

England in 1939 were no exception to this rule, nor are Germany and the United States in 1965.

Reviewed by STEPHEN J. TONSOR

The Rest is Silence

Isaac Babel: *The Lonely Years, 1925-1939*, edited and with an introduction by Nathalie Babel; translated from the Russian by Andrew R. MacAndrew and Max Hayward. *New York: Farrar, Straus & Company, 1964. 402 pp. \$6.75.*

IN APRIL of 1935 Isaac Babel, the celebrated Soviet author of *Red Cavalry*, wrote to his mother:

In recent years, however, my stories haven't been coming off too well—certain mental and literary changes have taken place within me that are beyond my control, changes that take no account of publishers' requirements. . . . And then my literary endowment is such that I can only handle ideas that I have thoroughly worked out, ideas that, on top of that, must be original, otherwise they don't interest me, and even if my own life depended on it or my child was dying before my eyes, I would be unable to get results by trying to force myself.

His life apparently did depend on it. In 1939 he fell victim to Stalin's paranoid suspicions, was arrested, and was never heard of again.

Babel was loyal to the regime, had never been in serious trouble before his arrest, and at the time of his arrest had found enough favor in the eyes of the state to merit a spacious villa outside Moscow. His purposeless destruction has come to symbolize for many the contingent fate of the writer under Stalin. The chief interest of the materials in this volume lies in the biographical light they shed on his last fifteen years. The volume, prepared and edited by his daughter Nathalie Babel, contains eight short stories, more than three hundred pages of letters from Babel to his mother and sister, who were living in Belgium, miscellaneous speeches and articles, a few reviews of his work, and various documents of biographical interest.

We do not get in the letters a chronicle of the fate of a Soviet writer in the thirties. The letter form is too private or too public, or Babel was too

innocent or too wise. But we do get, among much that is trivial and repetitious, a portrait of the man, and, occasionally, insights into his struggle to live with his conscience and with communism. Babel emerges as a man with a sense of humor, a dedication to his art, an exaggerated sense of his own weaknesses, a buoyant view of life, and a quick sympathy for the fate of others. He cherished most of all moments of quiet and peace for his work, but it was his misfortune to live at a time and in a country that insisted that everything be public. He writes: "I am longing for privacy, for meditation, for a life organized according to my own recipe, and that is all possible here. But I am being pulled out into the public market place, into the world of fuss and business and bargaining, into which I don't fit." His protests were always mild: the Soviets mobilized him as a "shock worker" to instruct worker writers, and he hoped he would be able to fulfill his duty as a citizen in some other way. A spacious villa was built for him in a writers' colony, and he hoped he could exchange it for something private near his native Odessa. He despised what was trite and stale, and he was forced to live through the shrill rhetoric of the thirties. He noted mildly: "In a country as united as ours, it is quite inevitable that a certain amount of thinking in clichés should appear and I want to overcome this standardized way of thinking and introduce into our literature new ideas, new feelings and rhythms."

One wonders, finally, why Babel continued to live and work in an atmosphere which more and more denied him the kind of personal peace and independence he prized so much. He had every reason to leave: his wife and daughter lived in France, and his mother and sister in Belgium (they had emigrated in 1925). He even had the opportunity. He was able to go to France in 1928, 1932, and for a few days in 1935 to attend international gatherings. Babel himself wondered and answered why he stayed. In one of the letters he wrote: "There's poverty here, much that is sad, but it is my material, my language, something that is of direct interest to me. . . . I don't mind going abroad for a vacation, but I must work here." Babel shared with writers everywhere the need to be with his own people, no matter what the cost. The cost for him was supreme. He regretted only his work. When he was being led off to prison, he is reported to have said, "They didn't give me time to finish."

Reviewed by EDWARD WASIOLEK