я согреваюсь на солнце после долгой мерзлоты... После *такого* находишь в себе силы перенести и поведение ‘Литгазеты,’ и бессонные рассветы, когда, кажется, не убиваешь себя только потому, что нечем” (“He talked and it seemed to me that I was thawing, like under the sun, after a long deep freeze... After *this* one can find the power to bear the behavior of *Litgazeta* and the sleepless dawns when it appears that the only reason you do not kill yourself is because you do not have what to do it with”) [Инбер 1967, 49–50]. In October of 1940 Inber also recorded in her diary that writing for children, who get truly inspired by the books they read, was “a [tremendous] responsibility” (“Какую ответственность возлагает это на писателя, пишущего для детей!”) [Инбер 1967, 54]. However, then the war and the Siege of Leningrad, which she barely survived and exhaustively recorded, interfered, and her plans for a children book had to be put aside.

Soon after the war Inber began thinking again about writing a children’s book. Children’s literature in those immediate postwar years was largely dominated by narratives about young adults’ wartime heroism in the occupied territories, including such soon-to-become Soviet classics as Alexander Fadeev’s “Молодая гвардия” (*The Young Guard*, 1948) and Lev Kassil’s “Улица младшего сына” (*The Street of the Younger Son*, 1949)¹⁴. But Inber obviously desired to write a different kind

of a book and, probably fearing that the time was not quite right yet for a literary account of her own early life, as opposed to that of a young war hero, she put that project on hold yet once again. She turned to contemplating instead a truly “big book” about how to play a vital role in the society and culture while growing older (she was approaching sixty). “And as far as the children’s book is concerned”, she wrote on May 3, 1947 in her journal, “let it go. Children’s literature will do just fine without me” (“А детская — бог с ней! Обойдется детская литература и без меня...”) [Инбер 1967, 241]. By then her reputation as a prose writer rested not only on her stories and the 1928 autobiographical novel, “Место под солнцем” (*Place under the Sun*), about the immediate post-revolutionary life in Odessa, but also on her edited wartime diaries of the Siege, “Почти три года” (*Almost Three Years*), which came out in 1946, and for which (as well as her long poem about the Siege, *Pulkov Meridian*), she received the Stalin Prize that same year. She undoubtedly felt that a “big book”, rather than a short tale for children, would properly cement her status as a major Soviet writer.

She never wrote the book about getting old¹⁵. Instead, during the very last years of Stalin’s life she did finally start working on her very personal book for children, which was so well received that it did, despite its slimness, greatly enhance her literary reputation. During her lifetime “Как я была маленькая” became so popular that, like Zhelikhovskaia’s work more than sixty years before, it went into regular reprints. Like Zhelikhovskaia, Inber was also immediately asked to write a sequel to it; however, unlike Zhelikhovskaia, she tried but never completed the second book¹⁶. She did, however, add two more ideologically correct chapters to the 1961 edition since, after the first edition was published, some critics pointed out that she talked very little about poverty and inequality at the turn of the century. The new chapters — “Луковое колечко” (*An Onion Ring*) and “Школьная скамья” (*A School Bench*) were therefore created to remedy it¹⁷.

So was Inber’s not-so-veiled tribute to a no-longer-approved 19th century Russian author her rebellious self-compensation for feeling forced, by the circumstances Stalin was creating, to hide from her readers that her family was Jewish, when the whole world, including the Soviet leader, should have, in her opinion, recoiled from the horrendous price her people had paid during the war? And was it also her revenge for the “sleepless dawns” she endured throughout Stalin’s regime, when apparently her thoughts turned not only grim but also suicidal? Did she then choose a children’s book to make this stand because of her own



Figure 3. Inber in her study in the late 1940s

nostalgic need to go back to the time when she was blissfully innocent of any political and personal compromises and her uncle Trotsky was still but a regular young lad staying with her family in Odessa? Was it also, perhaps, a tribute to not only Zhelikhovskaia but also to Chukovsky, whom Inber still revered and who had often endangered his own political safety in order to write the kind of books he believed children deserved?¹⁸

If that is what she in fact did, she must have felt that even her mild dissent had to be compensated for. She was, after all, still a relative of Trotsky, and, despite Khrushchev's 1956 speech denouncing Stalin's "Cult of Personality", Trotsky, who had been assassinated by Soviet agents in Mexico in 1940, was nowhere near being rehabilitated. She also likely felt that, unlike Stalin, Khrushchev had little staying power in the fluid political situation in the late 1950s and things could therefore easily revert back to the more Stalinesque reality. Probably largely with that in mind, soon after the book's publication, Inber quickly created

a whole cycle of new poems about Lenin, among them *April* (1954), *A Project for a Monument* (1956), *Lenin and Time* (1957) and *The Light of Lenin* (1957). Then in 1958, when Boris Pasternak, once a good friend, was being condemned for writing and then publishing abroad his “anti-Soviet” novel, *Doctor Zhivago*, for which he got that year’s Nobel Prize, Inber did not just criticize him, as many of her peers felt compelled to do at the time, she truly savaged him. It was not enough for her, she said, that Pasternak should be kicked out of the Writer’s Union, he should be kicked out of the country as well¹⁹. In short, just like her uncle had been thirty years before. To live with her compromised conscience Inber may have ultimately convinced herself that she was just doing her former buddy a favor by allowing him to leave the Soviet Union. And she also, we assume, sincerely hoped that, unlike her uncle, Pasternak would not be assassinated by Soviet agents in a foreign country if he ended up being expelled...

Примечания

- ¹ See also [Rubenstein 2007].
- ² For more on that, see [Rubenstein 2001; Костырченко 2001]. Michoels was killed in a staged car-pedestrian accident in 1948; Zuskin was executed in 1952.
- ³ See also [Костырченко 2001, 298–300].
- ⁴ For Marshak’s participation in the letter, see [Hellman 2007]. For the Russian text of the letter and all the signatures, see [Письмо 2000].
- ⁵ Brushtein’s husband, Sergey Brushtein, was, interestingly enough, also a very prominent Jewish doctor, one of the very first Soviet specialists in physical therapy. He died, as far as we know, a natural death in 1947, a year before the “Killer Doctors” hysteria began coming into full force.
- ⁶ The transliteration of Russian names and last names is not always consistent here because some appear as they are customarily spelled in English-language publications.
- ⁷ As Wachtel accurately states in his book, “Gorky’s model of childhood... attained mythical status, influencing the childhood memories of many Soviet literary figures and autobiographers” [Wachtel 1990, 149]. For more on Gorky’s influence on Soviet literature about childhood, see also [Balina 2008].
- ⁸ Some of the chapters in Zhelikhovskaia’s book resulted from her inclusion of narrated stories and fairy tales, something that Inber appears to have contemplated also doing in her sequel — see [Иньбер 1967, 281].
- ⁹ For the family’s fate during the purges see, for example, an interview with his grandson, Esteban Volkov [Volkov 2003].

- ¹⁰ Among them was Sergey Alymov (1892–1948), famous for writing the words to the popular Soviet Civil War song “По долинам и по взгорьям”.
- ¹¹ ЧК (ChK) was the old name for the secret police; in 1933 it was called ОГПУ (OGPU) and a year later it was renamed into НКВД (NKVD).
- ¹² A. Angarov and V. Kirpotin to L. M. Kaganovich, A. A. Andreev, and N. I. Yezhov, 29 August, 1936. Published in English in [Clark 2007, 317].
- ¹³ For highly informed discussions of this cultural trend in several early Soviet authors (including Yuri Olesha and Mikhail Zoshchenko), see [Harris 1990].
- ¹⁴ For more on post-war Soviet literature for children, see [Voronina 2018; Balina 2018].
- ¹⁵ Instead, her rather gloomy reflections on her birthdays, as she was approaching 70, appeared in her notebooks, [Инбер 1967, 301–312].
- ¹⁶ Zhelikhovskaia’s sequel, “Мое отрочество” (*My Young Years*), was published in 1894, two years before she died. Inber left detailed plans for her sequel in her 1954 notebooks (See [Инбер 1967, 278–281]) and kept talking about her difficulty in writing it because of her “bad [right] arm” (“Очень мешает больная рука”), while the publisher was expecting it, all through 1955. “I need to finish my children’s book” (“мне надо кончать детскую книгу”), she typically wrote on July 11, 1955, “since they are waiting for it. But I cannot do it” (“ее ведь ждут. Но сделать этого я не могу.”) [Инбер 1967, 283].
- ¹⁷ Among the critics was Aleksandr Fadeyev, the author of “Молодая гвардия” and still in 1954 the Chair of the Soviet Writers’ Union. He would kill himself in Peredelkino two years later when his role in Stalin’s persecution of writers was beginning to be denounced by some of his colleagues. The new chapters described a visit to a poor student who wants to be a doctor but is virtually homeless, and her mother’s admonishment to Vera that the parents of her two play pals, daughters of their domestic servants, cannot afford to send them to school. Vera then plays school with them and learns more about their difficult lives.
- ¹⁸ In the expanded edition of “Страницы дней перебирая”, which came out in 1977, Inber included a grateful poetic tribute she wrote for Chukovsky: “Пусть вас зефиры навещают/ Пусть грозы будут вам милы/ Пусть ваши розы расцветают/ Как я от вашей похвалы” (“Let Zephyrs visit you/ Let thunderstorms be dear to you/ Let your roses bloom/ Like I do from your praises”) [Инбер 1977, 376].
- ¹⁹ For more on that, see, among others, [Barnes 1998, 348].

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**БАРХАТНЫЙ МЯТЕЖ ПЛЕМЯННИЦЫ ТРОЦКОГО? «КАК Я
БЫЛА МАЛЕНЬКАЯ» ВЕРЫ ИНБЕР**

«Как я была маленькая» В. Инбер, очевидно, была написана под влиянием книги, написанной другой Верой, и имеющей практически такое же название — «Как я была маленькой». Автором этой детской автобиографии была Вера Желиховская (1835–1896). Желиховская не была еврейкой; она принадлежала к очень старой, выдающейся аристократической семье. Но эта другая Вера тоже провела часть своего детства в Одессе. К моменту выхода книги «Как я была маленькой» в 1891 г. Инбер исполнился один год. С тех пор книга выдержала большое число переизданий и выходила вплоть до революции 1917 г. В детстве Инбер была яростным любителем чтения, как она сама про себя говорит, и, несомненно, читала Желиховскую. Если книге В. Инбер «Как я был маленькая» суждено было стать священной данью дореволюционному автору, то каковы были реальные причины, лежащие в основе всего этого?

Ключевые слова: Вера Инбер, Вера Желиховская, «Как я был маленькая», детская литература, дискуссии в детской литературе.