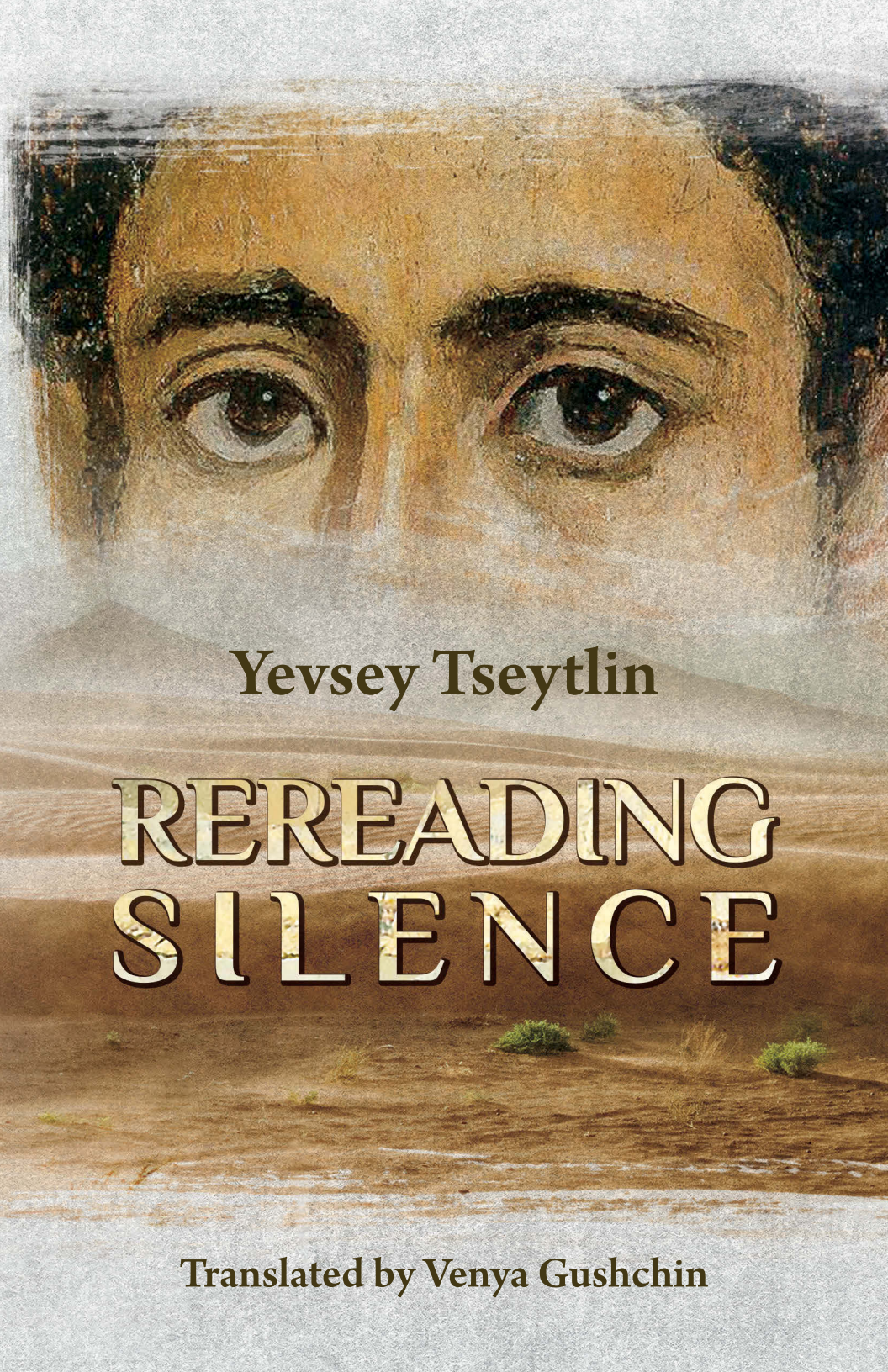
Yevsey Tseytlin
REREADING SILENCE
Translated by Venya Gushchin


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Any one of Yevsey Tseytlin's books is taken in as an entire universe—a universe of intertwining fates, emotions, thoughts, and dreams. These books are to be read slowly because a cursory glance is impossible. Every episode, every memory, and every face forcefully bring the reader back to the words on the page, to make sense of them and their inner gaze. That's why the characters of this prose are so memorable, so numerous that they could comprise a city. There's not a single passing thought, not a single banal observation, not a single divergent fate.

Troubling and quarrelsome, wise and profound, lucky and unlucky—the characters in these books remind the reader of old photographs. The subjects would prepare, sitting for a long time, tense and immobile, all so that the picture would come out well, so that their faces would be preserved forever: for their grandkids, their great-grandkids. That's why it feels like they're looking out at us, observing us and our contemporary world with that typical exacting expression you see in photographs of the past. In this ability lies the author's extraordinary powers of rapt attention; his ability to look into the depths of life; his skill at noticing and fishing out the painful and piercing essence of history, individual scenes and situations, and fates. That essence is precious, grabbing us living today, however overwhelmed and bustling we may be. Grabbing us and never letting go.

But the most important part of these essays and miniatures is tone. In any book the most important thing is tone. In Yevsey Tseyltin's prose, the tone is of calm fortitude.

Dina Rubina

The Lonely Ones Among Pedestrians

They had a particular look in their eyes. It seemed to me they even had a particular smell. And for sure, a particular gait.

Theirs was the gait of lonely people.

They instantly caught my attention—many years ago, when I had just begun to write down the life stories of Soviet Jews.

Sometimes it was only a light splash of words and gestures—uneven confessions coming out like hurried breath in the lines at the American and Dutch consulates (the latter had long represented the Jewish state in Moscow)—then at the Israeli consulate.

Overcoming their fear, they would come for visits and visas. After a while I would recognize them, made friends with some.

But many got lost, disappeared somewhere. Only their faces and voices still reside in my notepad.

Without a Language

A motionless, almost frozen face. There is an obvious contrast with the anguished, halting words I hear.

"You'll never guess why I hate the "Pamyat" society[1] ..." She pauses, but I don't really feel like guessing. Regardless, I would never be able to come to the same conclusion as her: "I can't stand the fact that I'm obligated to use the same language as them!"

She catches the look of surprise on my face: "I don't mean that in any figurative sense: no, literally—I converse, think, read, dream only in Russian."

She is hysterical, mostly just listening to herself talk. However, though she is wrong, she unwittingly approaches the truth.

"They… they despise me. They despise my very being. And I have no choice but to use the same language as them. They say that Jews are getting the Russian people hooked on alcohol—that they've already destroyed village life, ruined culture. Is this demagoguery? But here's their best argument: I answer them using their own language. What do I have that's my own, that's really Jewish? I'm completely barren, just a rootless tumbleweed…"

I remain silent, scared to agree with her, to pour salt in the wound. Yet I know that almost everything that's been said here is true… Of course, in her head there's a mix of the books that she's read: Remarque, Hemmingway, Kafka, Bulgakov… At different times these authors were fashionable, each one briefly held her interest. But really, Yesenin is one she truly loves: she feels the anguish of the soul that hides behind his poor rhymes, similes like "my head flaps its ears, like a bird flaps its wings." It would seem that she feels a closeness to his reckless sincerity, his ebb-less flow of confessions.

At the post office on Bolshaya Ordynka street someone asks me:

"Do you have a pen on you?"

Then, recognizing me as one of "her own," she adds:

"I need to write down my information to get an invitation from Israel. You came here for the same thing, right?"

No further explanation needed. We simply walk over to the Israeli consulate, and she drops her envelope in the mailbox. Then we stand among those waiting outside, listening to their conversations looping like a broken record. We walk back to the metro, inhaling the rare scents of spring.

"Everyone goes to Israel for their children, but I haven't got any… never going to have any…"

Only a few short, sudden, seemingly random phrases. But I can already picture her woeful, crumpled-up life that appears to have already flown by.

She is forty-nine, but looks younger: this happens at times to women that have given up on themselves. Her thick red hair is contained by a black band. She doesn't seem to be at all embarrassed that there's an oil stain on her dark blue coat, that her grey shoes are scratched on the sides.

She teaches at the technical institute. The last few years, noticing her own lack of restraint, she still manages to learn to be measured at work: to be quiet, to appear productive and together. But this skill, hard to acquire in the first place, melted away in February like she had never learned it at all. Yes, in February of 1990, when the agonizing fear of pogroms was felt in Moscow and other major cities.

Those days when her thoughts were consumed by one thing only, she spent half a class talking about anti-semitism. The students watched her in shock. And, of course, one of them informed the principal. He called her into his office and spoke, cringing and squeezing out his words, though not, as she expected, about her being fired—he asked her to not "get off topic in class" again.

We say goodbye at the metro and exchange phone numbers for some reason. It's obvious that we will never call each other. And now she vanishes into the flow of legs and elbows, into the smell of sweat and grocery bags, into the din of that speech she now despises and, later in life, will have a hard time learning not to miss.

Jewish Luck

A wet day in March, gloomy since the morning. The same humming crowd as yesterday. spitting out the same words like sunflower seed shells: luggage… tickets… pogrom…

Now a new little word falls from the heavens: lucky.

Am I hallucinating? But the next day and the day after I hear the same words of envy: Jews have it good now!

Sometimes they communicate this only in their intonation, in their gaze: Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians—all of them carried over here by their dreams of leaving.

Ah, what an old, cliched joke! "A Jewess for a wife isn't a luxury, she's a way out." I'm sure you've heard. People will pay big money for a fake marriage.

Of course, I still shudder whenever I hear: "We're the lucky ones…"

That little word melts in the mouth of a young Jewish man from Baku like a piece of Turkish delight. Smiling, clearly enjoying the attention of the passersby asking him to give details of the recent pogrom in Baku[2].

"We're the lucky ones… They gave Armenians a year to get out of the city, Jews got three. And the Russians? Five years…"

I don't know if that's true. Probably just rumors. But I wasn't thinking about the factual accuracy of his claims, but about the humiliating joy that radiated from him. This joy has ancient roots: knowing that he is on the second-to-lowest rung of the food chain raises a Jew's spirits—at least he's not at the bottom.

That Same Day—Another Meeting

Another pair from Baku. Also young, newlyweds.

A mysterious union from time immemorial: an Armenian and a Jew. It's as if they got married without any fear of multiplying the eternal sorrows of their respective peoples.

During the pogrom they hid with an Azerbaijani family for a week, but that's too common a story among refugees to tell it now in great detail: the trembling at the sound of each ring of the doorbell; the stuffy air of the pantry where they hid, lost in guessing what's happening outside; finally, plane tickets ("we paid six times their price!"); now staying in Moscow with distant relatives…

"What would happen if you got caught?" someone asks.

The husband shrugs—he doesn't want to pile the weight of his words onto anyone.

The wife responds:

"The very least—they'd cut our ears off… we had nightmares about that, night after night."

She looks to the side, the others in line keep staring at her. She's frail, like a miniature portrait. Despite her living situation being in flux, her hair is very neatly coiffed. She looks very elegant in her fuzzy black pants, white leather boots, and white nylon coat. All of this is for her husband's sake, of course. She doesn't know that she looks like her sisters out of the Bible—young naïve girls that grow into wise old women. But I can tell that she's aware that her happy eyes are out of place here in this crowd. That's why she always lowers her gaze, trying to hide all the things that are obvious to anyone paying attention: her tenderness, her determination to outsmart fate, her calm acceptance of the bitter road ahead, the road that awaits us all.

1991, the line outside the American embassy

One Small Detail

How do I quickly paint her portrait? Stout; perhaps, grand, majestic, I would say. She clearly figured out her answers to all of life's questions a long time ago.

That's exactly what old Jewish women are often like.

Now she's insistently telling someone with a dull and curious bitterness in her voice:

"…No, you have no idea what assholes those Israelis are! You can't even imagine it… They've raised a generation that has no hope of building any sort of future… You'll see, you'll believe me, I only need one small detail to see the whole."

So, what is this "one small detail"?

It turns out, the detail was a performance of an Israeli amateur theater group that recently took place in Vilnius. More precisely, it was the sight of two young actors kissing, a boy

and girl (in the intermission they were kissing "in front of everyone"—sitting on a bench right outside of the theater).

After talking to the old woman, I completely understand her annoyance.

Of course, she's annoyed at herself. Or at the absurdity of life? It's been three days since she's put in her application at the visa office, together with her son's family.

1990, Vilnius

The One Who Stays

Not many of them will stay. More accurately: it's their fear that will stay. Once fear has set up residence in your soul, it's hard to defeat it.

Moses commanded the Jews living in Egypt to leave their homes immediately and set off. Out of slavery. To the Promised Land.

Why the hurry? Not because Moses was scared of the pharaoh pursuing them. He was well aware of the real danger: if he delayed their journey even a bit, the Jews themselves would have grown hesitant.

…Only twenty percent of our ancestors followed Moses out of Egypt. The majority stayed.

Snow on Saturday

Today it is deserted here: it's Saturday. Today Jews are supposed to be thinking about eternity, dismissing all the paltry bustle of everyday life. Snow falls quietly on the sidewalk. The pedestrians are few, so the snow doesn't turn into a squelching mush like it does during the week. It's warm. And the police officer at the consulate doesn't hide in his booth. Pacing around the metal detector, he's sunk into his own thoughts.

Now and then people still walk up to the entrance. They read the announcements posted on the concrete wall, which

are strange because they are so ordinary: phone numbers and addresses of moving companies, the guidelines for reserving tickets, ads for available apartments. The people who come up write down the relevant information and then go their separate ways.

At midday an old Jewish man stops by for a while. He's taken the morning train from a Moscow suburb. He was told that the consulate is open every day, and, like almost everyone in Russia, he had forgotten Jewish law and had come on the Sabbath. He can't bring himself to approach the police officer, the only one there. Finally, he asks:

"Excuse me, are any of the diplomats from Israel here today?"

"It's their day off… on Saturday they're not supposed to work…" the officer says knowledgeably.

"Yes, yes," the old man hops from one foot to the other. And again, unexpectedly overcomes his shyness:

"I was told that I could give my information for an invite for permanent residence…"

"You can," the office confirms, "If you want, give me your documents and put the envelope into a special box."

The old man remains silent: how can he trust a goy, and a police officer at that? He's clearly been placed here to collect information for the state; but what choice does the old man have? Come here again? He gazes at the police officer with a questioning look in his eyes. The officer is in his early twenties. His eyes are bright, his cheeks big and child-like.

I'm standing with my back to them, looking at the bulletin board. Neither one pays any attention to me. And now the old man leaps towards me—joyfully. He immediately pegged me as Jewish based on my appearance. And the envelope that he had prepared is shaking in his hand:

"Could you take a look, please… is everything in order?"

He covers part of the page with his palm, protecting it from the snow and from the officer's eyes. I first take notice of his birthyear: 1910. I also see that there's only one surname listed. That means he's going alone. But the old man's

thoughts are elsewhere. He asks the officer about the procedures around getting documents in order, about sending over luggage. The officer turns out to be very much on top of everything (during his shifts, his mind has recorded all the repetitive conversations of the consulate visitors). And for some reason this doesn't surprise the old man.

We stand, slowly enveloped by snowflakes. Then the old man starts looking for something in the windows of the empty stores. Slowly, carefully, without any extraneous movements, he glides on the snow in his antediluvian boots. I remember about thirty years we used to call those kinds of boots "farewell, youth."

1989

Their Truth

I was always fascinated by anti-Semites—their fates, their hatred that steadily grows stronger over the years, their burning "truth," wherein logical connections are peculiarly tangled up.

In the Baltic city of Kaliningrad, on the Leningrad Prospect, an old woman walks towards me, carrying heavy bags. She wears a beret on her head and a long, woven scarf droops behind and in front of her old coat. (These are the typical, naïve attempts of the intelligentsia to hide how poor they are).

I notice from afar how mercilessly the November wind whips at her slight frame.

Meeting my gaze, she walks over to me. She stops, lowers her bags, and proclaims, clearly enunciating every word:

"…And it's all the Jews' fault!"

And, having uttered this "sacred truth," the woman slowly continues on her way.

1989, November

Phrases

Those who come *from over there* all tell the same story: no one could believe their eyes upon discovering on arrival that everyone around them was Jewish. And I can confirm: this feeling is incomparable. Trust me, you start breathing differently! Literally, breathing there is easier. After all, we're all compressed, bound up back here…

Whom do these words belong to? Doesn't matter! Every time someone will let them slip out while waiting in line. Someone who is going to Israel for the second or third time. A lady from Minsk, a hair dresser from Voronezh, a retiree from Bălți…

Sometimes, however, you hear something different. Either with a giggle or completely seriously:

"…Israel is great, but so many Jews!"

These phrases can essentially be voiced by one and the same person. Of course, at different times and with different intonations.

You might try asking: why? Most likely, the one voicing it can't really explain. And I myself won't try to explain it right now: it would take too long. But if you think about it, you'll come to understand it yourself—what two thousand years of diaspora have done to us.

1992, January

A Map

A chance encounter, as always. I meet him in an apartment in Moscow, where he arrives straight from the train station. He is from Saratov. Our mutual friends had brought over a letter from his Israeli relatives. And in the envelope—easy enough to guess—is an invitation for "permanent residence."

I can picture him even now. He's lounging on a rocking chair: after a careless movement his dusty, thick-soled low

shoes jump up sharply. His pants are wrinkled, and he wears brown synthetic socks. He is very cautious and shy and as a result rarely appears at ease. Even the question "do you want some coffee?" leaves him baffled.

He knows that it's just a polite gesture (his hosts are rushing off somewhere), but he can't refuse—so he drinks two cups, devouring an entire plate of sandwiches ("Sorry, I'll just take one more." "Well, of course, of course").

He doesn't say anything else. Words cake him in a thick layer, as if they're covering up something important. However, he has nothing to hide, which becomes apparent after a few minutes. Of course, he has no idea why he had decided to leave: "This is beyond logic." Finally, at the age of forty-two, he defended his dissertation, got the position of senior research fellow at the institute, and decided to build a dacha. "Anti-Semitism is real, of course, but no one's really harmed me…"

All of this is typical, so I've stopped listening to him (I haven't learned anything about his parents whom he still lives with).

I'm listening to the Okudzhava songs come in from the room next door—the kid's room—and keep looking at B.

He could be considered cute, but his thick red beard doesn't suit him at all—it really clashes with the anxious look in his eyes. Typically, a beard gives a face a sense of closure, of completeness—he, on the hand, is absent-mindedness embodied. Maybe that's why never leaves, overstays his welcome, seems to require some sort of hint to leave…

When I see him again—again completely accidentally—it's on the Bolshaya Ordynka, and B seems to be even more wrinkled than before. He's living in a hostel (a room with four beds), clearly hasn't showered in days: through his coat, I can see a clean shirt he has gotten out of his Saratov suitcase, but his hair is glossy, and dandruff lines his collar.

At the consulate he walks from group to group impatiently. In his eyes I can see the same expectation: someone—but who?—has to answer all his doubts.

He's happy to see me (an old friend!) and quickly invites me to grab a bite at a basement café. We walk there for a while: like every person from the provinces, B knows that there are only a few fairly priced buffet-style restaurants in Moscow. At the café he hoists two portions of sausage, a plate of dinner rolls, two cups of weak coffee with condensed milk onto his tray. And he just keeps on talking like he doesn't want to listen to his inner voice—or perhaps he's trying to block this quiet voice out.

Afterwards we sit on a bench. He lights a cigarette and produces a map of Israel, bought from a scalper, out of his bag. Lips moving like a kid sounding words out, he reads the ancient names printed atop the landscape out loud. I think to myself: millions of people have pronounced these combinations of phonemes with trepidation for thousands of years. And these phonemes are completely unreal to him.

Finally, he falls silent and looks past me, off to the side.

1990

Yevsey Tseytlin—a writer of prose, a cultural historian, a literary scholar and critic. He is the author of many books published in Russia, America, Lithuania and Germany. These are collections of stories and tales about people of the arts, essays, and monographs. In the last 25 years, nearly all of Yevsey Tseytlin's books have the subtitle *From Diaries of These Years* (*Long Conversations in the Expectation of a Happy Death, From Where to Where* and others). They capture the complex problems of the Jewish consciousness, person and voice on the roads of the Exodus. Tseytlin was born in Omsk, Russia, in 1948. He graduated from the department of journalism of the Ural University (1969) and the Higher Literature Courses at the A. M. Gorky Literature Institute (1989). He taught the literary history and culture at higher educational institutions and was the chief editor of the almanac *Jewish Museum* (Vilnius). He got his PhD in philology in 1978 and became an assistant professor in 1980. Beginning in 1968, he was published in many literary and artistic journals and collections. He emigrated twice—to Lithuania and the USA. He has been living in Chicago since 1996 and is the editor of the Chicago monthly *Shalom*.

He was a member of the USSR Writers' Union (1978) and is a member of the Moscow Writers' Union, the Lithuanian Writers' Union, the Russian Writers' Union, and a member of the International Pen Club ("Writers in Exile").

Venya Gushchin is a PhD Candidate at Columbia University, writing a dissertation on the late styles of Russian Modernist poets. He is also a translator, who has worked primarily on Silver Age poetry (Anna Akhmatova, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Aleksandr Blok among others). His translations of Vladimir Mayakovsky have received the Columbia University Slavic Department Pushkin Prize. *Blockade Swallow*, selected poems by Olga Berggolts translated by Gushchin, appeared from Smokestack Books in 2022. His writing has appeared in *Cardinal Points*, *The Birch*, and elsewhere.

Yevsey Tseytlin is an essayist, literary critic, and prose writer. Author of numerous books, among them—*Long Conversations in Anticipation of a Happy Death,* the subject of debates and arguments for almost a quarter of a century in different countries (the book has been translated into English, German, Spanish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian). The collection of diary short stories and essays by Yevsey Tseytlin *Rereading Silence* in its own way continues *Long Conversations.* Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel called his Soviet compatriots "Jews of silence." Tseytlin tries to "decipher" this silence by writing down Jewish confessions and dreams for many years. Together with his characters, the author plunges into their past lives, full of secrets that they try, but cannot forget.

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