

Mordechai Altshuler

Mordechai Altshuler, who was a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, wrote dozens of important books and articles about Soviet Jews. He was not a person of the mainstream. He did not like a propagandistic approach that rested on dichotomies; he always tried to see a more complex historical picture. In Israel during the Cold War, when the Jewish Section of the Communist Party was exclusively seen as a demonic force, you had to have been daring to say that matters were different. These were Jews with a national inclination, very radical, anti-Zionist, anti-Hebrew, who were conducting an aggressive anti-religious campaign, but with an explicit ethnic self-consciousness. While he was still a student, Altshuler discovered a fact that had been distorted by Soviet Jewish historiography of the 1920s, namely, that the members of the Jewish Section saw themselves as an autonomous force inside the Communist Party. This discovery greatly influenced his understanding of the history of Soviet Jews, its echoes can be seen both in his first book *Hayevsektzia bivrit hamo'atzot, 1918–1930: Ben leumiyut vekomunizm (The Jewish Section in the Soviet Union 1918–1930: Between Nationalism and Communism, 1980)* as well as in his subsequent research.

His identity formed during the Cold War. To one degree or another having been drawn into its ideological conflicts, and already a mature scholar, he found the strength in the 1980s to reconsider broadly-accepted views on Soviet Jews as an atomized, assimilated group with a weakened Jewish consciousness. He was able to and loved working with archival documents, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when archives were opened. He wrote many innovative and significant studies on the basis of these materials. Among these should be noted his books on Soviet Jewish demography, including *Soviet Jewry on the Eve of the Holocaust* (1998), *Soviet Jewry since the Second World War* (1987, the book first came out in Hebrew in 1979), and also his book about the religious life of Soviet Jews in the postwar period, *Religion and Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union 1941–1964* (published in English in 2012, the fuller, Hebrew version in 2007). In fact, there was no theme concerning Soviet Jews that Altshuler did not touch on in his work. This included, as mentioned earlier, demography, religious life, Jewish organizations (the Jewish Section, Evobshchestkom [Committee to Aid Victims of Pogroms], SETMAS [Union of Jewish Toiling Masses]), questions of Jewish self-consciousness, Jews in the context of the indigenization campaigns of the 1920s, problems of evacuation during the Second World War and the Holocaust on the territory of the USSR, the Jews' return to their homes after evacuation, Holocaust memory, the history of Yiddish theater, and the Soviet-Jewish relation to Israel. He greatly admired Yiddish culture, and the publication of his book of letters written by Soviet Yiddish authors to their colleagues abroad, *Briv fun yidishe sovetishe shraybers (Letters from Soviet Yiddish Writers, 1979)*, was nothing less than an event. Non-Ashkenazi Jews occupy a special place in his work. A key study was his comprehensive book in Hebrew on Mountain Jews: *Yehudei tzfon kavkaz (Jews of the Northern Caucasus, 1990)*. There were also articles on Bukharan and Georgian Jews. One of his important books on Soviet-Jewish self-consciousness was the edited collection *Sovetskie evrei pishut Il'e Erenburgu, (Soviet Jews Write to Il'ia Erenburg)*, which the Hebrew University, together with Yad Vashem, published in 1993 (jointly edited by Altshuler, Yitzhak Arad, and Shmuel Krakowski). Altshuler was the moving

Slavic Review 79, no. 2 (Summer 2020)

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doi: 10.1017/slr.2020.95

force behind this publication, as well as the author of its lengthy introduction about Erenburg. One of his passions was the compilation and support for the publication of various bibliographic sourcebooks, which included the theme of Soviet Jews in the Polish Yiddish press and Soviet works in Russian about Jews. His last Hebrew book, *She'erit hapletah bivrit hamo'atzot (Holocaust Survivors in the Soviet Union)*, (2019), was dedicated to the issue of how the Second World War and the Holocaust influenced the ethnic identity of Soviet Jews in 1939–1963.

Altshuler thought it was his historical mission to support scholars from the Soviet Union. He rarely spoke about it publicly, but dedicated considerable energy to this, especially in the 1990s, when a significant number of researchers from the Soviet Union (including me) were transitioning from an amateur to a professional engagement with history. He frequently met with scholars from the former USSR, and for many, these meetings, which included both undergraduate and graduate students, were important. This turned out to be true for those who continued to live in the territory of the former USSR and those who settled in the west or Israel. They (that is to say, we) sorely needed help in acquiring contemporary methodological approaches, and also support in publishing our work. One of the vehicles for our inclusion in ongoing scholarship was the English language journal, *Jews in Eastern Europe*, which later became *Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe*, published by the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The editor and moving force behind the journal was Mordechai Altshuler, even though his name was not indicated. He exerted considerable effort to raise the level of a significant number of articles. For many authors, his comments were a source of feedback that was crucially important for their understanding of the rules of research and publication.

Mordechai Altshuler was my teacher and dissertation director. For ten years I worked with him, Yisrael Elliot Cohen, and Sima Ycikas, editing the journal. I learned a great deal from him and am indebted to him in many ways. Sometimes all that was needed was a comment in passing, but one that was formulated precisely—Mordechai knew how to do this—in order for me to understand that something had been done incorrectly, and the problem had to be rephrased. Once, when he was writing his book about the postwar religious life of Jews in the USSR, he told me that he had been looking for two weeks for something that would confirm what seemed to me to have been an insignificant event but had not found anything. I naively asked whether it would not be better to use another example. He looked at me attentively and said, “But that would be dishonest.”

I attended his lectures at the university, which were always laid out exactly and logically. Students considered him a harsh teacher, not especially generous with grades or praise, but if you received a relatively high grade, you took this as a sign of great personal success. What is more, when the course ended, you felt that you had understood the subject.

He had the capacity to value other scholars' ideas. More than once, I heard him praise new books and articles that he thought were interesting. I also heard negative responses, and this was not infrequent. One particular case, connected with my own dissertation, especially surprised me. I gave him my text, and waited uneasily for his reaction. When he returned it, and we got to the chapter about interethnic relations, he articulated my view of the problem. I sensed that something was not right, having learned by this point to understand his skepticism, and timidly began to explain. He said that everything was ok, and that he had no complaints. I defended my dissertation, and thanks to his letter, the dissertation received honors. Five years went by and at a conference at Yad Vashem (the journal had ceased publication by then) he said to me, “I don't agree with your view of antisemitism.” That was Mordechai in a nutshell.

And one more thing. He was very careful about his students' work. He never permitted his students' work to appear in his own scholarship until they published it.

A great scholar is gone. And a person, who might have seemed severe, but was not. In the early 1990s, sitting in a restaurant with scholars from the former Soviet Union, he sang Polish songs, until the waiter noticed, and then with great animation and pride told us the story of his grandfather, a Zionist from Suwałki, who wrote a diary preserved in the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem. He also told us how his family, exiled in 1939, lived in a special settlement in Vologda Region (although archival documents indicated that this settlement was located in Arkhangelsk Region), and then, after they were released, lived in evacuation in the Soviet interior.

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Jamey Gambrell

Jamey Gambrell (1954–2020), the unrivaled Russian translator of our time, concludes her Introduction to Marina Tsvetaeva's *Earthly Signs* (Yale University Press, 2002) by quoting Tsvetaeva on translating Rilke: "And today I want Rilke to speak—through me. . . . Following in the poet's path, paving anew the entire road which he paved." To which Gambrell adds vis-à-vis her own translation of Tsvetaeva: "Every translation, like every poem or novel, is a voyage of sorts. My hope is that I have managed to read these earthly signs well enough, to follow Tsvetaeva's path closely enough, to repave enough of her singular road, for English readers to be transported across the river." The hammering repetition of "enough" is a typically modest stroke on the part of Jamey, who would routinely prepare a quick initial draft that would then be subjected to ten rounds of revision.

The Tsvetaeva book, which was fifteen years in the making and which Jamey would always single out as a favorite project, had indeed turned out to be quite a voyage. The translation originated as her master's thesis in the Columbia Department of Slavic Languages in the 1980s; the germ of the idea for the project came from working at Russica, the NYC Russian bookstore, and her friendship with Alexander Sumerkin, Joseph Brodsky's Russian secretary and the editor of Tsvetaeva's prose and poetry. As she writes in a memorial volume for Sumerkin, "I didn't realize it at the time, but my real graduate studies in Russian literature took place under Sasha's tutelage, through the constant visits of poets and writers who gravitated toward his kind editorial intelligence."

Jamey's Tsvetaeva translation is dedicated "To Joseph Brodsky/who always insisted I persevere," with a blurb from Susan Sontag, who had helped Jamey place some of these pieces in journals before book publication: "Is there prose more intimate, more piercing, more heroic, more astonishing than Tsvetaeva's? Was the truth of reckless feelings ever so naked? So accelerated? Voicing gut and brow, she is incomparable. Clad in the veil of translation, expert translation, her recklessness commands, her nakedness flames."

Languages and translation had figured in Jamey's life from an early age. She studied French and Russian as an undergraduate at the University of Texas, Austin, and the Sorbonne. She wrote her senior thesis on Stanley Kunitz's translations of Anna

Akhmatova with Paul Schmidt, the brilliant translator and poet. Her first published translation, a piece by a Soviet journalist on the war in Afghanistan, appeared in *Life* magazine in 1980.

When Jamey embarked on her first trip to the Soviet Union in 1985 it was as a reporter for *Art in America*, where she would work as editor for the next fifteen years. (She had earlier worked as an editor and frequent contributor for *Artforum* during Ingrid Sischy's tenure.) Among her many accomplishments from that period, one should mention the documentary film *USSaRt* about the 1988 Sotheby's auction in Moscow, a signal event in the chronicle of glasnost, for which she interviewed the artists in their studios. It was during her 1988 trip that she met Vladimir Sorokin, on a picnic with a group of artists from the auction. Later publications, among many, from the art world include her essay on VDNKh for the *New York Review of Books* ("The Wonder of the Soviet World," Dec. 22, 1994) and her translation of Aleksandr Rodchenko's *Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Letters, Manifestos and Other Writings* (Museum of Modern Art, 2005), not to mention a host of pieces on the Russian art scene in New York and Moscow, about such figures as Vitalii Komar, Aleksandr Melamid, and Ilya Kabakov.

I got to know Jamey when she was a Visiting Scholar at the Harriman Institute, working on the topic "Once Upon an Empire: Soviet Paradise" (2002–3). We had first met in Moscow, when she served as Deputy Director for Programs at the Open Society Institute, Moscow, working with Russian staff to develop culture and media programs (1995–97). Jamey was omnipresent in 90s Moscow—and everyone wanted a piece of her.

At Harriman we would get together in my office, smoke, drink coffee, and carry on passionately about art and life and her beloved daughter, Callie, whom she adopted in Russia in the 90s, and Sasha Sumerkin, whom she adored. I remember her telling me that her dual identity as art critic and translator was very important for a number of reasons, not least of which was that when her own writing was not going well, there were always pages of someone else's text that needed to be brought over into English.

By the time Yale brought out the Tsvetaeva in 2002, Jamey had already published works by the two writers with whom she would become most identified: Tat'iana Tolstaia and Vladimir Sorokin. Jamey's translation of Tolstaia's *Sleepwalker in a Fog* (Knopf, 1992), for which she was recommended by Brodsky, and Vladimir Sorokin's short prose, including *A Month in Dachau* (Grand Street, 1994), were the beginnings of her most important collaborations with contemporary prose writers. Jamey would go on to translate two more books by Tolstaia, the novel *Slynx* (2003) and the volume of essays titled *Pushkin's Children*, the majority of which had appeared in the *New York Review of Books* in Jamey's translation. (In general, almost all translations from Russian in *NYRB*, from the 1980s onwards, were executed by Jamey—everything from Elena Bonner to Svetlana Alexievich.)

As she recounts in her interview on Sorokin for the *Paris Review* (June 23, 2011), she met Sorokin, who had close ties with the Moscow conceptualists, in 1988, soon after the Sotheby Auction: "The art world in Russia was pretty small, so an American from *Art in America* who spoke Russian? I was a very unusual creature and everyone introduced me to everyone." She read a lot of Sorokin's work in manuscript but had difficulty in interesting a publisher. She persevered, publishing the short story "Hiroshima" in Jean Stein's *Grand Street*, before embarking on the series of novels that would cement Sorokin's reputation in the United States: *Ice*, *Day of the Oprichnik*, *Ice Trilogy*, and *The Blizzard*. This last novel garnered praise from all quarters; for example, Masha Gessen writing in the *New York Times* (December 30, 2015): "Knowing when to pick one's battles is the mark of a great translator, and Gambrell is one. Her translation is as elegant, playful and layered as the original—and never appears

labored.” The book was shortlisted for the PEN America Translation Prize. (As a juror, I had the pleasure of informing Jamey.)

In 2016, Jamey received the prestigious Thornton Wilder Prize for Translation by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The prize, which comes with a purse of \$20,000, is awarded to a person who has made a significant contribution to the art of literary translation. The citation reads: “Gambrell has translated the works of the wizardly Russian, Vladimir Sorokin, and her translations are wizardly in their own right. Hip, unflappable and at ease in the otherworldly post-apocalyptic mesmeric Xtreme sport of storytelling Sorokin represents, Gambrell captures the tone of this rogue modernist masterfully.”

For some reason translators are routinely asked for a metaphor to explain their translation theory or process. In her interview with Liesl Schillinger (*Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 15, 2016), Jamey offers two marvelous answers to that question: “My first thought was [that translation is] as reality is to a dream; and the other one which is more mundane, is a blocking rehearsal in a theater. Not a dress rehearsal, but rather where the actors read the words and everyone stands in their places, and the director gives instructions, and figures out how it all comes together. Seen that way, a translation is to the original as a blocking rehearsal is to a finished performance.” Of course, neither is mundane, but Jamey’s preferred version, ultimately, is “as reality is to a dream.”

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