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## Iosif Utkin: Jewish Poet and Fighter for Soviet Motherland

Iosif Utkin: poeta żydowski i obrońca sowieckiej ojczyzny

**Streszczenie:** Artykuł poświęcony jest życiu i twórczości mało znanego sowiecko-żydowskiego poety Iosifa Utkina (1903–1944), który zginął podczas II wojny światowej. Ten wybitny twórca ciągle pozostaje nieznanym na Zachodzie, a jego poezją rzadko zajmowali się nawet badacze rosyjskojęzyczni. Autorkę artykułu interesują trzy aspekty poezji Utkina: aspekt muzyczny, poezja wojskowa i wątki żydowskie. Aspekty te poddano analizie, gdyż stanowią centralne, najbardziej podstawowe elementy twórczości poety. Jednakże poezja Utkina nie ogranicza się do tych aspektów, dlatego też celowe wydaje się zbadanie występujących w niej motywów folklorystycznych, specyfiki gatunkowej, symboliki oraz opisów różnych rzemiosł i zawodów. W swojej poezji Utkin stworzył zaczarowany świat, świadczący o niezwykłym i błyskotliwym talencie artystycznym. Jego twórczość wyraża ducha dawnych czasów, romantyczną wiarę w sprawiedliwy komunizm, nadzieje, które rozwiły się wraz z końcem II wojny światowej i początkiem antysemitkiej polityki Stalina, zwanej „mrocznymi latami sowieckiego żydostwa”.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Utkin, poezja popularna, elementy żydowskie, II wojna światowa, sowiecka ojczyzna

Иосиф Уткин: еврейский поэт и борец за советскую родину

**Резюме:** В статье впервые рассказывается о жизни и творчестве советского еврейского поэта Иосифа Уткина (1903–1944), погибшего во время Второй мировой войны. Этот крупный поэт на сегодняшний день неизвестен на Западе, и его поэзия почти не изучалась, даже на русском языке. Автора статьи интересуют три основных аспекта поэзии Уткина: музыкальные аспекты его поэзии, его военная поэзия и еврейские темы в его поэзии. Эти аспекты были выбраны для анализа, потому что они являются центральными, наиболее основными элементами в работе Уткина. Но его поэзия охватывает не только эти аспекты, и было бы также целесообразно изучить ее фольклорные элементы, жанровые стороны, символику его поэзии, а также описания различных ремесел и профессий. В своей поэзии он создал заколдованный мир, который показал его необычайный и блестящий художественный талант. Его поэзия выражала дух времени романтической веры в справедливость коммунизма, надежды, которые были разбиты после окончания Второй Мировой Войны и начала сталинских антисемитских гонений, известных как «черные годы советского еврейства».

**Ключевые слова:** Уткин, популярная поэзия, еврейские элементы, Вторая Мировая Война, Советская Родина

## Introduction

This article presents the life and work of the Soviet Jewish poet Iosif Utkin (1903–1944), who was killed in the Second World War (or the Great Patriotic War, as it was known in the Soviet Union). This major poet is to date almost unknown in the West, and his poetry has hardly been studied even in Russian, let alone in other languages. Jewish authors in Eastern Europe were familiar with and wrote in three languages: Yiddish, Russian, and Hebrew, and made abundant use of imagery and illustrations from the Bible and the Talmud. This article reveals for the first time the manner in which elements of these languages and cultures were incorporated within Utkin's work.

Significant attention is devoted to the poem *The Tale of the Red-head Motele, Mr. Inspector, Rabbi Isaiah, and Commissar Blokh*. This epic poem relates to Yiddish, to Hebrew, to the Hebrew Bible, and incorporates other sources in Jewish folklore and religious texts — sources which place the poem in an ironic light. One who reads this poem without noting its underlying irony has missed the simple meaning of this text.

In what follows, we present these basic linguistic and cultural aspects, without which it is impossible to understand the simple meaning of the written text. Hence, this article makes little use of the theoretical constructs widespread in contemporary literary studies, which can only be applied to Utkin's poetry once its basic linguistic and textual contents have been thoroughly researched.

In this article we refer to three main aspects of Utkin's poetry: the musical aspects of his poetry, his war poetry, and Jewish themes in his poetry. These aspects were chosen for analysis because they are the most important elements in Utkin's work.

### **Iosif Utkin: The Short and Difficult Life of a Jewish Poet and Soviet Patriot**

Iosif Pavlovich Utkin (27 May, 1903 – 13 November, 1944) was a Russian-Jewish poet and journalist who participated in the Russian Civil War of 1917–1923 and in the Second World War. He was born at Khingan Station, now Khingansk on the China-Orient railway line, where his father worked. The surname "Utkin" may have been derived from the Jewish surname "Utkin" — i.e., the son of Utka (or: Itka, or: Etk), a Jewish woman's name. At times Jewish surnames are derived from the personal name of the child's moth-

er, especially when the child's father is absent, the suffix "kin" being the Yiddish for "son of"<sup>1</sup>.

Utkin was among seven children in his family. When he was seventeen, Utkin volunteered for combat in the civil war and was sent to the Soviet Far East to fight the White Russian forces<sup>2</sup>. In late 1922 Utkin became a reporter for the newspaper *Vlast Truda* (The Power of Labor), where his first poems were published. In 1924 he was sent by the Irkutsk Province Party Committee and the Party Committee of the Komsomol to study in Moscow, where he graduated from the Moscow Institute of Journalism in 1927. About that time he became a member of a group of engaged Komsomol poets that included Alexander Bezymensky<sup>3</sup>, Alexander Zharov<sup>4</sup>, Vissarion Sayanov<sup>5</sup> and Mikhail Svetlov<sup>6</sup>.

Utkin's literary career began in Moscow. In late 1924 and early 1925 his poems about the Civil War — *The Story of a Soldier*, *Execution*, and *Song about a Mother* — were published in the journals "Ogonek", "Prozhektor", and "Smena". His first book, *The Tale of the Red-head Motele, Mr. Inspector, Rabbi Isaiah, and Commissar Blokh* (1925), was a long poem about the *shtetl*<sup>7</sup>. It was Utkin's first major success and facilitated his entry into the world of poetry<sup>8</sup>.

In 1930 and 1931 he wrote many engaged poems in an explicitly Communist style, dealing with such subjects as the Red Army, the Komsomol, outstanding construction workers, and electrification. However, his more mature poetry, written between 1933 and 1940, tended more toward the folk song. The lyric hero of this poetry was a character who was restrained in the expression of his feelings.

In August 1941 Utkin began to serve on the Bryansk front as a staff member of the front-line newspaper Na "Razgrom Vraga" ("To Rout the Enemy"). The following month he was wounded, losing four fingers of his right hand. Sent to Tashkent to recover, Utkin continued his literary work despite his condition. Throughout this time he was eager to return to the front, frequently writing to high

<sup>1</sup> Compare also to the name of the Yiddish writer David Utkes, see: G. Estraikh, *In Harness. Yiddish Writers' Romance with Communism*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse 2005, pp. 49, 50, 241.

<sup>2</sup> The Whites were anti-Bolshevik supporters of the former Tsarist government. The Tsarist governmental army was called the White Army. The Reds were pro-Bolshevik supporters.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Bezymensky (1898–1973) was an engaged Soviet poet.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Zharov (1904–1984) was an engaged Soviet poet and songwriter.

<sup>5</sup> Vissarion Sayanov (real family name: Makhin, 1903–1959) was a Soviet writer.

<sup>6</sup> Mikhail Svetlov (real family name: Sheinkman, 1903–1964) Soviet poet and dramatist, author of the famous poem *Grenada* (1922).

<sup>7</sup> Jewish provincial town and its inhabitants.

<sup>8</sup> It was first published in *Molodaya gvardiya*, 4 (1925). See also: С. А. Васильев, *Предисловие*, in: И. Уткин, *Стихи и поэмы*, Гослитиздат, Москва 1956, pp. 5–7.

military authorities requesting to be returned to the combat zone.

By the summer of 1942 Utkin was back at the Bryansk front as a special correspondent for “Pravda” and “Izvestiya”. He was in the heat of battle alongside the soldiers, while he wrote marching poems, many of which were set to music and sung at the front.

On November 13, 1944, while at the peak of his creativity, Utkin perished in a plane crash not far from Moscow while on his way back from an area where partisans were fighting the Nazi enemy<sup>9</sup>.

### Utkin’s Work in Research Literature

Although Utkin was a Jewish artist with a Jewish cultural background, he did not continue to develop his poetic career as a Jewish poet, and over the years became a Russian poet in every sense of the word — albeit one of Jewish ethnic descent.

The awakening of Jewish national identity, as described by Brian Horowitz and Alise Nakhimovsky in their monumental works, *Jewish Nationalism and Acculturation in 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Russia*<sup>10</sup> and *Russian-Jewish Literature and Identity*<sup>11</sup>, contributed to the preservation of awareness of Jewish national identity among Jewish youth close to the time of the revolution of October 1917, and even thereafter. But this national orientation described by Horowitz and Nakhimovsky was the opposite of that which developed among the Jews of the Soviet Union, including Isosif Utkin, after the 1917 Revolution, when masses of Jews embraced communism and renounced their Jewish identity. Nevertheless, the awakening of Jewish national identity delayed somewhat the erasure of the Jewish roots by the Jewish youth, even among those who eventually abandoned Judaism, such as Utkin. Preservation of Jewish identity until the period of the revolution can help to explain the deep Jewish background fashioned in Utkin’s Long Poem *The Tale of the Red-head Motele, Mr. Inspector, Rabbi Isaia, and Commissar Blok*.

Utkin’s abandonment of Jewish culture was one that could have been anticipated in the Soviet Union, both because of the

<sup>9</sup> Е. Евтушенко (ред.), *Строфы века. Антология русской поэзии*, Полифакт, Москва–Минск 1995, pp. 408–409; А. Саакянц, *Иосиф Уткин* (вступительная статья), in: И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы*, Советский писатель, Москва–Ленинград 1966, pp. 5–40; *Советские поэты павшие на Великой Отечественной Войне*, Советский писатель, Ленинград 1965, p. 406; В. Коржев, *Иосиф Уткин* (введение), in: И. Уткин, *Стихи 1924–1944 годов*, Западно-Сибирское книжное изд-во, Новосибирск 1971, pp. 5–36.

<sup>10</sup> B. Horowitz, *Jewish Nationalism and Acculturation in 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Russia*, Slavica Publishers, Bloomington 2009, pp. 65–85.

<sup>11</sup> A. Nakhimovsky, *Russian-Jewish Literature and Identity*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1992.

idealistic enthusiasm felt in light of the new government, and due to the social, political and economic pressure imposed upon Jewish writers and poets to forego their Jewish heritage. In any event, even at the beginning of his path, when Utkin had not yet cut himself off from his Jewish roots, he was never a deeply rooted Jewish author devoted to Jewish culture of the type described in the studies of the scholar of Yiddish literature, Gennady Estraiikh<sup>12</sup>. The eminent scholar of Soviet literature, Evgeny Dobrenko, holds that Utkin was a Russian and Russian-Soviet author in every respect. He mentions Utkin alongside such explicitly Soviet authors as Alexandr Zharov and Alexandr Bezymenski<sup>13</sup>. He also mentions Utkin as one of the most popular authors, whose works were published in *Molodaya Gvardia* alongside works by Vladimir Mayakovsky, Mikhail Golodnii<sup>14</sup>, Nikolay Aseev<sup>15</sup>, Sergei Obradovich<sup>16</sup> and Eduard Bagritskii<sup>17</sup>. Evidently, Utkin had aspects that tended one way or the other. In this paper I will relate to this issue as well.

### Musicality of Utkin's Poetry

Iosif Utkin does not seem to have belonged to any of the contemporary innovative literary streams. Rather, one can trace a strong affinity of Utkin to classical Russian literature, in particular to the poets Mikhail Lermontov<sup>18</sup> and Pavel Vyasemsky<sup>19</sup>. Several lines from Vyasemsky's poetry appear as a refrain in Utkin's poem, which is similar to that of Vyasemsky, as follows:

*Еще Тройка*

Тройка мчится,  
тройка скачет...  
P. Vyasemsky

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the insightful research by Gennady Estraiikh (*In Harness. Yiddish Writers' Romance with Communism...*). Even more mature Yiddish writers than Utkin were impressed by the Communist ideas and forced by the regime to abandon the Jewish life.

<sup>13</sup> E. Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Writer. Social and Aesthetic Origins of Soviet Literary Culture*, trans. J.M. Savage, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2001, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> Mikhail Golodnii (1903–1949) was a Russian poet of a Jewish descent.

<sup>15</sup> Nikolay Aseev (1889–1963) was a Soviet poet, Futurist, theatrical director.

<sup>16</sup> Sergei Obradovich (1892–1956) was a Russian and Soviet poet.

<sup>17</sup> Eduard Bagritskii (1895–1934) was an important Russian and Soviet poet of the Constructivist School. See: E. Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Writer...*, pp. 120–121.

<sup>18</sup> Mikhail Lermontov (1814–1841) is a supreme Russian Romantic writer and poet.

<sup>19</sup> Prince Pavel Vyazemsky (1820–1888) was a writer and historian of Russian literature, accountant of Alexander Pushkin.

Мчится тройка, скачет тройка,  
 Колокольчик под дугой  
 Разговаривает бойко.  
 Светит месяц молодой.  
 [...] Гармонист и запевала  
 Держит песню на ремне,  
 Эта песня побывала  
 И в станице и в Кремле.  
 [...] Как он близок, как понятен,  
 Как народ к нему привык,  
 Звонких песен, ярких пятен  
 Выразительный язык!  
 [...] Нет, не время нынче волку!  
 И, не тронув свежий наст,  
 Волк уходит втихомолку,  
 Русской песни сторонясь.  
 А она летит, лихая,  
 В белоснежные края,  
 Замирая, затихая,  
 Будто молодость моя...<sup>20</sup>

The poet and critic Ilya Selvinsky<sup>21</sup> praised this poem of Utkin, which he saw as continuing in the path of Pushkin<sup>22</sup>. Utkin himself constantly read Lermontov's poetry, related to images from his poetry in his own poems and, at the time of his death, a volume of Lermontov's poetry was found in his hand after his plane crashed. Utkin's poetry enjoyed positive reviews on the part of critics of Russian classical poetry,

Thus Utkin's *First Book of Poems* (1927) was noted by the cultural commissar Lunacharsky<sup>23</sup>, who wrote:

можно поздравить русскую литературу с появлением первых произведений Иосифа Уткина. [...] [Его] музыкальный стих. [...] гармонирует с идейным и эмоциональным содержанием фразы. [...] Уткину присущ чрезвычайно мягкий гуманизм, полный любовного отношения к людям. [...] Надо пожелать, чтобы блестящее начало, положенное первыми его произведениями, получило достойное продолжение<sup>24</sup>.

Utkin's approach to the rhyme and meter of classical Russian poetry was particularly well developed. He was likewise influ-

<sup>20</sup> И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы*, Художественная литература, Москва 1961, pp. 163–164; И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы*. . . 1966, p. 197; И. Уткин, *Стихи 1924–1944 годов*. . . , pp. 132–133.

<sup>21</sup> Ilya Sel'vinsky (1899–1968) was a Soviet prose writer, poet, and dramatist, the leader of the Soviet Constructivist movement.

<sup>22</sup> И. Сельвинский, *Поэзия Иосифа Уткина*, "Литературная газета", 2.12.1944, no 5 (1108), pp. 12–13.

<sup>23</sup> Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875–1933) was an art critic and a journalist.

<sup>24</sup> А. Луначарский, *Иосиф Уткин*, "Прожектор 22", 30.11.1925, pp. 12–18; переизд.: И. Уткин, *Собрание сочинений в 8 томах*, т. 2, Художественная литература, Москва 1964, pp. 348–354.

enced by Russian folklore, whose rhymes and meters he borrowed. The only contemporary poet by whom Utkin was influenced was Sergei Esenin<sup>25</sup>; it is possible that Esenin's authentic and powerful relation to Russian folklore<sup>26</sup> further strengthened Utkin's relation to his poetry. On the occasion of Esenin's tragic and premature death by suicide at the age of 30, Utkin wrote a special, melancholy poem the like of which he never wrote for any other poet:

*Слово Есенину*

Красивым, синеглазым  
Не просто умирать.  
Он пел, любил проказы,  
Стихи, село и мать...  
Нам всем дана отчизна  
И право жить и петь,  
И кроме права жизни —  
И право умереть.  
[...] Бунтующий и шалый,  
Ты выкипел до дна.  
Кому нужны бокалы,  
Бокалы без вина?..  
Кипит, цветет отчизна,  
Но ты не можешь петь!  
А кроме права жизни,  
Есть право умереть<sup>27</sup>.

The combination of influences from Russian classical poetry and Russian folklore, together with his brilliant fashioning of rhyme and meter, gave Utkin's poetry a uniquely musical quality and a striking chanson or ballad-like quality. Almost all of his lyric poems may be considered as songs. Thanks to their classic, simple Russian language and their lyric style; they were also extremely popular.

Many well-known composers, such as Mikhail Gnesin<sup>28</sup>, the founder of Jewish music in the Soviet Union, set some of Utkin's poems to music. Gnesin's collection *Jewish Songs* (1923–1926) consisted of five works, including music to Utkin's *Tale of the Red-*

<sup>25</sup> Sergei Esenin (1895–1925) was one of the most popular and well-known Russian lyrical poets of the 20th century. About Utkin's affinity to Esenin's poetry, see: А. Михайлов, *Владимир Маяковский (1893–1930)*, in: *История русской советской поэзии 1917–1941*, Наука, Ленинград 1983, p. 188.

<sup>26</sup> R. Lapidus, *Between Snow and Desert Heat — Russian Influences on Hebrew Literature: 1870–1970*, Hebrew Union College Press, Cincinnati 2003, pp. 174–176.

<sup>27</sup> И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...*, 1961, p. 44–45; И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...*, 1966, p. 74.

<sup>28</sup> Mikhail Gnesin (1883–1957) was an important Russian composer and pedagogue. Jewish motifs can be heard in Gnesin's composition (1929), which include the vocal cycle *Tale of the Red-headed Motele* based on Utkin's poem (1925). Gnesin had been one of the founders of Jewish art music in Russia.

*headed Motele* (see below). This cycle is considered one of Gnesin's most important works. Vadim Kozin<sup>29</sup>, Alexandr Sukhanov<sup>30</sup>, Alexandr Vertinsky<sup>31</sup>, and Sergei Nikitin<sup>32</sup> also composed music and wrote romances to verses by Utkin<sup>33</sup>.

The composer Vitaly Gubarenko<sup>34</sup> composed a cycle of vocal music based upon Utkin's poems. Three of Gubarenko's nine romances written in 1962 were based on Utkin's poems: *Annushka*, *On the Way*, and *In the Carpathians* were all part of this cycle. a recording of a Kharkov concert preserved in the collection of Ukrainian National Radio begins with these romances.

*Annushka*, the most emotionally expressive romance in this cycle, articulates the main patriotic idea of the three songs discussed<sup>35</sup>:

*Народная песня (Аннушка)*

«Ну-ка, двери отвори:  
Кто стоит там у двери?»  
«Это нищий, Аннушка».  
[...]  
«Ну, так выйди за плетень:  
Почему такая тень?!»  
«Это ружья, Аннушка».  
[...]  
Это белые идут,  
Это красного введут,  
Это... муж твой, Аннушка...»<sup>36</sup>  
1939

The vocal score is constructed in the form of a dialogue between Annushka and an unseen interlocutor. The heroine's questions (first about a beggar who accidentally came to Annushka's home, then about groans heard coming from the river, and finally about the arrival of a White Army company dragging with them her captive husband) are followed by laconic responses with the formulaic lament: "It is a beggar, Annushka", "It is a swan, Annushka", etc. This compositional device creates the effect of a rondo, that com-

<sup>29</sup> Vadim Alekseevich Kozin (1905–1994) was a Russian popular singer, composer and poet.

<sup>30</sup> Alexandr Sukhanov (born in 1952) is a Russian composer and bard. Starting in 1969, Sukhanov began to compose tunes to his own poems, as well as those of such well-known Russian poets as Samuil Marshak, Alexandr Vertinsky, Alexandr Pushkin and Utkin.

<sup>31</sup> Alexandr Vertinsky (1889–1957) was a Russian poet, artist, singer, composer, cabaret artist, and actor.

<sup>32</sup> Sergei Nikitin (born in 1944) was a Russian composer and singer.

<sup>33</sup> On the musical qualities of Utkin's poetry, see: М. Светлов, *О поэте и друге*, вступительная статья in: И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы*, Художественная Литература, Москва 1958, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Vitalii Gubarenko (1934–2000) was a Ukrainian composer.

<sup>35</sup> М. Светлов, *О поэте и друге* . . . , pp. 5–8.

<sup>36</sup> И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы* . . . , 1961, p. 160; И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы* . . . , 1966, p. 191.



plicates the traditional romance structure and gradually increases the emotional tension of the scene.

Gubarenko's romance *On the Way*, from his cycle inspired by Utkin's poem *On the Way (Night and Snow and the Way is Long)*, highlights images of war. The music conveys a sense of broad spaces, houses covered with snow, columns of soldiers, wrecked fates, wounded souls, and distraught emotions. Amidst all these there emerges the atmosphere of a winter night with frozen air and the labored breathing of humans.

*В дороге*

Ночь и снег, и путь далёк;  
На снегу покатом  
Только тлеет уголёк  
Одинокой хаты.  
[...] Под полозьями скрипит  
Русской жизни сказка.  
...Поглядишь по сторонам –  
Только снег да лыжни.  
Но такая сказка нам  
Всей дорожке жизни!<sup>37</sup>

*In the Carpathians*, the third vocal miniature of Gubarenko, dramatizes the mournful tale of the news of a Cossack killed on the Austrian front brought to a hut in the Kuban. The emotional structure of this romance reflects the foreboding of the girl who loves the Cossack<sup>38</sup>. In the vocal performance of this song one can sense traces of the Trans-Carpathian folk music tradition<sup>39</sup>.

The striking and brilliant musicality of Utkin's poetry is characteristic of the movement which he created, a poetic school of one man, standing alongside the other literary movements that existed during the period of the Russian avant-garde.

### Utkin's Patriotic War Poetry

Iosif Utkin wrote a considerable amount of poetry on the subject of warfare, relating both to the Civil War in the young Soviet Union

<sup>37</sup> И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...*, 1961, p. 217; И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...*, 1966, p. 229.

<sup>38</sup> The poem was also published under the titles *Song to a Girl* and *Song*, see: Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...*, 1961, pp. 74–75.

<sup>39</sup> About the musical and vocal settings of the poetry of Utkin, see: І. Драч, Вокальна лірика Віталія Губаренка, "Наукові записки Тернопільського педуніверситету" (Серія мистецтвознавство) 1999, № 1, pp. 37–40; А. Лычагин, *Проблема літературного контекста і жанрових традицій в ліриці Йосифа Уткина 1920-1930-х років*, <https://www.dissercat.com/content/problema-literaturnogo-konteksta-i-zhanrovyykh-traditsii-v-lirike-iosifa-utkina-1920-1930-kh-> [10.09.2020].

(1917–23) between the Communists and the anti-Communists (the Reds and the Whites), and the Second World War of 1941–45 (i.e., the Second World War) between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany<sup>40</sup>. Utkin was a Soviet patriot in heart and soul, deeply rooted in matters of public concern. Nevertheless, many of his poems focus upon the destiny of the individual combat soldier who found himself in a no-win situation without any chance of survival. The individual soldier stands alone against the forces of evil confronting him which are far beyond his ability to resist so that, in the final analysis, he is defeated thereby<sup>41</sup>.

Utkin's poetry portrays the Soviet man fighting on behalf of the lofty ideal of his beloved Soviet Motherland, forced to pay the ultimate personal price. But although he is killed by the mighty enemy, he does not betray his ideals. The following poem describes the torture and execution of a young Soviet soldier by the Japanese army within the framework of Japanese intervention in the Russian Civil War on the side of the anti-Communist forces during the years 1921–1923:

*Комсомольская Песня*

Мальчишку шлепнули в Иркутске.  
Ему семнадцать лет всего.  
[...] Над ним неделю измывался  
Японский офицер в тюрьме,  
[...] Ему японская «микада»  
Грозит, кричит: «Признайся сам!..»  
И били мальчика прикладом  
[...] Но комсомольцы  
На допросе  
Не трусят  
И не говорят!  
[...] Его ввели в тюремный двор.  
Но коммунисты  
На расстреле  
Не опускают в землю глаз!  
[...] И он погиб, судьбу приемля,  
[...] Обнявши землю,  
Которой мы не отдадим!<sup>42</sup>  
1934

The young Soviet soldier is all alone confronting the Japanese army. There is no chance that the Red Army will come to his help to

<sup>40</sup> Д. Фикс, *От составителя*, in: И. Уткин, *Избранная лирика*, Молодая гвардия, Москва 1968, pp. 3–4.

<sup>41</sup> On the individualistic tendency in Utkin's poetry, see: А. Михайлов, *Владимир Маяковский* . . . , p. 134.

<sup>42</sup> И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы* . . . , 1961, pp. 108–109; И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы* . . . 1966, pp. 146–147; Е. Евтушенко (ed.), *Строфы века* . . . , p. 409; И. Уткин, *Стихи 1924–1944 годов* . . . , pp. 102–103.

free him, and his numerous torturers are far more powerful than he is. Hence, he has no hope to survive and is helpless in face of his cruel fate. The power of his spirit is nevertheless stronger than his physical power, and by virtue of this he does not betray his patriotic ideals. Utkin portrays the figure of the almost mythological, utopian hero, presented as a superman, who stands alone against the entire world of evil<sup>43</sup>.

In his other patriotic poems, Utkin refines this individualistic approach even further. In his war poetry he foregoes dramatic portrayals of the acts of the individual and focuses upon his feelings, his thoughts, and his inner spiritual and experiential world upon finding himself being taken out to be executed — the peak of his isolation. For example, in the following:

*Расстрел*

И просто так —  
Без дальних слов —  
Как будто был и не был...  
За частоколами штыков  
Так тяжело смотреть на небо...  
[...] Могу и душу подарить —  
Вон там за следующей горкой...  
[...] И офицер спросил:  
«Готов?»  
Я сосчитал штыки невольно.  
Зачем им дюжина штыков?  
И одного вполне довольно...  
[...] «Т-т-т-оварищ... дай-ка закурить».  
«Подохнешь без махорки...»<sup>44</sup>

1924

Utkin is revealed in his war poetry as an ambivalent figure, torn between his dedication to the supreme goal of the collective and his individualistic temperament.

A special place in Utkin's war poetry is devoted to the soldier's mother. The figure of the mother serves as an alter-ego to the voice of the poem's narrator. She too becomes a soldier like himself, a figure both mother and soldier. She is more loyal and devoted to her soldier-son than the entire military of the Soviet Union. Even when the Red Army fails to stand by the side of the isolated soldier confronting the entire force of the enemy, his mother comes to his help and avenges him, waging war against the entire enemy army.

<sup>43</sup> А. Михайлов, *Владимир Маяковский*..., р. 390.

<sup>44</sup> И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы*..., 1961, р. 23; И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы*..., 1966, р. 52; И. Уткин, *Стихи 1924–1944 годов*..., рр. 41–42.

There is no person in the entire universe who understands the heart of the soldier and identifies with him more than his mother. Thus, for example:

*Рассказ солдата*

[...] Далеко, в заснеженной Сибири,  
И меня ждала старуха мать.

[...] И пришли к ней как-то партизаны  
И сказали,  
Что повешен я.

[...] А под утро, валенки надвинув,  
В час, когда желтеет мгла,  
К офицерскому ушла овину —  
И овин, должно быть, подожгла.

[...] Шомполами в штабе офицерском  
Запороли мать мою!..<sup>45</sup>

1924

But even in those poems that focus upon the image of the mother, there is a certain ambivalence on the part of Utkin. The mother is the person who is most beloved and closest to the soldier; she is described as the only true and reliable person upon the earth; it is to her that he lifts his eyes in times of trouble and to whom he cries out in times of danger. Nevertheless, she does not understand him, his inner world, or the situation in which he finds himself. Indeed, it seems that there is no person who is more alien and distant to the soldier than his own mother, as follows from the following poem:

*Песня о матери*

Вошел и сказал:  
«Как видишь, я цел,  
Взять не сумели  
Враги на прицел.  
[...] И снова пришел я,  
Родная, домой. [...]!»  
И орден  
Пылал у него на груди.  
[...] И больно сказала  
Седая мать:  
«Мой милый,

<sup>45</sup> First published in the journal "Огонек" 1924, no. 42, pp. 1–2, under the title *Рассказ партизана*; И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...*, 1961, pp. 21–22; И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...*, 1966, p. 51; И. Уткин, *Стихи 1924–1944 годов...*, 1971, pp. 39–40.

[...] Но больше боялась  
За совесть твою.  
Скажи:  
Человеком  
На фронте ты был?..»  
И глухо сказал он:  
«Семнадцать убил...»  
[...] И молча солдат  
Ступил за порог,  
[...] И орден...  
Дрожал у него на груди.  
Ах, бедная мать!  
Ах, добрая мать!  
Кого нам любить?  
Кого проклинать?<sup>46</sup>  
1924

The figure of the mother and her memory is an open, bleeding wound in the heart of the Soviet soldier with whom Utkin identifies. Her image, imprinted deep in the poet's heart, is the source of the existential ambivalence in his poetry. The complex relationship between the soldier and his mother, which combines devotion and identification to death alongside alienation, is the deepest fault-line in Utkin's poetry.

Nevertheless, in his war poetry it difficult for Utkin to refrain from relating to events involving numerous people, such as groups of soldiers, and not just to isolated individuals. In such poems, Utkin often describes landscapes with human characteristics, turning them into national, social and political symbols. The following is a propaganda poem describing an innocent and miserable Russian village attacked by a platoon of vicious soldiers of the White Army, opposed to the just Communist Red Army:

*Налет*

[...] И псом испуганным в снегу  
Корежилась деревня.  
Полковник вырос над лукой:  
«Закладывай патроны!»  
И каждый скованной рукой  
Тугой курок потрогал.  
И застонал оконный звон!  
Обезумевший вдрызг,  
Всю ночь казачий конный взвод  
Дырявил шкуры изб.  
И никогда, как в тот восход,  
Под розовевшим небом

<sup>46</sup> И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...*, 1966, pp. 53–54.

У проруби багровый лед  
Таким багровым не был...<sup>47</sup>  
[...] На дыбе дымного огня  
Шаталась деревня...<sup>48</sup>

1924

Utkin's poems about the Civil War in Russia differ from those devoted to the Second World War. In the poetry about the Civil War, he expresses his sadness in face of the death of the individual soldier, whereas in his poetry about the Second World War there is no room for sadness. Instead there are fury and shock in face of the abominations, and a call for vengeance that allows no respite. The poems of the Second World War are decisive, forceful, and more poignant than those of the Civil War. These are also songs of battle, each one of which could serve as an anthem, as a symbol of struggle to the last drop of blood of the Soviet people.

Utkin's tendency to focus upon the figure of a single unfortunate and helpless individual, forced to unsuccessfully confront the enormous powers of evil, thousands of times stronger than himself, is further accentuated in his poems of war<sup>49</sup>. In these poems, Utkin concentrates upon the acts of his heroes or the things done to them, as in the following description of a girl who was killed. He foregoes portraying the inner world of the hero, which is utterly negligible in light of the external events which are far worse:

*Я видел девочку убитую*

Я видел девочку убитую,  
[...] Казалось, девочка спала.  
[...] Как будто что-то ждал ребенок...  
Спроси, чего ждала она?  
Она ждала, товарищ, вести,  
Тобою вырванной в бою, —  
О страшной, беспощадной мести  
За смерть невинную свою!<sup>50</sup>

1941

In the poems of the Second World War one can likewise see Utkin's manner of attributing human characteristics to scenery and

<sup>47</sup> Because the wounded village dwellers, who supported Communists, were thrown through a hole in the ice into the icy water and drowned by the anti-Communist forces.

<sup>48</sup> И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...* 1961, pp. 25–26; И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...* 1966, p. 53; И. Уткин, *Стихи 1924–1944 годов...* 1971, p. 43.

<sup>49</sup> W. Kasack, *Lexikon der russischen Literatur ab 1917*, РИК Культура, Москва 1996, p. 432.

<sup>50</sup> First published under the title *To a Red Army Soldier*; И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...* 1961, p. 202; И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...* 1966, pp. 208–209; *До последнего дыхания. Стихи советских поэтов, павших в Великой Отечественной войне*, Правда, Москва 1985, p. 312. See also another poem written in this spirit: *ibid.*, 315–316.

to places, turning them into patriotic symbols. Every river, every town and every Russian village participates in this life-and-death struggle against the Nazis<sup>51</sup>. Among the villages and scenery, too, the war arouses supreme, supernatural forces for battle against the accursed Nazis. It would thus seem that the wild, intense longing to repel the Nazis gave Utkin wings, transformed him into a creature with superhuman powers, changed his life permanently, and ultimately led to his death in the crash of his combat plane.

**The Yiddish and Hebrew Subtext of Utkin's Long Poem  
*The Tale of the Red-head Motele, Mr. Inspector, Rabbi Isaia,  
and Commissar Blokh***

Utkin not only distanced himself from the avant-garde movements which were current in the literature of the period during which he took shape as a poet, but also avoided Jewish subjects in his poetry. He only related to the subject of Jews and Judaism by way of parody and mockery.

In 1925, when Iosif Utkin was 22 years old, he wrote the poem known by the name *The Tale of the Red-head Motele, Mr. Inspector, Rabbi Isaiah, and Commissar Blokh*. This lengthy poem brought about a revolution in Russian literature in general and in Russian-Jewish literature in particular. The hero of the poem is a redheaded Jewish youth named Motele, whose parents were murdered in one of the pogroms, leaving him an orphan. Motele lived in a Jewish village, or *shteitl*, was a simple young man unlearned in the secrets of the Talmud or in any traditional Jewish mysticism. He was very poor, and worked as an apprentice tailor who with difficulty eked out a meager living. Motele's socio-economic situation was distressing; he had no hopes for the future, and on the face of it seemed destined to struggle his entire life merely in order to survive. To Motele's frustration, disappointment and depression, a personal insult was added: he was in love with Riva, daughter of the wealthy Rabbi Isaia, who represents the class of capitalistic Jews during the period prior to the Communist revolution. But a match between Motele and Riva was unthinkable, because her father related to Motele in a mean and condescending way and could not agree to the marriage of his spoiled and finicky daughter to an impoverished man of his like.

<sup>51</sup> И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...*, 1961, р. 242; И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...*, 1966, р. 234; *Священная война. Стихи о Великой Отечественной войне*, ред. С. Наровчатова, Я. Хелемский, Художественная литература, Москва 1966, р. 700; *Великая Отечественная. Стихотворения и поэмы*, ред. С. Наровчатова, Я. Хелемский, Художественная литература, Москва 1970, 2 тт., pp. 406–407.

Upon the outbreak of the Communist revolution, everything was turned upside down: the wealthy Rabbi Isaia lost all his money and was left with naught but to pray for the failure of Communism, a hope lacking in any chance of being realized, as the Communists become stronger all the time. All of the earlier social arrangements had changed: the harsh official responsible for all public matters, Mr. Inspector, loses his office. Rabbi Isaia, who in the past had imposed his fear on everybody, dies, while Motele, the formerly destitute and miserable tailor, ascends to the position of a high-level official, makes decisions, and people seek him out whenever they need something.

The poem is written as a parody of the old life in the *shteitl*, the Jewish village, presenting the parochial Jewish characters in ridiculous and grotesque fashion, making mocking use of Yiddish phrases written in Russian transcription, so that the Russian reader may understand it. The following is a fragment of this lengthy poem:

*Повесть о рыжем Мотэле, господине инспекторе,  
раввине Исае и комиссаре Блох*

И маленький рыжий Мотэле  
Работал  
За двоих.  
[...] сделали —  
Портным.  
[...] Мотэле мечтает о курице,  
А инспектор  
Курицу ест.  
[...] Вот: Мотэле любит Риву,  
Но... у Ривы  
Отец — раввин.  
А раввин говорит часто,  
И всегда об одном:  
— «Ей надо  
[...] большой  
Дом».  
[...] у Мотэле всё, что большое,  
Так это только  
Нос.  
[...] И у Мотэле  
Была мама,  
Старая еврейская мать.  
[...] Всего...  
Два...  
Погрома...  
И Мотэле стал  
Сирота.  
[...] Этот день был таким новым,



Молодым, как заря!  
Первый раз тогда в Кишинёве  
Пели не про царя!  
[...] И кто-то  
Крепко  
Сшил  
Тахрихим  
Николаю!  
[...] На вокзал  
По улице  
Прошёл  
Отряд...  
Но не к этому  
Доводы,  
Главное (чтоб он сдох!)  
В отряде  
С могоендовидом.  
Мотька  
Блох!  
[...] И от нас  
До бога,  
Как от бога  
До нас.

[...] Что может дать  
Слепой,  
Когда  
Комиссаром  
Какой-то  
Портной?  
[...] А Мотэле?  
Вы не смейтесь,  
Тоже не пустяк:  
Мотэле выбрил пейсы,  
Снял лапсердак.  
[...] Инспектор не о себе молится  
О других.  
[...] Дай бог сгореть Советам,  
Провалиться депутатам...  
[...] Выпрями то,  
Что смято...  
[...] Тот, кто попробовал птицы,  
Мясо не очень ест.  
Мудрый раввин Исаяя  
[...] выглядит всё-таки плохо:  
Щукой на мели...  
— Мне к комиссару Блоху...—  
Его провели.  
[...] — До вас небольшое дельце,  
Товарищ комиссар.  
[...] Вы — мужчина красивый,  
Скажете:  
Зять как зять.  
Так почему моей Ривы

Вам бы  
 Не взять?  
 [...] Инспектор сидит и колет  
 «Текущие дела».  
 И... он мечтает — не больше  
 (Что же осталось ему?),  
 Как бы попасть  
 В Польшу  
 И не попасть  
 В тюрьму...  
 [...] Вот Мотэле —  
 [...] Сидит в сердитом  
 Кабинете.  
 Сидит как первый человек.  
 [...] И если новым  
 Срок пришёл,  
 То, значит, старым —  
 Время смерти!  
 [...] Пусть по-новому, Исаяя,  
 Стол тебе послужит.  
 А потом — к иному краю.  
 В рай, конечно, не иначе...  
 [...] И если новым  
 Срок пришёл,  
 То, значит, старым —  
 Время смерти...  
 [...] Фэртиг...

[...] Инспектору  
 Нужно Польшу,  
 Портному —  
 Россия.  
 [...] Милая, светлая родина,  
 Свободная родина!  
 [...] И Мотэле  
 Не уедет,  
 И даже  
 В Америку.  
 [...] И пусть он — не комиссаром,  
 Достаточно —  
 Че-ло-ве-ком!<sup>52</sup>

1924–1925, Irkutsk–Moscow

Russian scholars who studied this lengthy poem noted that Utkin mocks the Russian speech characteristic of the village Jews. According to them, Utkin imitates their Russian speech, which includes many errors in Russian and fragments of odd Yiddish expressions, thereby creating ludicrous figures. These characters are not au-

<sup>52</sup> И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...* 1961, pp. 296–321; И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...* 1966, pp. 267–287; И. Уткин, *Стихи 1924–1944 годов...* 1971, pp. 161–183. Е. Евтушенко (ed.), *Строфы века...*, 409–410.

thentic representations of the village Jews as they were in reality, but rather are consistent with the caricatures of Jews that were accepted in the Russian environment<sup>53</sup>. In other words, Utkin does not describe authentic Jews, but rather depicts the images of Jews that were accepted in the anti-Semitic anecdotes of the Russian milieu.

But these Russian or Russian-Jewish scholars such as Ilia Selvinsky who related to Utkin's lengthy poem were unfamiliar with the Jewish sources and with the traditional Jewish way-of-life, and hence did not realize the full degree of Utkin's playing to his Russian audience. For example, in Utkin's description of what happens in the home of Rabbi Isaia upon his death: the body of the deceased is placed upon the dining table in the house, and candles are lit alongside it. This is, however, an explicitly Russian Orthodox custom and not a Jewish custom at all. The Jews place the body of the deceased upon a sheet or a blanket upon the bed and do not light candles around it. Utkin describes the scene of the funeral in a strange and artificial manner in order to bring it closer to his Russian readers and to represent the Jewish customs as if they were identical to those familiar to them from their own Russian milieu, even when these descriptions are alien and foreign to the Jewish world. Utkin panders to his Russian readers, not only by including errors in Russian speech and fragments of Yiddish expressions in his characters' conversation, but also by depicting religious customs taken from the Russian Orthodox milieu as if they were characteristic of Jewish life as well, even though Utkin certainly knew that this was not the case.

But over and beyond Utkin's mocking of his Jewish figures and his pandering to the world of Russian culture and literature, one sees in this lengthy poem a warm, sentimental, and authentic relation towards the very Jewish environment that it mocks. Utkin incorporates authentic Jewish expressions in the discourse of the narrator — and not only in that of his principles — without mocking them, but as an integral part of the flow of his discourse.

Thus, this lengthy poem is filled with Yiddish expressions, incorporated therein in translation to Russian, including such expressions as the following:

И от нас  
До бога,  
Как от бога  
До нас<sup>54</sup>.

<sup>53</sup> З. Паперный, *Поэзия любви и мужества*, in: И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...*, 1961, pp. 7–8.

<sup>54</sup> И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...*, 1961, p. 306; И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...*, 1966, p. 275.

This is a Yiddish folk expression, which in the original goes as follows: *Fun der Gott azoi fil fun unz tzum Gott*<sup>55</sup>, which means something like the following: the world follows its own path, and God doesn't help. This expression is incorporated within the course of the text of the author himself, and functions as part of his descriptions of what is taking place in the Jewish village.

We should also take note of the following idiom appearing in the text said by the narrator:

Тот, кто попробовал птицы,  
Мясо не очень ест<sup>56</sup>.

This is an inverted corruption of the Yiddish expression: "He who has tasted beef won't want to eat chicken"—meaning, once a person has gotten used to good and luxurious things (referring here to the wealthy Rabbi Isaia, as described by Utkin), he will not agree to become accustomed to things of a lower caliber, such as are used by poor people.

Utkin's text also includes Yiddish curses that appear without any need for interpretation or commentary. Thus: "May God burn up the Soviets". This is a literal translation of a Yiddish curse, whose meaning is self-evident.

Apart from those Yiddish expressions and idioms that are openly incorporated within the text, there are also fragments or allusions to idioms and phrases taken from the Hebrew, such as the following:

[Бог] Выпрями то,  
Что смято...<sup>57</sup>

This expression is taken from the Bible, Isaiah 40: 3–4: "...make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough places plain"<sup>58</sup>.

The origin of this phrase in the book of Isaiah also explains the source of the name of the character, Rabbi Isaia, that appears in this lengthy poem.

To summarize: while Utkin mocks the figures of his heroes as described in his poem, he also makes use of idioms whose source lies in Yiddish and in traditional Jewish sources. Utkin's attitude

<sup>55</sup> In Yiddish: פון דער גאט אזוי פיל פון אונז צום גאט

<sup>56</sup> И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...*, 1961, p. 312; И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...*, 1966, p. 280.

<sup>57</sup> И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...*, 1961, p. 310; И. Уткин, *Стихотворения и поэмы...*, 1966, p. 278.

<sup>58</sup> In Hebrew: כל-גיא, יינשא, וכל-הר וגבעה, ישפלו, והיה העקוב למישור, והרכסים לבקעה

towards Judaism is ambivalent, involving mockery and imitation alongside authentic love. Utkin is revealed in this lengthy poem, not only as a Jew who has left the miserable and stifling Jewish ghetto in order to join the great Soviet Communist revolution, but also as an authentic, deeply-rooted Jew, who knows well the sources of Judaism. Moreover: his extensive use of traditional Yiddish and Hebrew sources may well be rooted in the fact that these sources were an integral part of Utkin's language, as against Russian, with which he had certain difficulties; at the time of writing this lengthy poem, he was still a beginning poet, and this was among his earliest works.

### Conclusion

To date, Utkin's poetry has not been sufficiently studied by scholars, and many significant and interesting aspects of it remain unknown. In the present paper, I have related to four aspects of his poetry: its musicality, his war and patriotic poetry, Jewish elements in his poetry, and his attitude towards women as expressed in his poetry. But Utkin's poetry is not fully encompassed by these aspects alone, and it would be worthwhile as well to study its genre aspects, folkloristic elements therein, his use of symbolism, and particular subjects within his poetry, such as his descriptions of scenery and nature as well as descriptions of various crafts and professions.

One may distinguish three distinct periods in Utkin's work. The first is that of the young Utkin, who has just now entered into the area of Russian poetry. In his writings from this period it is possible to discern Jewish elements, Yiddish folk expressions, and allusions to verses from the Hebrew Bible. It was during this period that he wrote *The Tale of the Red-headed Motele, Mr. Inspector, Rabbi Isaia and Commissar Blokh*. The second period was that during in which Utkin attempted to become a Soviet author in heart and soul. During this period he wrote Soviet propaganda poems, which were not that successful. The third period was that of Utkin's mature poetry. During this period he wrote lyrical poems that speak of what was happening within his heart. The poet himself is depicted as a sensitive and vulnerable person, who longs for his beloved and for his home and who suffers heartbreak for one or another reason. During this period Utkin wrote his most passionate, poems that captivate the soul.

While Utkin's poetry is not marked by philosophical depth, it is nevertheless incomparably beloved and pleasant to the Russian

ear. Through his poetry he created an enchanted world, which first and foremost exposed his extraordinary and brilliant artistic talent. But more than it expressed his personal feelings, his poetry articulated the spirit of the time, a time of a great and romantic belief in the justice of Communism, a hope that was disappointed upon the conclusion of the Second World War and the beginning of the Stalinist anti-Semitic persecutions. This period later became known as the “black years of Soviet Jewry”<sup>59</sup>.

<sup>59</sup> Ye. Gilboa, *The Black Years of Soviet Jewry, 1939–1953*, trans. from the Hebrew by Y. Shachter, D. Ben-Abba, Little, Brown and Company, Boston–Toronto 1971.