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Women Writers and Girl Characters in Russian Children's Reading

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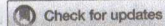
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Children's literature may be read as moral instruction + or as revolutionary transformation, as entertainment, and as psychological and emotional information and support for child and young adult readers in difficult times. Or it may attract readers simply because it is entertaining and interesting and that is certainly true of these articles.



Aleksandra Brushtein's Trilogy *The Road Goes into the Distance: History, Intention, Realization*

Maria Gelfond

ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between actual historical events and the way they are interpreted in Aleksandra Brushtein's autobiographical trilogy *The Road Goes into the Distance* [*Doroga ukhodit v dal'*], as well as the 'shift of intention' the trilogy represents from the diary entries of twelve-year-old Sasha Vygodskaiia to her finalized text. This analysis is based on materials from Brushtein's personal archive and the Lithuanian State Historical Archives. This is the first time these documents have been put to scholarly use.

KEYWORDS

Russian; Soviet; Jewish;
adolescent; Aleksandra
Brushtein

Aleksandra Iakovlevna Brushtein's *The Road Goes into the Distance* [*Doroga ukhodit v dal'*] is one of twentieth-century Russian literature's most important texts for both young adult and adult members of the Soviet and post-Soviet intelligentsia. Written in the second half of the 1950s (the first part in 1955 and the final one completed in 1959), *The Road* not only passed through censorship, it was absolutely loyal to the Soviet government. It went through several editions and enjoyed considerable popularity among both adults and adolescents; however, for a half century it remained a book for family reading. In other words, it existed outside school curricula and was very rarely included in recommended-reading lists. Nevertheless, in the minds of its readers Brushtein's trilogy almost immediately acquired a special status. For several generations of the intelligentsia it was akin to a book of commandments, the embodiment of a basic life principle.

Legions of readers assign the trilogy a central role in shaping their worldview. For example, in 2009, a 'lyudi knigi' [people of the book] community was established on LiveJournal with the central mission of filling in the

English translation © 2020 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, from the Russian text © 2014 "Detskie chteniia." "Trilogiia Aleksandry Brushtein 'Doroga ukhodit vdal': istoriia, zamysel, voploshchenie," *Detskie chteniia*, 2014, no. 6(2), pp. 269–285.

Translated by Nora Seligman Favorov. Notes have been renumbered for this edition.—Ed.
Maria Gelfond is an associate professor at the Higher School of Economics, Nizhny Novgorod campus. Besides children's literature, she specializes in twentieth-century Russian poetry.

historical details associated with the events Brushtein depicted, figuring out who her characters were based on and what ultimately became of them (it drew approximately eight hundred participants). The community was quite successful in its research, and its members contributed historical and factual commentary to the trilogy. One of the group's main tasks was identifying prototypes for characters and situations, since, although the trilogy was autobiographical, it was not strictly speaking a memoir: some names were changed, liberties were taken in describing situations, and historical events were depicted from a viewpoint that, when the book was being written, Brushtein felt was the only possible correct one.

The trilogy's narrative centers on the Ianovskii family (their actual surname was Vygodskii). The true story of this family is exceptionally interesting, and the trilogy leaves out quite a bit. For example, the father of the autobiographical heroine, Iakov Efimovich Ianovskii, is portrayed as an outstanding doctor and a man totally absorbed by his work. Indeed, Vygodskii was Vilnius's first professional gynecologist and the author of a number of medical works. But this does not tell the full story of his life and career. As Shoshana Gel'tser points out, beginning in the 1890s, the very period depicted in the trilogy's final section, he was the head of Vilnius's Jewish community (Gel'tser, 2000). It was in this capacity that he was subsequently forced to deal with the Germans as representative of the local Jews during the First World War. He was arrested and sent to a prisoner-of-war camp, where he spent more than thirteen months (he describes this period in his 1926 book *In the Storm* [In shturm], which he wrote in Yiddish). In the leadup to the Second World War, he chaired Vilnius's anti-Hitler committee, and after Lithuania's Sovietization in 1940 he submitted an appeal to Joseph Stalin asking that the republic's Hebrew-language schools be preserved. In the trilogy, Brushtein portrays her father as a thoroughgoing atheist: he is shown explaining to his nine-year-old daughter that 'the sweet lord and I have a division of labor; we don't both treat the same patient' (Brushtein, 1987: p. 64). In other words, Brushtein portrays him as being unwilling to treat people who only believe in prayer rather than medicine. He does however, treat – and save – the unfortunate Iu'lka, daughter of the laundress Aneliia Ivanovna, a devout Catholic convinced that prayer alone would save her child. In reality, his views on religion were quite different. In his autobiography he wrote:

I was born into a Hasidic family in 1856 in Bobruisk. I was the oldest of my seven brothers. Until the age of fourteen, I was educated in the deeply religious spirit of the Lubavitcher Hasidim. I attended a cheder Until I was ten, I was a notorious hooligan in town. But starting then, I came under the influence of the outstanding rabbi Abram Ber Iermigud, an ingenious Talmudist and brilliant Kabbalist who had completely cut himself off from worldly cares. Under his influence, I began a profound and far-



ranging study of religion. He secluded me from everyday life and turned me into an expert on Hasidic and Kabbalist teachings. He inculcated Jewishness in me so deeply that no one was ever able to tear me away from it. (Vygodskii, 1923)

Understandably, a book written in the Soviet period, even during the Thaw, could not have portrayed a sympathetic character as a Zionist. The following passage from *The Road* seems to allude to the fact that the book omitted this aspect of her father's life and worldview:

There is something I should add here. More than sixty years have passed since then, and I hold my father's memory as sacred. He lived a long and good life and more than once performed acts that could be confidently characterized as heroic (I'll tell about that in another book). He died despising his executioners and never demeaned himself before them for even a second. (Brushtein, 1987: p. 42)

That 'other book' was never written, and no notes for it have been preserved in Brushtein's archive. It is difficult to know for certain what played the greater role in this silence: fear of external censorship or self-censorship.

Be that as it may, the story of her father's death, which is included in Brushtein's trilogy, was one of the first Holocaust accounts in Soviet children's literature. It can even be said that the trilogy, to a large degree, was written specifically as a memorial to her father. The tone of this memorial is established at the very start of the trilogy's first part:

My Papa, Papa! Fifty years after that evening when you and I "caroused," you, an 85-year-old-man, were shot by the Fascists occupying our city. You never got the little house six feet under that luzefa said you would, and I don't know where you are buried. There is nowhere I can go to tell you that I am living honorably, that I am considerate of others, that I am not a coward, and that good people respect me. I am telling you that here. (p. 78)

Brushtein's archive contains a book by Abraham Sutzkever, *The Vilna Ghetto* [Vilenskoe getto], in which she made generous notations. We also know that she met with Shoshana Gel'tser, author of the article about her father referenced above. However, we do not know whether she knew the true story of her parents' death at the time she was writing the trilogy. For example, according to L.D. Bolotova, one of her relatives, she asked her grandson and his wife, who were making a trip to Vilnius in the late 1950s, to go to Ponary (now Paneriai) and pay their respects to her parents' remains. In fact, Iakov Vygodskii and his wife were not killed in Ponary. Iakov Efimovich died in the Lukiškės Prison, and his final days are described in the memoirs of Ruzhka Korchak, a prisoner in the Vilna ghetto:

Vygodskii was eighty-five years old, and he refused to be cowed by violence. On August 24 they came and took him away to Lukiškės. We never saw him again. A cellmate who was later released conveyed a final greeting and the

old man was slowly dying in agony, lying in a corner that with great effort they had managed to free up for him in the overcrowded cell that the Germans had packed with seventy-five prisoners. He was not allowed a doctor, and no one was permitted to provide him any help, but he still found the strength to encourage the Jews sitting with him and tried to alleviate their desperation. He was the most courageous among them, and later, when they were taken out of the cell, he was left there, utterly alone. Someone wanted to leave him his coat. Vygodskii refused, saying that he would not be having any use for it, while others might yet benefit from it. And so, in silent solitude, on the cold prison concrete, the protector of the Jews of "the Lithuanian Jerusalem," Iakov Vygodskii, departed this life in torment. (Korchak, 1977)

After the Vilna ghetto was liquidated, his wife, Elena Semyonovna, was sent to Treblinka, where she was exterminated.

The trilogy offers only a fragmentary picture of the fates of Iakov Efimovich's six brothers, although certain details about their lives have been found in the Memorial Books [*Pamiatnye knizhki*] of Vilnius and St. Petersburg, as well as in relatives' memoirs.¹ For example, Gavriil Vygodskii was an ophthalmologist and, during the period covered in the trilogy, Professor Donberg's assistant ('Gania had a stroke of luck: he was taken on as assistant to the famous oculist, Professor Donberg' [Brushtein, 1987: p. 393]), and later he became proprietor of a private hospital. Like his older brother, Gavriil treated many poor patients at no charge. Not long before the revolution, he married a singer from the Berlin Opera, Raisa Patrukhovskaia. He welcomed the revolution, but soon afterward his hospital was nationalized, and Gavriil Vygodskii and his family evaded repression only thanks to the fact that Kirov and other Leningrad party leaders counted among his patients. The trilogy says little about what happened to the brothers after the revolution, only that the two youngest ones, Timofei and Abram, died during the Siege of Leningrad.

We learn the true identity of Brushtein's maternal grandfather from the Memorial Books of Kamenets-Podolsk Province.² In the trilogy, Sasha refers to 'Dr. Iablonkin' as an 'Actual State Councilor, meaning he was a full general,' which provokes unfeigned amazement in Madam Burdes: 'A Jew is a general? What? Did he convert?' (p. 578). The Memorial Books for 1885 list Semen Iadlovkin as a Collegiate Councilor (the civilian equivalent of a colonel on the Table of Ranks). However by 1901, St. Petersburg resident Maria Abramovna Iadlovkina was already listed as the widow of a State Councilor (this civilian rank did not have a military equivalent). While Brushtein focuses her attention in the trilogy on his career as a military doctor and a hero of the Russo-Turkish War, in her memoir *Pages from the Past* [*Stranitsy proshlogo*], she writes of his passion for the theater and his aid to actors:

My grandfather was also the permanent doctor for the theater in the town of
Kamenets Podolsk. The position of theater doctor was a very important one.



unpaid. The doctor treated ailing actors and attended all performances, or sent another doctor in his place, in case one of the performers suddenly took ill Grandfather not only provided the actors medical care—he helped them with money, problems, and connections among the local intelligentsia. He organized fundraising drives and subscriptions to benefit actors who had fallen ill or on hard times. All the props for performances came from grandfather—the tablecloth, the curtains, the couch, the rug, the sideboard, the tea set, the military greatcoat (grandfather had been a military doctor). There were evenings when close to half the furnishings and things from grandfather's apartment were carried off to the theater. (Brushtein, 1952: p. 107–8)

A combination of Orenburg Province Memorial Books and Brushtein's own archive offers a few hints as to the fate of his son, Mikhail Semenovitch Iadlovkin. The life of this brilliant and many-talented family favorite, Uncle Misha, never quite came together. 'As for Misha, from a very young age he was accustomed to thinking of himself as a hereditary nobleman, with a father bedecked in medals like ornaments on a holiday tree and all doors open to him – whatever you want, it will all come to be!' (Brushtein, 1987: p. 578). Interestingly, his daughter Galina was able to find her cousin Aleksandra Brushtein after the trilogy was published (Brushtein's archive includes several letters from her filled with news of her family's younger generation).³

Archival materials also offer some details about several of Sasha's institute friends whom we meet in the book. Here, too, however, there is missing information. We know most of all about Lida Kartseva, who was based on Mariia Vladimirovna Kartavtseva. Her father, the lawyer Vladimir Epafroditovich Kartavtsev, was brother-in-law to the writer Mariia Vsevolodovna Krestovskaia. She was not the only writer in the family: Mirra Lokhvitskaia and Nadezhda Teffi were Lida Kartseva's (Mariia Kartavtseva's) first cousins once removed on her mother's side. Teffi is not mentioned in the novel, but we are easily able to read between the lines when writer aunts are referred to. The fact that Teffi is not mentioned can be explained not only by her emigration but also by the fact that she did not publish until after the conversation among the girls we find in *The Road* would have taken place.⁴ Mariia Vladimirovna Kartavtseva's name can be found on a list of 1901 graduates of the Smolny Institute. We also know that she subsequently graduated from the Higher Women's Courses, was a nurse during the Russo-Japanese War, and married a man named Roznatovskii.⁵ A literature teacher at Smolny, Demidov, who Brushtein's notes suggest was the prototype for Lida's fiancé Denisov, died in 1901 from an eye disease. We know nothing more of what happened to Mariia Kartavtseva. Brushtein's silence on this subject coupled with a mention of rare meetings can be interpreted as suggesting that she either emigrated or stayed in the Soviet Union only to fall victim to Stalinist repression. Unfortunately, nobody has yet managed to learn the real name of another Smolny graduate, Tamara Khovanskaia, or of her brother Lenia. We

also lack reliable information about the prototype for Ivan Konstantinovich Rogov. Most likely, the actual surname of the character Mania Feigel' is Feigina (in Brushtein's notes she is referred to as Miriam); a list of graduates of Vilnius's boy's gymnasium includes her brother Mordko Feigin, who participated in the Kiev student rebellion, also mentioned in the book.⁶

One of the hardest puzzles to solve in discovering the trilogy's historical underpinnings is the question of whom Pavel Grigor'evich Rozanov is based on – Sasha's home teacher and a talented medical student, revolutionary, and participant in the famous 'Yakutsk protest.' Many important details of a story told by Pavel Grigor'evich (in the 1939 foreword to the play *Blue and Pink* [Goluboe i rozovoe], Sasha's home teacher is referred to as Mark Isaevich) about the rebellion and execution of revolutionaries in the trilogy's first part match what we find in the memoirs of Osip Solomonovich Minor – the only participant in that tragedy who lived in Vilno, as far as we know. However, it should be noted that he moved to Vilno in 1900, while the trilogy depicts this story as being told close to the time Sasha entered the institute, in other words, sometime around 1894. The two accounts are stylistically similar:

And so we, a group of several dozen exiles, were walking from Petersburg to Yakutsk. We walked in stages, almost exclusively on foot, that is. It was hardly a short journey—ten or fifteen thousand versts There were carts driving alongside us—wagons called "fury" that carried our things. Exiles who fell ill or reached the point of exhaustion were sometimes allowed to take a rest on these wagons. We walked not for days but for months, many months, almost a year It was not just things in the wagons: there were wives following their husbands into exile along with their children, and fiancées. (Brushtein, 1987: p. 119)

And now, just think—we were forced to immediately set out on such a journey of 3,000 versts! You couldn't buy any food along the way, so you had to take enough with you to last for two months. Along the way we had to rest in unfurnished *yurts*, chilled through with the 50-degree frosts. It was hard traveling on little sleds—*narty*—that were drawn by reindeer and intended to transport small loads across snow, and you couldn't sit comfortably on them or shelter yourself Among us there were women, some them in a state that guaranteed they wouldn't survive the journey; there were also people who were ill and weak. (Minor, 1933)⁷

It appears probable that Brushtein (Vygodskaia at the time) could have heard this account from Osip Minor. Among the supporting evidence is the fact that the participants in the Yakutsk protest began being released only in 1895 and in Chita, meaning that they would have reached European Russia only two or three years later. That being the case, there is no way that Sasha's teacher could have taken part in the Yakutsk protest, and she must have learned of it closer to her graduation from the institute. If she did indeed hear about it from Osip Minor, she would not have been able to mention him – a Socialist Revolutionary and emigrant – in a book subject to Soviet censorship.



But while in the above case we can only guess that Brushtein intentionally omitted information, we can clearly see that something has been left unsaid when she discusses the fate of the son of one of those executed – Matvei Kogan-Bernshtein, ‘My darling little son Mitiushka,’ as he is called in the letter his father, Lev Kogan-Bernshtein, wrote before his death. In 1918, Matvei was arrested by the Bolsheviks as a Socialist Revolutionary and shot. Letters from his stepsister and fiancée, Faina Kogan-Bernshtein have been found in Brushtein’s archive in RGALI (the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts). Kogan-Bernshtein apparently saved the originals of the last letters written by participants in the Yakutsk protest before they were executed. An investigation of her archive would probably help solve other mysteries surrounding the circumstances of the Yakutsk protest.

Clearly, *The Road Goes into the Distance* is an important account reflecting the realities of life in Vilno, and in Russia more broadly, at the turn of the twentieth century. The work’s authenticity and its ties to numerous important people and events of this pivotal time are a compelling argument that it should be provided with a thorough scholarly apparatus to fill in the missing historical details. At the same time, filling in historical and biographical detail puts a spotlight on a major conflict that would arise in the mind of any Soviet writer dealing with censorship: the mismatch between what needs to be said and what can be said, subject less to external causes than to the significant effect of self-censorship and the notorious tendency to stop short of saying all that could be said. In this regard, a dialogue between the story’s heroine and her father about compromise in the trilogy’s second part has particular resonance:

Papa was the only one I had to remind me that, in life, you have to speak nothing but the truth. Then again, my experience the first day of school had already shown Papa and me that, at the institute, there are certain provisos as to speaking the truth: “if it won’t harm my friends!” This is a compromise, Papa says, in other words a deviation from my own rules, a concession to life. At some point, Papa thinks, there won’t be any more compromises: just the truth and honesty.

“And will that be soon?”

“It might be soon . . .”

Papa said this with such uncertainty you might have thought he was claiming that someday cabbage turnovers would start sprouting out of rose bushes. (Brushtein, 1987: p. 240)

One mystery surrounding Brushtein’s autobiographical trilogy is that it stands alone, with no previous works to suggest she was on her way to becoming such an outstanding writer. Many of her other works (more

autobiographical stories) show her as a serious but rather mediocre author of 'literature of the Soviet past.'⁸ Within her oeuvre, the autobiographical trilogy is in a class of its own. This is reflected in the level of its poetics, first and foremost the generic poetics that unify the features of memoiristic prose and the 'Bildungsroman'; the profundity of the problems presented; and in its insights into reality, which make the book typical of Thaw literature but also one of the best books to come out of that period. This is what compels us to delve into the question of the book's history, the 'shift of intention' it represents, and the stages of its development.

The writer's legacy (both her published legacy and the contents of her archives) suggests that there were several stages in her journey toward an autobiographical trilogy. We will attempt to delineate these stages and, where possible, characterize them. The diary of twelve-year-old Sasha Vygodskaia, which is in RGALI, can probably be called the first step toward the future trilogy. Among the people we meet in her diary are some who will become characters in her book, at least episodically, such as the future composer Maksimilian Shteinberg and his sister Dinochka. However, the commonalities between the diary and *The Road* have more to do with the diary's heroine and the future heroine of the trilogy. The naive reflections of a twelve-year-old girl, a staple of the diary genre, are later replicated in the autobiographical trilogy. The narration is from the perspective of a girl (nine years old at the trilogy's start, sixteen at its conclusion), and only rarely does the retrospective judgment of an adult of the sort who has lived the far-from-simple life of the author creep in. This naive reflection, stylistically anticipating *The Road*, suffuses the diary:

In starting my diary, I find myself in a difficult predicament: should I describe myself or not? After all, my diary could fall into the hands of a stranger who would want to know who wrote it. So be it: here goes. My name is Aleksandra Iakovlevna Vygodskaia, and I'm 12 years old. I attend an institute and have already started fourth grade. I have always been at the top of my class, and each year I am promoted with the highest award. It must be that God gave me excellent abilities instead of a pretty face, because that is something I cannot boast of. Indeed, I'm not pretty: I have brown hair with crooked brown eyes, a fat nose, red cheeks, and rather fat, crimson lips—that's my portrait. I am Papa and Mama's only daughter. I also have a brother, Senia, who's four. He is a handsome little fellow, blond, with golden locks, dark eyes, a smallish mouth, a smallish nose, well-formed—there you have his portrait. We are much loved and pampered in our family. A few more words about me: I'm a big giggler, I love all sorts of music, except my own; I speak French well, am fairly good at croquet, I really love reading, but because I'm nearsighted I cannot indulge in that activity for very long ...

Another entry from the diary reads:

My dear diary! You can't imagine what a comfort you are today. Over the past several days I've done so much thinking, more than 500 years' worth.

speaking, I really did think a lot and I came to a conclusion! I want to be absolutely sure to devote my entire life to serving my fellow human being. "Life is given for good deeds." After all, we know that in Russia the native population is crude and uneducated, and outsiders like us Jews are oppressed by the natives. Why not devote your life to enlightening the poor, worn down by the burdens arising out of vice? Why not devote it to healing this people, which ignorant village quacks and sorceresses kill with their potions? Anyone fated to read my diary, do not say that it is foolhardy and rash to also help the enemies of one's own people, its oppressors! All people are brothers. All have been created by the same God, by a God for whom everyone is equal! The sun shines just as brightly for the Jew as for the Christian, for the Mohammedan, for the pagan! Love thy neighbor as thyself!

True happiness is helping your neighbor attain happiness, to rejoice in his happiness as you would your own. (Lord! What phrases I'm filling my diary with! It even made me laugh when I reread it! I'm a giggler, a silly little girl, and suddenly these high-flown words! But keep in mind that I wrote these words in the throes of inspiration.) (Brushtein, n.d.)

The combination of earnestness bordering on melodrama and irony along with the constant switching from one mode to the other, which we see in the diary of twelve-year-old Sasha Vygodskaia, would later become hallmarks of *The Road's* poetics. However, the diary is not the only document preserved in the author's archive that dates to her schooldays. It also contains poetry by Liusia Sushchevskaia (which appears to be her actual name, although in one draft of the trilogy she is referred to as Niuta Elagina). There is also a handwritten magazine entitled *The Schoolboy* [Gimnazist], although it is impossible to determine with certainty whether it was written by Sasha Vygodskaia and her school friends (the diary also mentions a handwritten magazine *The Pogulianka Herald* [Pogulianskii vestnik] [ibid.]). While the future writer's diary has importance as a personal document, these magazines are significant for what they tell us about the general environment of a provincial school. Documents from the Lithuanian State Historical Archives also confirm the authenticity of many situations described in the trilogy and enhance our view of the general backdrop against which the Vygodskii family's story, and the book's action overall, unfolded. This includes 'The Case of the Jewish Teachers' Institute Inspector, Ovsei Shtenberg' (father of Maksimilian and Valentina) ["Delo o sluzhbe," 1895]) and 'The Case of the Prohibition against Compulsory Attendance of Liturgical Services by Non-Orthodox Pupils in Educational Institutions' ("Delo o zapreshchenii," 1897). 'Correspondence with Educational Institutions of the Vilna Educational District Concerning a Report from the City of Vilna published in the Newspaper *The Citizen* [Grazhdanin], No. 151, 1888, Concerning the Expulsion of a Pupil for Speaking Polish' ("Perepiska s uchebnymi zavedeniami," n.d.) offers context for a conversation that Sasha had with Olesia

Sasha! We Poles can't speak in our native language Only in Russian!' (Brushtein, 1987: p. 276). The episode where the director Aleksandra Iakovlevna Kolodkina wants to expel Sasha and her friends for helping their classmates and treats this as the discovery of a secret school is confirmed by a number of cases 'Concerning the Closing of Secret Schools and Holding Those Responsible to Account' ("O zakrytii," 1894), and insights into the episode where the sister of the teacher Gorokhov gave pupils examination math problems are offered by 'Comments on the Written Work in Algebra and Geometry by Pupils on Graduation Examinations' ("Otzyvy o pis'mennykh rabotakh," 1901).

But let us return to the intention behind the trilogy. Among its early textual antecedents are a poem written by young Sasha Vygodskaiia the year she graduated from the institute. Here is an abridged version:

Just a tiny drop more patience,
Prison doors will open wide!
In an instant we'll depart our
Shrine to science and the mind.

Like a light-winged vernal flock,
Sniffing freedom, we'll take to flight,
And to you, our Ds, and Fs,
We sing 'addio' for good.

.....

Farewell, our friends the pedagogues,
And you, the aggravating bell,
And even – may the gods forgive me –
Farewell, our cozy old latrine!

.....

The sea of life awaits, we're ready,
Farewell to blue-clad schoolmarm hordes,
So harshly working to suppress
Our inoffensive shrieks and howls!

Farewell Burenin and Malinin,
We'll no more memorize your texts!
Farewell Pozharsky, dauntless Minin
And Ilovaiskii's balderdash!

.....

Farewell to all! We now depart you,
A million childish dreams destroyed,
And head toward life's unending cares,
The chasm of evil, the sea of tears.



This sea is truly without bottom,
 And just as storms can sink a ship,
 So in this sea pernicious sorrow
 Can inundate our hopes and dreams.

Yet, these storms do not alarm us,
 We're full of fresh and youthful strength,
 We'll race across the sea's bright azure
 Without concern for dangerous waves!

And so, farewell, our years of learning!
 Farewell, our cramming days are done!
 A time of freedom now awaits us!
 Boldly on! Hurrah! Hurrah!
 1 February 1901

By all appearances, it was more than three decades before Brushtein gave much thought to the impressions left by her Vilno childhood.⁹ The next step in her shift in intention is hinted at by her play *Blue and Pink*: it was written in 1935, performed at the Third Moscow Children's Theater in 1936, and first published as a stand-alone book in 1939, with several editions to follow. The introduction to the play's first edition is an autobiographical sketch, revised fragments of which were later included in *The Road*:

Sometimes we have scary dreams. For example: someone hostile and frightening is chasing you, catching up, breathing down your neck, wants to grab you ... what a joy it is to wake up and see your nice, familiar wallpaper and hear the brotherly voice of the radio announcer starting a new day! What a sigh of relief: 'It was just a dream!'

I, too, am familiar with those dreams. And the scariest of all was when I was dreaming about the school I attended as a child.

I would dream that my mother was taking me to the school's entrance exam. I was little, eight years old, but on that day I was as old and gloomy as my grandmother. I was so afraid of the exam I was about to take that I even felt nauseated. I squeezed Mama's hand and she squeezed it back, but the way she did it told me that she was afraid for me to the point of wooziness.

Mark Isaevich, a student who prepared me for the exam, accompanied us to the school. I knew that Mark Isaevich was a very bold man. He had been sent to our city under police supervision because he had taken part in a rebellion along with other students against the czar. Cossacks had broken up the demonstration, trampling them with the hoofs of their horses and thrashing them with their whips. But that day, Mark Isaevich was also worried about me ...

According to the program, girls like me taking the exam for the preparatory class only had to 'be able to copy something from a book and count to one hundred.'¹⁰ But that was the program for everyone. For me, a Jewish girl, there was no set program. I had to know everything they might ask me about, and

take the exam for the preparatory class having been prepared by Mark Isaevich as if I was applying to enter the third grade. Meanwhile, I was trembling with terror: what if they asked me something for the fourth grade? I kept repeating in my head what the first meridian is, what is traded in the Indian city of Benares, what all numbers divisible by three have in common, and the names of the children of the Russian Prince Vsevolod III the Big Nest . . .

I am a pupil at the gymnasium. At school, no Mark Isaevich-esque 'just stay calm' is possible. Every morning starts with joyous excitement: maybe I came down with something overnight that'll keep me home today? Then there's the bitter realization that I'm healthy, which means I have to go. At school, I'm afraid of the homeroom teacher and all the other teachers, I'm afraid of punishment, I'm afraid of the written work, I'm afraid that my friends will make fun of my dress, which has been sewn 'to grow into.' I don't have a father with his own carriage and coachman, I don't have a wristwatch, brooches, or rings - nothing to earn me respect! And on top of everything else I apparently have to answer for the fact that 'the Jews crucified Christ' and for the statement in Smirnovskii's geography textbook where it says that Berdichev is 'A dirty city populated by Jews.' (Brushtein, 1939: p. 5-6)

The attitude expressed both in the introduction and in the play itself toward the prerevolutionary gymnasium (modeled on the Higher Vilna Mariinskii School for Girls) that is the play's setting is unequivocally negative. In contrast to the friendship of the institute girls that is a central feature of the autobiographical trilogy, here we have an atmosphere of relentless badgering and cruel anti-Semitism, which in the trilogy is attributed to school officialdom, but not an aspect of daily life there.

Among the play's dramatis personae are characters who will later appear in *The Road*: the school inspector Zhofezina Ignat'evna Voronets (Vorona - the crow), the homeroom teacher Sofia Vasil'evna Boreisha (Mopsia - the pug), the dance teacher Lidiia Dmitrievna, and girls from the higher grades: Iaroshenko (in the trilogy, her mother owns a dressmaking shop that ruins Madam Burdes's dress), Pevtsova (in the trilogy, she is the sister of the future actor Illarion Pevtsov), Alia Shermet, and Tonia Khnykina. There are also individual episodes and scenes that were inserted into the trilogy almost without change: the episode involving the publication of the handwritten magazines *The Schoolboy* and *Forget-Me-Nots* [Nezabudki], the conversation about the tradition whereby girls in the lower grades adored those from the higher grades, the scene where girls are punished in the dance room, and the beating of demonstrators by Cossacks.

These scenes tell us two things about the literary history behind the writing of *The Road*. First, Aleksandra Brushtein's intention moved away from the peripheral toward the central: the play and her memoir of the theater *Pages from the Past* convey the general setting of life in a provincial city and the experience of attending a gymnasium. Details were used to create an atmosphere: the overall oppressive boredom (to entertain



themselves, the girls use chocolate bars as pretend money to play a game called 'blue and pink,' which gave the play its title; the younger girls' adoration of the older ones and teachers; the multilingual city, which used to be part of Poland and is at the time part of the Pale of Settlement. Second, when we juxtapose the epic trilogy with its precursor written for the stage, the dramatic principle informing *The Road* comes into sharp relief. The organization of scenes, the dialogue, and narrator's comments, which often sound like stage directions – all of this points to the fact that Aleksandra Brushtein saw the components of her autobiographical trilogy as scenes in a play. Even the way one episode transitions into another and the switching back and forth between irony and earnestness referred to above obviously stem from the writer's experience as a playwright.

Analysis of the play *Blue and Pink* leads to the conclusion that the main difference between the play and the trilogy is the former's fierce revolutionary credo. In the play, the message is unambiguous: the school was a hateful prison; Bliuma and Ionia were victims and Zhenia and Nanny were future fighters for the revolution. The play may have had brilliant dialogue, striking details, and insightful characterizations, but it almost totally lacked one of the most important components of *The Road*: the atmosphere of humanity that prevails both in the Ianovskii family and in the relationships among the institute classmates.

For a long time, Brushtein did not write about her family. Most likely, she felt an inner taboo against doing so, and, perhaps, a sense of guilt: whatever the reason, when she left Vilnius on 22 June 1941, she did not take her parents with her. The writer's archive contains an undated sketch describing her arrival in Vilnius right before the war, representing the first time the writer found the will to write about her parents (RGALI, f. 2546, op. 1, d. 62). The sketch describes 'the rock' overlooking the railroad tracks – one of the trilogy's important symbolic elements, and the old house in which the final book of the trilogy takes place (corresponding to the house into which the Vygodskii family moved in 1899). Among the people who appear in the sketch is the aging Iuzefa, Sasha's former nanny, who is lovingly portrayed in the book. The mother we encounter in the sketch is quite different from her counterpart in the trilogy, where she is somewhat overshadowed by her husband. In the sketch, she is endowed with a subtle wit, generosity, and keen insightfulness: she seems to foresee the fate that awaits her and her family, although she does not talk about it openly. In this unpublished sketch, a theme that would later structure the trilogy first began to take shape: coming of age at a time when family and 'History' collide:

We did so much talking, and laughing, and crying, and reveling, and kissing, that we needed a break, so we had tea again, which Mama now prepared using

Iuzefa looked sad.

“What’s the matter, Iuzefochka?”

“I’m in mourning, *pani* . . .”

“For whom, Iuzefa?”

“For Warsaw . . .”

A bed was set up for Papa in the parlor, behind a screen. The three of us slept in the study. I couldn’t sleep all night. At first I thought this was because I was so excited. Then I got the idea that it was from the hackberry blossoms in the big vase, so I took them out into the foyer. But I still couldn’t sleep.

And I didn’t sleep later, all six weeks.

But for now this was still the first evening. May 9. Four years later this date would be Victory Day—the Germans’ capitulation, a thousand-gun salute. But there were still four years to go. (RGALI, f. 2546, op. 1, d. 62)

In a letter to Evgeniia S. Ginzburg, soon after reading the manuscript of her *Journey into the Whirlwind* [Krutoi marshrut], Brushtein wrote:

But there is one other aspect of your memoirs that would be impossible not to mention. George Sand once said: “A book is, first and foremost, the person who wrote it. If that is missing, it’s not a book, it’s nothing.” . . . Sand definitely had in mind the personal that is inseparable from the true writer, that cannot be taken away, like breathing, which absolutely has to be in a book.” (RGALI, f. 2546, op. 1, d. 83).¹¹

There can be no doubt that these words came out of Aleksandra Iakovlevna Brushtein’s own personal and literary experience. It took time to fulfill her long-held intention to write the trilogy. *The Road Goes into the Distance* came into living, breathing being when it began to center on the person writing it and the tragic story of her family and the city of her childhood. What enabled this was the ‘breath of freedom’ provided by the Thaw.

Notes

1. *Pamiatnye knizhki* were something akin to almanacs published in most provinces of the Russian Empire beginning in the 1830s. – Trans.
2. It was a member of the LiveJournal community, Alla Starkova, who determined who Dr. Iablonkin was based on. See: <http://lyudi-knigi.livejournal.com/50719.html> (accessed 13 July 2020).
3. *Adres-kalendar’ i pamiatnaia knizhka po orenburgskoi gubernii na 1901 g.*, p. 22, available at: http://istmat.info/files/uploads/55283/1901_adres-kalendar_i_pamyatnaya_knizhka_orenburgskoy_gubernii.pdf (accessed 13 July 2020). By 1908, M.S. Iadlovkin was listed as a Collegiate Councilor in Orenburg, and in 1909 he was transferred to Plotsk, where he was a permanent member of the Warsaw branch of the Russian Land Book

which was headed by Evgenii Epafroditovich Kartavtsev, the uncle of Mariia Kartavtseva (Lida Kartseva in the book). This was pointed out by the publisher I.E. Bernshtein.

4. The omission having to do with Nadezhda Teffi was pointed out by Rafael Shusterovich, a participant in the LiveJournal community.
5. From the list of graduates of the Smolny Institute:

1. Graduating class no.: 70 (1902)
2. Number: 10
3. Title: –
4. Surname: Kartavtseva
5. Name: Mariia
6. Patronymic: Vladimirovna
7. Born: –
8. Died: –
9. Details: daughter of State Councilor Vladimir Epafroditovich; graduated with a monogram; later graduated from the Higher Women's Courses; was a nurse in the Russo-Japanese War; married to Roznatovskii.

(Upon graduation from Smolny, the top six students were awarded a *shifr* or monogram consisting of a golden pin featuring Catherine the Great's crown and 'E II' for Ekaterina II to be worn on a ribbon on the shoulder. – Trans.)

6. A website listing graduates of Vilnius's 1st Gymnasium includes: 'Feigin, Mordko (gold medal); year of graduation – 1892'. Available at: <http://www.petergen.com/history/willgim.shtml> (accessed 14 July 2020).
7. For more on the Yakutsk operation see Gurevich, 2010.
8. Here we use a term introduced by M.O. Chudakova (2001).
9. During the 1920s–1940s, Brushtein was primarily writing plays, of which she produced more than sixty. Most of them were staged at Leningrad's Theater for Young Spectators [Teatr iunogo zritel'ia]. This aspect of her career is covered in Turkov, 1966, pp. 19–42.
10. Beginning in 1871, all gymnasiums of the sort Sasha was applying to enter had a preparatory [prigotovitel'nyi] class to prepare pupils for first grade. – Trans.
11. The letter is dated 18 June 1964.

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