

## It's a Dark Night

**By: Asher Sterkin**

"It's a dark night, only bullets are whistling in steppes ..." Some sources claim that the movie, "Two Warriors", with the prominent Soviet Jewish actor and singer Mark Bernes singing this song<sup>1</sup> was shown for the first time in 1942. The movie was devoted to defenders of blockaded Leningrad. Officially, the song is dated 1944.

I grew up on Mark Bernes' songs. As long as I remember myself, I remember his songs, including, and foremost, "It's a Dark Night". I hum it over and over. I even work the tune into my morning prayer at the synagogue. The song fits very well into the Ashkenazi Hazanut style. Or is it the Yiddish song style? Who knows the difference? It sounds so Jewish ... Not even mentioning how symbolic the song's title is.

After the revolution, Russian Jewish artists were everywhere, finally free from tradition and nationality restrictions. Liberated and assimilated Russian Jews contributed to the Soviet and Western culture in almost every aspect of science and art. Everybody knows Chagall. Some people still remember Mark Bernes or Iliya Erenburg – an exceptionally popular Soviet journalist during the War. There were, however, others ...

Vladimir (Zeev) Jabotinsky was born on October 18, 1880, in Odessa, the largest wheat trade center of Russian Empire of that time. He is well known in Israel as a Zionist leader - almost every town and city has a street with his name. But he was also an outstanding Russian writer, one of the best in the 20th century. His writing style in Russian was just brilliant. "You stole him from us", complained a 'real' Russian writer, Alexander Kuprin, "why do you need him?"

We do need ... It's still a dark night, although not as dark as it was in 1942 in Leningrad. In the depth of confusion, despair, sticky mess, unrestrained greed and leadership crisis, his voice, the "violin in the void" comes as a breath of

1. Available for download at <http://download.sovmusic.ru/m/tnoch.mp3>.



fresh air ... Jabotinsky was a fierce rival and critic of Weitzman and Ben Gurion. He was the author of the iron wall<sup>2</sup> concept and is considered a spiritual father of the right wing of the contemporary Israeli political spectrum. Today, the latter might sound almost ironic. Jabotinsky was also a great artist, and as such he belongs to the whole nation.

During the spring and summer, contemporary and ancient Jewish history mix together: Passover, Holocaust, Memorial, Independence, Lag BaOmer, Shavuot, 17 B'Tamuz, and 9 B'Av. This year too many people are worried. "What do the coming years hold in store?"<sup>3</sup> We have too many questions and too few answers. We again and again come up with solutions that are worse than the original problems. I pick up Jabotinsky's articles written in my first language about a century ago and I read: "... I would like to call your attention to yet another detail: *our* petrified, condensed, and coldly-furious determination to hold this post, from where others have deserted, and to serve the Jewish matter by whatever it's possible: by brains, and by hands, and by teeth, and by truth, and by lie ..."<sup>4</sup> Jabotinsky is not speaking about the "Iron Wall", "White Paper" or any other political affair. It's about the basic responsibility of an educated elite towards its nation. Educated Jews contributed so much to Western culture, but how many of them stubbornly stuck with "Do not imagine in your soul that you will be able to escape in the king's palace any more than all of the Jews"<sup>5</sup>? Sadly, not too many. We are usually very proud of the Jewish stake in the Russian and Western culture, but does anybody realize what a high price we, as a nation, pay for this stake? In his "Story of My Days" Jabotinsky reveals this simple secret of the *Yiddish Kopf* natural selection: "Starting from 1888 a new law was introduced, according to which proportion between Jewish and Christian students in state education organizations was 1/9". This Jewish stake in the Western culture, at least, partially was built up via fierce Darwinian competition among ... Jews.

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2. See Jabotinsky's essay at <http://www.marxists.de/middleeast/ironwall/ironwall.htm>.
  3. "Hamlet", B.Pasternak, "Doctor Zhivago". Pasternak wrote a poem called "Hamlet" which he included into his novel "Doctor Zhivago". He also translated Shakespeare (including Hamlet) into Russian, but that's another story.
  4. "On Jews in Russian Literature", "Free Thoughts", 1908
  5. Esther, 4:13

The latter might sound like a condemnation of the Jewish involvement in Western culture. For educated people it would be not easy to take this point of view. Even Jabotinsky himself called Jews “the most veteran Europeans”. No, it’s not a condemnation, it’s a warning: “And it’s especially easy to be wrong, when the whole affair is built on the faith in a strong ally, on the faith that this ally will understand and will respond, and will help – but in reality nobody among us is familiar enough with this ally, and only G-d knows *how* this ally will thank us”<sup>6</sup>. This was written in 1906 regarding the Jewish participation in the Russian revolution of 1905. Today we do know, unfortunately, what was their “thank you”.

The bottom line of this passage is about how a small nation (only 15 million at that time – and where they are today?) should manage its business: conservatively, carefully, and sparingly. Too many Jewish CEOs, CTOs, Nobel Prize winners and businessmen around the world do not prove how intellegent we are, but perhaps the opposite, that as a nation we still waste our best resources elsewhere, that we are still a nation of *schlimazels*, who are struggling to survive against all odds during the last two thousands years.

Personal stories and inclinations are irrelevant – Jabotinsky’s translation of Edgar Poe’s “The Raven” to Russian is still considered as one of the best among about 30 existing translations<sup>7</sup>. He also translated the world classics to Hebrew. “The main decisive factor here would not be a language and, on the other hand, even not a nationality of the author, not even a plot; the main decisive factor is the *sentiment* of the author – for whom does he write, to *whom* appeal, *whose* spiritual needs takes into account ...”<sup>8</sup> Patriotism and intellectualism are not mutually exclusive as many contemporary Israeli intellectuals think. The possession of a foreign culture does not make a difference, but rather, an attitude towards one’s own culture does.

Come and learn, what answer did Samson , the Jewish hero and judge, give to Saran – the governor of Philistines, in Jabotinsky’s novel “Samson the Nazirite”.

6. “Jewish Sediton”, 1906

7. To get an impression about how many times “The Raven” was translated into Russian look at <http://speakrus.ru/articles/theraven.htm>.

8. “On Jews in Russian Literature”, “Free Thoughts”, 1908

Samson is sitting in the Philistines jail, and Saran is trying to persuade him to lead Philistines troops to conquer the land of Israel<sup>9</sup>. The answer is 'no': "Your life is organized like the best fabric ... but ... you wear it as a custom, without jealousy – nobody will tear, but ... nobody will fix. ... Whether through love one will distinguish between one's own and someone else's? ... To drink and to joke with you (Philistines) I do like. But to build? You said 'to build'? With you? From you? I do not believe in you". The novel was written in Russian and published in Germany in 1927. By this time Jabotinsky had enough personal reasons to "... dislike Dan" and to "hate his relatives"<sup>10</sup> even though the bitterest frustrations connected to the assassination of Haim Alrosorov were another six years ahead.

"Leaders, who were born as leaders, understand each other"<sup>11</sup>. To be a leader does not mean to follow one's personal preferences (to follow one's eyes<sup>12</sup>). To lead, to steer, does not necessarily mean to love. Leadership is not about privileges. It's not about following the mob either. It's even not about a recognition or appreciation. "It is not seemly to be famous: Celebrity does not exalt."<sup>13</sup> Leadership is mostly about responsibility. Responsible leaders and disciplined citizens are the only alternative to anarchy and dictatorship. The latter two are equally bad.

From the first chapter of Genesis till the last Chapter of Kings, Biblical stories are stories about leadership. About leader's glory and weaknesses, sacrifices, mistakes and crimes, take-offs and failures. Without strong and wise political leaders the whole nation is sick. When the nation is betrayed by its intellectual elite, the nation loses its way completely. When leaders deceive themselves and the nation it leads to tragedy: "Blessed are you to Hashem! I have fulfilled the word of Hashem ... And what is this sound of sheep in my ears and the sound

9. As Jabotinsky himself admitted in Preface, the novel is very far from the original Biblical story in the book of Judges. To what extent it is permissible for an artist to freely interpret the Tradition is a too complex topic that would take us far from the scope of this essay.

10. From "Samson the Nazitite"

11. *ibid*

12. Talmud Sotah (10a) states that Samson lost his eyes because he allowed his eyes to entice him.

13. B. Pasternak, "It is not seemly to be famous", from the book "When it Clears Up" (1956-1959) see <http://www.friends-partners.org/friends/literature/19century/pasternak/notseemly.html> (opt, mozilla,pc,english,,new).

of cattle that I hear?"<sup>14</sup> How much suffering, pain, loss, and death could we have been spared in our history were we not constantly lulling ourselves with this "we have fulfilled?"

"Now in Bordeaux, when I read this poster, getting wet (from the rain), on this wall, I made the only possible logical conclusion ..."<sup>15</sup> Wide system vision, sharp intuition, an ability to make snap decisions. "Strategy is an ability to spot immediately, in the space of a very wide front, the weakest point of enemy. To do this, a very special trait, which the British call "imagination", is required ..."<sup>16</sup>. The tale of the Jewish Legion starts. Two years of mad work, against all odds and obstacles culminated in the creation of the first Jewish armed troops since Bar Kochba. Many people of many nations were involved in this story. Many of them were Russian Jews and Russians.

Here and now I will pause on only one name: Konstantin Dmitrievich Nabokov, deputy Russian ambassador in London, who followed the Jewish Legion and helped Jabotinsky a lot since the very first steps of Zion Mule Corps. K.D. Nabokov belonged to a rich, highly erudite Russian aristocratic family, which was by many subtle almost invisible threads connected to Russian Jewry. His brother, Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov, criminologist, liberal politician and journalist, one of the leaders of the Russian Constitution Democratic Party ("Kadets"), reported from the famous Beilis trial and was fined by 100 rubles for his sharp criticism of the Tsar government's anti-Semitic policy. "... (the request for) equal rights for Jews ... was an ultimate point of every Russian opposition party political platform, not because Russian Jews wanted it, but because it was demanded by a sense of justice and by the Russian state interests."<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov's son, Vladimir Vladimirovich, a prominent Russian-American writer, was a close friend and Tenishev school<sup>18</sup> mate of Samuil Rosoff, the son of Israel Rosoff, a Zionist leader, close friend and "companion-in-arms" of Jabotinsky.

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14. Shmuel, 15:13-14

15. "The Story of the Jewish Legion"

16. *ibid*

17. B. Nosik, "The World and Gift of Vladimir Nabokov"

18. The Tenishev School was the most advanced and expensive school in Russia at that time.

I do not have any evidence that V.V. Nabokov and Jabotinsky were acquainted in person, even though their paths crossed many times in St. Petersburg, Berlin, and Paris. Even though V.V. Nabokov was about 20 years younger, both of them, as writers, belonged to the Westernized Russian literature tradition established in the first half of the 19th century by Alexander Pushkin. They both were big admirers of Pushkin: "... even now I could hardly find a poem of Pushkin, which I would not be familiar with, and which I would not remember from the beginning to end"<sup>19</sup> - wrote Jabotinsky in his "Autobiography". They both had a great interest in Alan Edgar Poe. Jabotinsky's translation of Poe's "Annabel Lee"<sup>20</sup> is amazing because of its sad beauty and harmony. Nabokov built up his eternal "Lolita" around this poem. "She was a child and I was a child, In this kingdom by the sea ..."

Five years before his death, in 1936, Jabotinsky paid maybe his last tribute to Russian literature when he published, in Paris, his nostalgic novel "The Five". Some critics manage to trace Dostoyevsky's roots in this novel. I do not think so. I do not think there is too much in common between the two. "According to Dostoyevsky, Jews will bring the Holocaust to Russia".<sup>21</sup> Jabotinsky, in turn, had a very realistic understanding of general anti-Jewish sentiment that was typical even for the most progressive Russian writers of the 19th century, such as Pushkin and Chekhov.

For Jabotinsky, what Russian writers wrote was less important than how Russian Jews read what was written. Unconditional admiration of even the greatest masterpieces of Russian culture was in his eyes a clear symptom of assimilation, in other words, national suicide.

For me, the novel "The Five" is close in its sentiment to Ivan Bunin's "The Dark Alleys" – a sad, nostalgic story about adolescent places, places which the author will never see again. For Jabotinsky, such a place was Odessa, the Russian Marseille, a joyful, cosmopolitan city with more than ten nationalities living in peace together at the watershed of the 19th and 20th century. This

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19. V. Jabotinsky, "Autobiography"

20. Look at <http://www.vekperevoda.com/1855/zhabot.htm>

21. V. Jabotinsky, "Russian Caress", 1909

Odessa, indeed, this Russia, did not exist anymore in 1936, and Jabotinsky knew it precisely. All of the heroes of "The Five", as in "Samson Nazirite", are very far from being *saints*. Jabotinsky deliberately avoided highlighting any special Jewish morality. His Jewish heroes are flesh and blood humans, for whom all human flaws are not alien. "...We do not have any intentions of being better than the rest."<sup>22</sup> Only one hero, Torik (Victor), who is very positive according to any formal criteria – balanced, polite, educated – did not get any sympathy or understanding from Jabotinsky, due to his decision to convert to Christianity: "... it's too boring and lacks any perspective (to remain Jewish)".

Jabotinsky was a great man of his time: talented artist, visionary leader, smart politician. "He was a bold fellow, a jack-of-all-trades, merchant, fighter, knight and judge, ambitious<sup>23</sup> and noble, cautious and daring, calculating and generous - a real person, a grand man with great virtues and great faults, with a soul that was as variegated as a rainbow or a many-stringed harp. His life was and has remained the most interesting of all the poems that ever were and you must read it very often and learn from it. Learn how to love and fight and deceive, for this world is like a thieves' den and you must be able to wield every weapon both of defense and attack."<sup>24</sup> He knew how to love the Jewish people without idealizing them for even a second, and he devoted all his talents to the goal he considered the most important of all: to build a home for the homeless wanderer-nation.

It's time to wrap-up. So, what's the point of this story? We live in a multi-dimensional space, therefore there is no a single point. There are multiple lines and surfaces: historical, political, national, religious, cultural and personal. Some of them were only slightly touched here, while others were even not mentioned at all. Some of these lines and surfaces came very close though they never cross each other. Perhaps this story gives an example of how self-respecting individuals and nations should behave and build relationships.

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22. V. Jabotinsky, "Instead of Excessive Apology", 1911

23. In the original Russian text Jabotinsky used the word 'хищный', which literally means 'rapacious'. In Russian this word does not have such a strong negative connotation as in English. After a consultation with my editor, Shabtai Atlow, we decided to use a more neutral word, 'ambitious'.

24. V. Jabotinsky, "The Four Sons". The whole passage is about Jacob whom Jabotinsky describes as a sparkling representative of the Jewish nation as a whole.

After Joyce and Proust it is permissible to follow one's flow of conscious, to enjoy the process without giving too many explanations. So I did.

The night is still dark, but the morning will come: sooner or later. I also know the sentence which will fit the best to close this story, and here it is: "We are what we are, good enough for ourselves, have no intent to change and will never do."<sup>25</sup>

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25. V. Jabotinsky, "Instead of Excessive Apology", 1911