I Want To Live: The memoir of Izrail Agol

Clara Weiss
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Izrail Agol, Vadim Agol: Khochu zhit'—Tak i zhili [I Want to Live—That's How We Lived], Moscow: Agraf, 2011

Three years ago, the childhood memoir of the revolutionary, geneticist and Marxist theoretician of biology Izrail Agol (1891-1937) was published in Moscow, along with a brief autobiographical account by his son, the polio specialist Vadim Agol. The book is an important document on the history of the revolutionary movement in Russia and the devastating impact of Stalinism in the Soviet Union.

Izrail Agol's memoir of his childhood in an impoverished Jewish working class district of Bobruisk is a literary masterpiece, highlighting the oppression of Jewish workers and the spread of the revolutionary movement in the Tsarist Empire prior to the October Revolution.

By contrast, his son's account of the difficult beginnings of his career as a Jew and the offspring of an "enemy of the people" illustrates the destructive role played by Stalinism in relation to the development of the sciences, bound up with its return to the legacy of Great Russian chauvinism and anti-Semitism.

Izrail Agol wrote his memoir on the eve of his arrest by the NKVD in 1936. The memoir covers only his years in Bobruisk (today the second largest city in Belarus), as the author could not continue his work. The book was published in small circulation in Ukraine, but after the death of Agol at the hand of Stalinist executioners, it disappeared from the bookstores.

Agol grew up on Police Street [Politseiskaia ulitsa], one of the most impoverished streets of the Jewish working class district of Bobruisk. Born in 1891, at the beginning of the rapid emergence of Russian capitalism and the increasing crisis of the Tsarist autocracy, he witnessed the devastating poverty of workers throughout the city, the Revolution of 1905, and the brutal oppression of the Jews. At a young age he himself became involved in the rapidly growing revolutionary movement.

In the book, Agol is an ardent opponent of the Bund, the Jewish social democratic organization. In reality, however, as his son points out in the afterword, in 1909 he became a member of the Bund, which enjoyed significant support among sections of Jewish workers and petty traders, particularly in Belarus and Poland. In 1916, he broke with the Bund and joined the Bolsheviks.

Writing under conditions of increasing repression in the 1930s and the systematic falsification of the history of the October Revolution and the preceding decades of political struggles, Agol felt compelled to lie about his own political biography.

Apart from concealing his membership in the Bund, Agol's memoir gives a truthful and deeply moving picture of the plight of Jewish working people in the Tsarist Empire. Agol grew up in a working class family. While his father was one of the most erudite men on the street and regularly gathered a circle of workers to whom he read Darwin, August Bebel, and Marx, his mother was illiterate, absorbed in the desperate struggle to bring up her children and save the family from the persistent threat of starvation.

She put all her hope in Izrail and his older sister, Ester. Unlike many of his brothers and sisters, Izrail could go to school, where he learned to speak and write Russian. (At this time, most poor Jews in the Tsarist Empire spoke only Yiddish).

The years in school left him with a feeling of bitterness and hatred. His childhood was shaped by the double humiliation he suffered for being both poor and Jewish.

Izrail and Ester soon became involved in the revolutionary movement. (In the book, they are both participants in a circle of the Bolshevik faction of the social democratic party). After denunciation to the police, Ester was arrested and exiled to Siberia. Nevertheless, Agol and his peers continued their revolutionary activity, becoming witnesses to mass demonstrations—often bloodily dispersed by Cossacks—and the increasing self-confidence and political organization of the working class.

One of the most powerful passages in Agol's memoir is the description of a gruesome pogrom in Bobruisk by Russian ultra-nationalists and Cossacks. The pogrom hits Police Street and its inhabitants with enormous ferocity: women, including the elderly, are brutally raped; apartments and houses are robbed and destroyed; children and men are killed; some of the rape victims die following their abuse.

Agol and several of his friends from the revolutionary circle were members of a self-defense unit formed in the wake of the pogrom. While they succeeded in dispersing the rioting crowd, they come under fire by the heavily armed Cossacks, who shot down both Sholom, Izrail's best friend, and his first love, Slava.

After the pogrom, the entire street was overwhelmed by grief and horror. Slava's father, who had suffered from mental illness for a while and who had been humiliated by the pogromists, lost his mind over the death of his daughter. Determined to pay back God "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," he set the local synagogue on fire and perished in the flames.

The pogrom was followed by a major economic crisis and desperately cold winter. Agol's father, like many other workers, was unemployed for months. The mother regularly went begging for bread to save her children from starvation. Still a teenager, Izrail was forced to take up heavy physical work at the port. In his spare time, he continued his study of philosophical and Marxist classics and wrote poetry. The memoir ends with his departure from Bobruisk.

Written in vivid and beautiful language, Agol's book gives an invaluable account of the social and personal experiences that prompted so many of his generation to dedicate their life to the struggle for socialism. His observations of the social contradictions that tear apart Tsarist society, and the way in which the personal lives of working people are dominated and all too often destroyed by them, are filled with insights rarely seen among contemporary writers.

At the same time, the memoirs represent a rare literary document of the life of the Jewish population in Bobruisk at the turn of the century. During the German occupation in World War II, the entire Jewish population of the city—around 26,700 people—were murdered by the Nazis in the Ghetto and the notorious Massacre of Bobruisk.

While almost forgotten today, Izrail Agol was an important and inspiring figure in the revolutionary movement and intellectual life of the early Soviet Union.

Agol himself fought in World War I and was wounded twice. Having

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joined the Bolsheviks during the war, he participated in the battles of Moscow after the revolution in Petrograd in October 1917.

During the Civil War, he played a leading role in the struggle against the German occupation forces in the Baltics and Belarus. Afterward, he became a high-ranking party worker in the early Soviet Union and served as editor of several widely read newspapers. In 1923-24, he actively participated in the work of the Left Opposition, which, under the leadership of Leon Trotsky, would soon oppose the revisionist course of "socialism in one country" adopted by the Stalin faction.

During the early 1920s, he lived in the Kremlin together with his first wife, Mary, the mother of Vadim Agol, who worked in Lenin's secretariat. Simultaneously, he continued his studies of medicine and biology, which he had taken up in 1916 in Moscow. [1]

From 1924 to 1928, he studied philosophy and genetics at the Institute of Red Professors (Institut Krasnoi Professury—IKP), where he became a student of the major Marxist philosopher Deborin. In 1926, he began to work simultaneously at the Moscow Zoo-Biological Institute. In 1928, he became the head of the Biological Institute.

In this period, he assisted the geneticist A. S. Serebrovsky in ground-breaking experiments on mutagenesis and the divisibility of genes. He also wrote several works defending genetics against the attacks of the so-called Mechanicists, who embraced the neo-Lamarckian theory of the inheritability of acquired characteristics.

In 1930-1932, he and the Soviet geneticist Solomon Levit worked at the University of Texas with Herman Joseph Muller, later to become a Nobel Prize Laureate in Medicine. Although Agol and Levit received an invitation to stay in the US and continue their research, both returned to the Soviet Union in 1932.

There, the Deborin school had already been smashed at Stalin's behest, and geneticists such as Agol came under increasing pressure. The last years of his academic life, spent in Ukraine, were overshadowed by ever more ferocious political repression and uninterrupted slander attacks against himself and other geneticists.

In 1936, Agol was arrested by the NKVD. According to his son, the arrest was bound up with the Second Moscow Trial, in which Reingold, a long-time friend of Agol, served as the chief "witness" of the prosecution. But Agol's academic and revolutionary past no doubt played a major role as well. He was shot on March 8, 1937.

Shortly after Agol's execution, several other Soviet geneticists and followers of Deborin, including Maks L. Levin (1885-1937) and Solomon Levit (1892-1938) were shot. In the coming years, the terror and the struggle against genetics by the followers of Lysenko would cost the lives and scientific careers of dozens of outstanding biologists. The geneticist Nikolai Vavilov, one of the greatest scientists of the 20th century, died in a Stalinist prison during the war in 1943.

The pseudo-scientific theories of Trofim Lysenko, who claimed that organisms—including agricultural crops—could pass on characteristics acquired under certain objective conditions to the next generation, were to cause colossal damage to the Soviet economy in the following decades. Lysenko's views, however, were endorsed and made official agricultural policy by the Stalinist regime. The promotion of such anti-scientific conceptions and charlatanry did much to discredit the reputation of Marxism and the Soviet Union in the eyes of countless workers and intellectuals.

The text by Vadim Agol, who today ranks among the world's foremost specialists in polio, sheds some light on the difficult life of genuine scientists who worked in the aftermath of the terror. Born in 1929, his youth was overshadowed by the terror and World War II.

He studied medicine in post-War Moscow at a time when Lysenko and his students still dominated biological sciences. The perversion of sciences by the Stalinist bureaucracy and its lackeys acquired grotesque dimensions.

Agol recalls, for example, the "theories" of Olga Lepeshinskaya, an Old Bolshevik, who claimed that, according to Marxist "dialectics," the "living" always emerges from the "non-living." In the best tradition of quackery, she discovered a panacea—soda baths—against aging that was widely promoted in the official Soviet press (pp. 214-215).

Vadim Agol completed his graduate studies amid the unfolding anti-Semitic purges of the late 1940s and early 1950s, during which the members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were murdered and many more Jewish intellectuals removed from their posts. His mother, Mary, also lost her job.

After his graduate studies, Agol was sent to work in Karaganda, Kazakhstan, where many leading scientists had been exiled during the terror. The defense of his dissertation became possible only after Stalin's death in March 1953.

One year later, in March 1954, he became the first Jewish student in many years to receive a Ph.D. in Kazakhstan. After his return to Moscow, he joined the newly founded M. P. Chumakov Institute of Poliomyelitis & Viral Encephalitis to study polio, which had reached epidemic proportions in the Soviet Union and internationally by the 1950s.

Vadim Agol achieved the rehabilitation of his father in 1957, after the 20th Party Congress in 1956, when the then-secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, himself a hangman of the terror, was forced to admit to some of Stalin's worst crimes.

The republication of his father's memoir is an important literary event and a step toward restoring one of the many outstanding victims of the Stalinist terror to his true place in history. In recent years, three of Izrail Agol's most important works have been published by the Moscow publishing house URSS, which, on the initiative of the Russian scholar and philosopher Sergei N. Korsakov, has started to print a series with works from the Deborin school.

The publication of Agol's works indicates a growing interest in the powerful Marxist traditions of the working class in the former Soviet Union. One hopes that the beautifully edited and important book by Izrail and Vadim Agol finds a broad readership in Russia and will soon be translated into other languages.

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[1] Sergei N. Korsakov: Izrail Iosifovich Agol. Biobiliograficheskii ocherk, [Izrail Iosifovocih Agol. A Bio-Bibliographical Sketch] in: I. I. Agol: Dialekticheskii metod i evoliutsionnaia teoria [Dialectical Method and Evolutionary Theory], Moscow: URSS 2013, pp. iii-v.

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