

Ehrenburg at Large

Memoirs: 1921-1941, by Ilya Ehrenburg; translated by Tatania Shebunina in collaboration with Yvonne Kapp. *Cleveland & New York: World Publishing Company, 1964. 543 pp. \$6.95.*

THROUGH a series of largely fortuitous circumstances, Ilya Ehrenburg happened to be in Berlin in 1921 when revolution seemed imminent there, in besieged Madrid and Barcelona during the Spanish civil war, in Moscow during the purges of 1937, and in Paris under the Germans. During these same years, he met and talked to dozens of important writers, among them Gide, Valéry, Hemingway, Joyce, Andrey Bely, and Alexey Remizov.

Ehrenburg is a gifted Soviet writer, and these memoirs are compelling journalism. They are also something more. They are art wedded to journalism, for Ehrenburg has been able to seize on details that catch the rhythm, dissonances, and cadences of an extraordinary era. What was later to be unlocked by time had already been caught by Ehrenburg in some notebook or lodged in some crevice of his mind. In Madrid he saw the fantastic and the humdrum living side by side, as they always do in war: people dying while waiting in line for bread, and the trams running almost to the trenches; the streets littered with broken crockery and bomb splinters, and a young couple pricing a mirror-wardrobe in a furniture store; a small girl carried out of a bombed building like a broken doll, and poets meeting to discuss the resurrection of the romancero form. In Moscow in 1937, he listened to Babel telling him that a man could talk frankly only to his wife and then only with a blanket over his head; saw the tenants of his apartment house put the elevator out of operation so that they would not have to listen to its ominous clicking and wonder at which floor it would stop; a secretary told him that name boards for the glass doors of editors of *Izvestiya* were no longer made up because the names changed so frequently; friends of his kept two pairs of underwear packed and ready to go in case of arrest; and Boris Pasternak once naively said to him: "If only someone would tell Stalin about it."

In Paris before the war Ehrenburg saw Frenchmen congratulating themselves on the signing of the Munich Pact, and noted that the City Council renamed one of Paris' streets "Rue du 30 Septembre" in honor of the pact. And in Paris under the Germans he saw prostitutes lisping "mein Süßer," Germans buying smutty cards, and pocket dictionaries; and he saw signs reading "Genealogical trees compiled, ancestry researches made." *La France au Travail* enlightened its readers with the following: "In every one of us there is a particle of the Jewish spirit which makes it necessary to undertake an internal spiritual pogrom"; and Ehrenburg heard a German officer boast in a cafe: "First we'll pump oil out of Russia, then blood."

Ehrenburg does no less in bringing back to us the literary atmosphere of the times. Something of literary Paris of the twenties comes back when he catches Valéry favoring his companions with mournful aphorisms, and something of truth comes through when he describes Valéry as no less gifted than Mallarmé, but living in a world in which the acoustics had changed. He remembers André Gide looking like an Ibsen pastor or a Chinese surgeon, and in 1935 like a 66-year-old moth in a cage with a small volume of Euripides in his hands. Ehrenburg seems perpetually astonished that Gide should have known so little of life, and yet was admired for knowing so much of it. The judgment is hard and probably wrong, but one cannot help smiling with Ehrenburg at a Gide preparing to discuss with Stalin—in 1936 yet—the question of ped-erasty in the Soviet Union.

"Of all my contemporaries," he tells us, "I liked Hemingway best." He met Hemingway in besieged Madrid, spoke to him in French, and Hemingway to him in Spanish, and Hemingway almost hit him over a misunderstanding of a word. Hemingway lived in a hotel that everyone had abandoned, made coffee over a spirit lamp, ate oranges, drank whiskey, and worked on a play about love. Hemingway was, in short, Hemingway. They met in Spain and they parted in Spain, and they never met again. Ehrenburg's worship of Hemingway makes as little or as much sense as does Hemingway's popularity in Russia.

Ehrenburg writes about an extraordinary era, and one of the most extraordinary events he writes about is himself. Although criticized at times by his countrymen, he managed to write and publish a great number of novels in the Soviet Union, to spend most of his early career roaming about Europe, to work for eight years as a foreign correspondent for *Izvestiya*. He returned to Moscow voluntarily during the great purges of 1937, and he

managed to leave again six months later with Stalin's personal blessing. When he was asked much later by a young writer how it was that he had survived, he could answer simply: "I shall never know." In 1963 he drew the fire of Khrushchev's campaign against Westernization of Soviet art (it was reported that he walked out of the hall), and he has survived Khrushchev.

What kind of a man is he? His tone is modest, simple, unpretentious. He seems astonished that he has survived, proud that he spoke out at times against what he considered to be injustices, and almost pleased that a critic called him in 1932 "a literary lackey of the bourgeoisie" and that an edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* said he was a typical exponent of one segment of the bourgeois intelligentsia. At times in the memoirs he turns a critical eye on the mistakes of the Soviets. He tells us something of the attacks on the "formalists" in the middle thirties; he is amused at the idiocy of the Russian fight against sycophancy before the West, which often expressed itself in renaming cheeses and coffee and in denigrating Western accomplishments. He disapproved of the destruction of some historical and artistic relics of Old Russia during the zealous industrialization of the thirties; he was appalled by the German-Soviet pact and disgusted by Stalin's telegram to von Ribbentrop, which spoke of "friendship cemented with blood." But his disapproval and disgust took only the form of silence. As early as 1931 he had thought out his attitude for all the trying days ahead: "In 1931 I came to realize that a soldier's fate is not that of a dreamer, and that one ought to take one's place in the fighting ranks. I did not renounce what I held dear, nor did I repudiate anything, but I knew that I would have to grit my teeth and master that most difficult of disciplines—silence."

He did not look on his silence as cowardice, even while most of his friends and contemporaries were swallowed up in Stalin's paranoiac rage. He saw his silence as a commitment to something that transcended the squabbles of art, the shifts of ideology, and the injustices of the time. This was a commitment to the trials of his people, to a fight against fascism, and to the triumph of Communist ideals. Well, perhaps. What Ehrenburg takes as flexibility and intelligence can have other names. There is a hazard in autobiography: confession is sweet when our mistakes look heroic and our silence courageous. To use Ehrenburg's own words: another man's heart is a dark continent.

Reviewed by EDWARD WASIOLEK