

## Challenges of Non-Soviet Poetry in Minsk During the BSSR Period

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### *Abstract:*

The interview given by Gershon Trestman (born July 29, 1947, Minsk), a Russian-language Belarusian and Israeli poet, prose writer, publicist, and playwright. He is a member of the Union of Writers of Israel, the Commonwealth of Russian-Speaking Writers of Israel “Stolitsa,” and the International Federation of Russian Writers. His work has been recognized with the Yu. Stern and Yu. Nagibin awards, as well as a gold medal for “outstanding achievements in literature and the arts” from the California Academy of Sciences. Selected works: *The One Who Crossed the River* (Tel Aviv, 1996); *Golem, or Faust’s Curse*

(Moscow, 2007); *A Small Country with a Great History* (Israel, 2008, foreword by Avigdor Lieberman); *The Great History of a Small Country* (Israel, 2011); *The Scroll of Esther* (Jerusalem, 2013); *The Land of Olive Guardians* (Jerusalem, 2013); *The Israeli Knot: The History of the Country – The History of Confrontation* (Book-Sefer, 2014); *The Land of Olive Guardians* (Jerusalem, KKL-JNF, 2014); *Job* (Minsk, New Wineskins, 2014); *...Where There Are No Coordinates. Poems and Epics* (Jerusalem, 2017); *The Book of Non-Being* (Minsk, Logvinov, 2019); *Alphabet for Elderly Children* (Jerusalem, 2023).

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*Andrew Schumann:* The Soviet Union was a totalitarian society, meaning it maintained complete control over artistic expression and the production of meanings. However, this control was felt

differently in different cities. In Moscow and Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), artistic life seemed freer – poets had an easier time getting published, public spaces for poetry readings existed, literary salons provided venues for meetings, and even *samizdat* was possible. In Minsk, however, the situation was significantly worse.

In 1966, the only platform for poetry readings – the “Pioneer” cinema – emerged but lasted only a short while before being shut down. For a long time, the only “literary salon” in Minsk was the apartment of Kim Khadeev, but even that was often empty. How did you manage to cultivate a non-Soviet voice in your work while living in Minsk? How did you define your “non-Soviet” stance during that difficult time?

*Gershon Trestman:* The issue is not so much my “non-Soviet” stance as it is that I remained deeply alien to the official Soviet life surrounding me, with all its standards. My social circle, consisting of “unofficial” individuals with whom I could communicate without hostility, was always extremely small.

*Andrew Schumann:* The USSR had Soviet poets who enjoyed a degree of conditional creative freedom – like Andrei Voznesensky, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, and Bella Akhmadulina – as well as a whole movement of bard poets such as Vladimir Vysotsky, Bulat Okudzhava, and Alexander Galich. The Soviet intelligentsia eagerly consumed their works, seeking out their books and records. Did you consider these popular Soviet poets to be non-Soviet at the time? Do you consider them non-Soviet now?

*Gershon Trestman:* Conditional creative freedom? If it existed, it was only within the confines of a small social circle. As the writer Lev Anninsky once told me: “*We are deep-water fish. If we rise to the surface, we’ll suffer decompression sickness.*” One can only remain truly free in the depths.

As for the poets and bards you mentioned, despite their undeniable talent, they remained Soviet writers – even when, on rare occasions, they produced non-Soviet texts. Under Soviet rule, literature was forced to assume the roles of a Temple, a Conscience, and a Judge. This situation led to the development of an *Aesopian language*, but Aesopian language cannot replace spiritual or governmental institutions – it merely allows for a cautious probing of alternative viewpoints.

I believe the popularity of these artists stemmed from their ability to create an illusion of conditional freedom through Aesopian language. The vagueness of their formulations allowed readers to interpret their words in multiple ways. However, ultimately, this was still a form of compromise – one that conformed to Soviet censorship and certain prescribed frameworks.

*Andrew Schumann:* Which poets from Moscow and Leningrad in the RSFSR period were thematically or mentally close to you?

*Gershon Trestman:* I felt closest to Yuri Levitansky, David Samoilov, and Joseph Brodsky. But I don’t value poets solely by their collected works under a single surname – I appreciate specific poems, sometimes even by relatively obscure poets. That said, I hesitate to call any poet “obscure.” For me, Vladimir Sokolov or Yuly Aikhenvald – let alone the Leningrad or Moscow schools of that era – were just as significant as Yevtushenko, Rozhdestvensky, or even Akhmadulina.

Your question made me reflect on poets of that time, and I realize that, for me, they have faded. As the brilliant Israeli literary critic Maya Kaganskaya once said to me: “*I reread Anna Karenina and must admit, the book has changed a lot in the last thirty years.*” What remains with me is not a memory of individual poets or poems, but a feeling of the literary process. If I were to discuss specific poets and their work now, I would inevitably distort the truth.

*Andrew Schumann:* The poetry scene in Minsk was much smaller than in Moscow. Who among Minsk poets was mentally and thematically close to you? What did you have in common with Veniamin Blazhenny and Igor Poglazov (Schneerson)?

*Gershon Trestman:* The main intersection between us was that we were all outsiders in the Soviet reality. Yet, we were entirely different from one another – unique individuals. It is fundamentally wrong to compare poets, as no two are equal in greatness or insignificance. A true poet is one of a kind.

Blazhenny lived a full life and even grew weary of it – he longed for death. By contrast, Igor Poglazov took his own life at thirteen, unable to bear the weight of his own talent. When you ask me to name specific figures, I cannot do justice to each individual’s uniqueness without writing an entire monograph. However, I can confirm that a rich literary process existed in Belarus, outside of Soviet constraints.

*Andrew Schumann:* Russian-language poetry in Minsk was harder to publish than Belarusian-language poetry due to stricter censorship. Did any Belarusian-language poets seem non-Soviet to you at the time? Did the popular theme of the “Partisan Republic” resonate with you?

*Gershon Trestman:* I never expected my poetry to be published in the BSSR or even in the RSFSR. Among modern Belarusian poets, I feel a connection with Krystsina Banduryna, Ales Razanov, Vladimir Neklyaeu, Mikola Zakharenko, Yekaterina Andreyeva (currently imprisoned), Sergey Vaganov, Felix Batorin, Andrey Khadanovich, Maria Martusevich, and others.

*Andrew Schumann:* Can the theme of the “Partisan Republic” be interpreted in a non-Soviet way?

*Gershon Trestman:* It would be difficult to separate the Soviet and non-Soviet elements in Belarusian partisan prose without creating an artificial construct. The theme is too deeply interwoven with Soviet ideology. But that is for others to judge.

*Andrew Schumann:* What philosophical themes do you explore in your poetry?

*Gershon Trestman:* As Vladimir Mayakovsky said, “*I am a poet – this is what makes me interesting, and this is what I write about.*” Critics – both Israeli and even Belarusian – have written extensively and intelligently about the philosophical themes in my work. But, God knows, Andrew, I didn’t understand a word of it. If you have time to read them, please explain my philosophy to me. I’d be grateful.