

## **Isaac Emmanuilovich Babel: A Chronology**

by

Gregory Freidin

**Final Version: February 10, 2001**

- 1894 Isaac Babel is born (June 30) in Moldavanka, a poor district near the harbor of Odessa, to Feiga and Man Yitzkhovich Bobel, a dealer in agricultural machinery. Soon after, the Babel family relocates to Nikolayev (150 kilometers from Odessa). Babel studies English, French, and German; private Hebrew lessons.
- 1899 Babel's sister, Meriam, born on July 16.
- 1905 The October Manifesto of Czar Nicholas II establishes a constitutional monarchy.
- #
- Pogroms In southern Russia, including Nikolayev, witnessed by Babel. But the family is untouched.
- 1906 Babel's family, now considerably more prosperous, moves back to Odessa and settles in the residential center of the city. Babel enrolls in the Nicholas I Commercial School in Odessa; begins writing stories in French.
- 1911 After an unsuccessful attempt to enroll at the University of Odessa (due to the restrictions on Jews), Babel enters the Institute of Finance and Business Studies in Kiev. Meets Eugenia Borisovna Gronfein, his future wife.
- 1913 First publication: the story "Old Shloyme."
- 1914 World War I begins.
- 1915 Babel follows his institute's evacuation from Kiev to Saratov.
- 1916 After graduating from the institute, moves to St. Petersburg, meets Maxim Gorky, and begins to contribute stories and sketches to Gorky's journal Letopis and other periodicals (stories: "Mama, Rimma, and Alla," Elya Isaakovich and Margarita Prokofievna"). Babel's stories receive a favorable response from reviewers.
- 1917 Charged with writing pornography (story "The Bathroom Window") but the charge is made moot by the political turmoil.

The February Revolution.<sup>1</sup> Czar Nicholas II abdicates. Russia is ruled by the provisional government. Babel briefly volunteers for the Rumanian front. Bolshevik coup d'état in October.<sup>2</sup>

#

Babel abandons the disintegrating front in November, returns to Odessa, and takes a dangerous journey to Petrograd<sup>3</sup> (his story "The Road," 1932). Reaches Petrograd in December 1917 and joins the newly organized Cheka for a brief stint as a translator for the counter-intelligence department.

1918 In March, Babel becomes a regular contributor of sketches about life in the city to Maxim Gorky's anti-Leninist newspaper Novaya zhizn until the publication is shut down by the Bolsheviks on July 6 (Babel's last contribution is in the July 2 issue).

#

Contributes stories to newspaper Zhizn iskusstva (Petrograd) in November.

1918-19 Serves in the food requisitioning detachments during the Civil War; returns to Odessa. Marries Eugenia Gronfein (August 9, 1919).

1920 Odessa Party Committee issues Babel the credentials of a war correspondent under the name of Kiril Vasilievich Lyutov, assigned to Budyonny's Cavalry Army on the Polish front. Babel spends June through September with the Budyonny Cavalry.<sup>4</sup>

#

Returns to Odessa severely ill (life-long asthma). Travels with his wife in Georgia and the Caucasus, contributes to local periodicals.

1921 End of the Civil War and beginning of the New Economic Policy. Babel does editorial work for a publishing house, contributing stories and essays to Odessa periodicals.

1923 Most of the Benya Krik stories (the Odessa Stories) written and published in Odessa.

---

<sup>1</sup> March, , according to the Gregorian colander, adopted subsequently.

<sup>2</sup> November 7, according to the Gregorian colander.

<sup>3</sup> Formerly St. Petersburg.

<sup>4</sup> In August, 1920, the Red Army reaches the outskirts of Warsaw but is soon after repelled and by September defeated by Pilsudski's troops, aided by the Western powers; an armistice is signed in October, 1921; the Treaty of Riga finalizing the Russian-Polish border and ceding parts of Ukraine and Belarus to Poland, is signed on March 18, 1921).

#

Father dies (July 13).

Babel moves to Moscow in October, his family is soon to follow.

1923-24 After finishing the Odessa Stories, Babel begins work on the Red Cavalry stories. June 1923: the publication of his stories in the avant-garde Lef and the fellow traveler Krasnaya Nov; the beginning of Babel's fame.

1924 Lenin dies on January 21; Stalin, the Communist Party's General Secretary since 1922, begins his ascent to power.

#

Budonny's first attack on Red Cavalry stories (March).

#

Babel publication in the first issue of Evgeny Zamiatin's independent journal Russkii sovremennik.

#

Meriam Chapochnikoff (Babel's sister) emigrates to Brussels.

1925 First two childhood stories (the cycle The Story of My Dovecote) are published with a dedication to Maxim Gorky.

#

Eugenia Babel (Gronfein), Babel's wife, emigrates to Paris.

1926 The Red Cavalry is published as a book. Babel's mother emigrates to Brussels. Babel is Russia's "most famous writer."

1925-27 Babel's liaison with Tamara Kashirina (later, Mrs. Vsevolod Ivanov).

1926 Mikhail (Ivanov) is born to Babel and Tamara Kashirina in July.

#

Meets Ilya Ehrenburg for the first time in Paris.

#

Babel finishes his play Sunset in August.

#

Works on the film script of Benya Krik; the beginning of Babel's career as a screenwriter (script based on Sholem Aleichem's Roaming Stars and others).

#

The Film Benya Krik is released and soon taken out of circulation. In subsequent publications of the script, Babel disowns the film.

1927 Babel is in Kiev on family business; possibly works on The Jewess (a novel?) of which only the beginning is extant (autobiographical elements). Plans a work on the French Revolution, hints that he is working on a novel about the Cheka; continues work on the "Childhood" story cycle (referred to by Babel as "my true legacy").

#

Babel leaves Russia for Paris in July; a brief affair with E. Khaiutina (future Mrs. Nikolai Yezhov) in Berlin; rejoins his wife, Eugenia, in Paris.

#

Sunset staged successfully in Baku (10/23), in two theaters in Odessa (10/25 and 12/1).

1928 Moscow production of Sunset at the Moscow Art Theater II (2/28) fails.

#

The Shakhty Trial. End of the NEP and beginning of the Stalin Revolution.

#

Babel returns to Russia in October. General Budyonny resumes attacks on Red Cavalry. Gorky comes to Babel's defense.

#

The Chinese Mill, a film comedy based on a script by Babel, premiers in July.

#

Continues work on the childhood story cycle (according to, Babel, "part of a larger whole").

#

Critic Alexander Voronsky, an early patron and admirer of Babel, chides him in

print for his low productivity (“silence”).

#

Completes the story “My First Fee” (1922-28); plans Kolya Topuz, a long narrative about an Odessa bandit who is reformed during the period of socialist construction (late 1920s-early 1930s).

1929 Trotsky is exiled from Soviet Russia in January.

#

Babel’s daughter, Nathalie, born in Paris to Eugenia Borisovna Babel on July 17.

#

Red Cavalry is published in English translation in the United States (following German and French editions), preceded by the appearance of some stories in literary magazines.

1929-30 “In search of new material,” Babel, like many other Soviet writers, travels in the industrial heartland and witnesses the brutal collectivization and famine in the Ukraine (February-summer 1930).

1930 Babel is publicly accused of granting an anti-Soviet interview to a Polish newspaper while on the French Riviera. He insists, apparently successfully, that the interview was a fabrication. Attempts to receive permission to return to Paris are unsuccessful, in part, due to the author’s continued “silence.”

1931 Resumes contacts with Khaiutina.

#

Early spring in Ukraine.

#

Publishes two more childhood stories (the Dovecote cycle) and a “collectivization” story, “Gapa Guzhva.”

#

Impending publication of a series of stories is announced at the end of the year, only one of them subsequently published.

1932 Publication of the story “Guy de Maupassant.” Babel lives in Molodenovo, a village outside Moscow, close to Gorky’s summer estate.

#

Babel meets Antonina Nikolayevna Pirozhkova, a young engineer.

#

After many pleas, Babel finally is allowed to return to his family in France.

1932-33 In Paris, Babel sees his daughter for the first time. Collaborates on a script about a famous socialist-revolutionary double agent, Yevno Azef, for a French movie studio (continues this work later in Russia). Close friendship with Ilya Ehrenburg, who introduces Babel to André Malraux. Babel visits Gorky in Sorrento. Travels through France, Italy, Germany.

#

Returns to Moscow in August in response to Gorky's request for assistance in organizing the First Congress of Soviet Writers.

#

In the fall, Babel travels, with Antonina Pirozhkova, through the Caucasus on the way to Kabardino-Balkaria (a small Caucasus republic).

1934 Babel travels to the Donbass region (January).

#

During the 17<sup>th</sup> Communist Party Congress, "The Congress of Victors," opposition to Stalin becomes manifest, but is ultimately defeated.

#

Publication of Babel's story, "Dante Street."

#

Osip Mandelstam recites his anti-Stalin verses in March and is arrested in May.

#

At the First Congress of Soviet Writers (August), Babel obliquely criticizes the cult of Stalin. Speaking about his modest output, Babel calls himself "a great master of the genre [of literary silence]." He is grateful to the Soviet establishment for being able to enjoy the high status of a writer despite his "silence," which, in the West, would have forced him to abandon writing "sell haberdashery." Babel spends time with André Malraux, who attended the congress.

#

Assassination of Sergei Kirov on December 1. Beginning of the great purges.

1935 Babel attends the Congress of Soviets in Moscow (February).

#

Babel completes Maria, his second play, which is published in March.

#

Babel and Pasternak are dispatched, on the insistence of André Malraux and André Gide, to the antifascist International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture in Paris (June).

#

On July 14, Babel witnesses huge demonstrations in Paris (Popular Front and the pro-Fascist Croix de Feu<sup>5</sup>), seeing in them the signs of an impending revolution.

#

Along with his wife and daughter, Babel visits his mother and sister in Brussels (July). Babel makes plans to bring his entire family back to the Soviet Union. These plans do not materialize.

#

Babel returns to the Soviet Union (August) and travels, with Antonina Pirozhkova, to the Kiev region and on to Odessa. After returning to Moscow, Babel and Pirozhkova establish a household.

#

Ilya Ehrenburg, on a visit to Moscow from Paris, queries Babel about the mounting repression and the purges of the old Bolshevik intellectuals from the leadership. Babel attributes the changes to the preparations for war, which calls for a more decisive, military style government and a kind of art that could best serve the goals of total mobilization of society.

#

Babel collaborates with Sergei Eisenstein on the film Bezhin Meadow, about a young peasant communist who is murdered for denouncing his father as a kulak (winter 1935-36).

---

<sup>5</sup> Ilya Ehrenburg, *Memoirs: 1914-1941*, transl. Tatyana Shebunina (NY, 1966), p. 317.

1936 Attack on Dmitri Shostakovich's opera Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District (January) inaugurates the “campaign against Formalism,” a purge in the cultural sphere.

#

Together with André and Roland Malraux, Babel visits Gorky in the Crimea and, along with Mikhail Koltsov, serves as Malraux’s interpreter (March). Afterwards Gorky complains to Stalin that the “Campaign against Formalism” represents a harmful cultural policy.

#

Babel spends time with André Gide in Moscow and occasionally interprets for him.

#

Maxim Gorky dies on June 18.

#

As one of the leading figures in the Writers’ Union, Babel receives a country house (dacha) in Peredelkino.

#

Spanish Civil War begins in July.

#

The trial of Lev Kamenev, Grigory Zinoviev, and other famous party and military leaders, including several Civil War heroes (some friends of Babel’s), takes place in August. The accused are sentenced to death.

#

Nikolay Yezhov (now the husband of E. Khaiutina) replaces Genrikh Yagoda in September as the head of the NKVD (Stalin’s secret police).

#

According to an NKVD informer, Babel is critical of the trials, saying that the prosecution failed to make a convincing case against the accused.

1937 Daughter Lida is born to Babel and Antonina Pirozhkova (February).

#



Babel publishes stories “Sulak,” “Di Grasso” (thematically, part of the “childhood story cycle), and “The Kiss” (a new concluding story of Red Cavalry).

#

Show trials of political and military leaders continue.

1938 In a meeting with Ilya Ehrenburg, Babel recounts how banned books are pulped in a Moscow factory. Ehrenburg, who has just been recalled to Moscow from Spain, suggests to Babel that if Fascism wins in Spain, the repressive USSR would be the only place left for people like Babel and himself, and “so much the worse for us.”<sup>6</sup>

Last meeting with Ehrenburg (May).

Yezhov is replaced by Lavrenty Beria as the head of the NKVD and soon afterward arrested. He gives evidence against Babel.

#

Babel publishes a story, “The Trial” (August).

#

Collaborates on scripts for the film version of Gorky’s autobiographical trilogy (he is chiefly responsible for the script of the volume My Universities, released in 1939-40).

#

Signs a contract for an edition of his collected works.

1939 Babel completes a film script for a military-industrial spy thriller, Number 4, Staraya Square (the title referring to the address of the Communist Party Central Committee Headquarters in Moscow).

#

Babel is arrested on May 13, and soon charged with spying for France and Austria. The accusation is based, in part, on the evidence provided by Yezhov and Babel’s fellow-writers, Boris Pilnyak and Mikhail Koltsov, who had been arrested earlier.

#

---

<sup>6</sup> S. Povartsov, Prichina smerti – rasstrel (Cause of Death: Execution by the Firing Squad), M. 1966, p.130.

Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact is signed in Moscow in August. In September, the armies of Germany and the Soviet Union invade and partition Poland.

- 1940 Babel is executed in the Lubyanka prison on January 15.
- 1941 Germany invades the Soviet Union on June 22.
- 1948 Rumors circulate about Babel's imminent release from prison.
- 1953 Stalin dies (March 5).
- 1954 Babel is officially exonerated on December 23. The death certificate states that he died under unknown circumstances on March 17, 1941.
- 1955 Collected Stories by Isaac Babel, with an introduction by Lionel Trilling, are published in New York.
- 1956 Nikita Khrushchev denounces Stalin at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress (February).
- 1957 A volume of selected stories is published in Moscow with the introduction by Ilya Ehrenburg, at last opening the way for subsequent editions, albeit censored and incomplete.
- 1964 Isaac Babel, The Lonely Years: 1925-1939: Unpublished Stories and Correspondence, edited and introduced by Nathalie Babel. Revised edition published in 1995.
- 1966 You Must Know Everything, edited by Nathalie Babel, published in New York.
- 1989 Vospominania o Babele (Babel Remembered), edited by Antonina Pirozhkova, is published in Moscow, including Pirozhkova's essay "Years Spent Together (1932-1939)."
- 1990 The two-volume Sochineniia (Works) edition is published in Moscow, the most comprehensive uncensored edition of Babel to date, albeit incomplete.

#

Details of Babel's interrogation and death begin to reach Soviet press (publications by Arkady Vaksberg and Vitaly Shentalinsky).

- 1996 Pirozhkova publishes At His Side: The Last Years of Isaac Babel, translated by Anne Frydman and Robert L. Busch (Royalton, Vermont).

#

The centenary of Babel's birth is marked by international conferences in Russia and the United States.

Copyright © 2001 by Gregory Freidin  
(2226 words)

825 Stattuck Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707  
Tel.: 510.524.3518; Fax: 510-528-4704  
GFREIDIN@stanford.edu