

The Quiet Epic Journey of 'Maybe Esther'

Katja Petrowskaja's step into the past of her family and century

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Katja Petrowskaja [Wikicommons](#)

Katja Petrowskaja has us mesmerized from the first page of her book, “Maybe Esther.” We have no hesitation leaping on the Berlin - Warsaw train with her on a voyage of discovery across Eastern Europe, back in time, and into the very concept of memory. Much of “Maybe Esther’s” immediate appeal is the ease with which the author sweeps us along with her, often knocking through the fourth wall to address us directly. If we flag, she enjoins us to keep moving. Within pages, we are totally vested in the mission of “Maybe Esther:” to knit together a family memory from scraps and half information left from the charnel house of post-war Eastern Europe.

“Maybe Esther” is difficult to slot neatly into just one tidy literary genre because it is crafted with so many literary devices. This is the great genius of the work, and much of its success. The sweep of Petrowskaja’s narrative is epic, and indeed she makes both overt and oblique

reference to the classics throughout the book. We revisit the huge set pieces of twentieth century carnage: The Terror of the 1930s in the nascent Soviet state, the Gulag, the slaughter at Babi Yar, and the Holocaust, but we see them from an entirely fresh vantage point. Relatives and their memories act as Virgil to Petrowskaja's Dante, but as we learn more of the fate of these half-forgotten great aunts and uncles, grandparents, and cousins several times removed, the narrative shifts into intimate biography.

"Maybe Esther" reads like a collection of related short stories — seventy in all — which make up the six sections of the book. And in each, we learn a bit more about the people behind the sepia photograph, and gradually the entire photo gallery emerges. Sometimes the introduction comes in the form of an anecdote recounted over a crackly long-distance line, the discovery of an address, or a cache of photographs. And we rejoice in the connection. Some findings lead to more questions, such as the abbreviated recipe for kvass, that might mean "Jewish" kvass or, just as easily, "European" kvass. And we share Petrowskaja's frustration at not knowing the answer.

"Maybe Esther" is a travelogue: a physical journey into modern-day Europe, Russia, and Ukraine. But by visiting the landscapes of her family history, Petrowskaja is also on quiet interior journey, carefully stitching together scraps of family legend and lore into a cohesive narrative of a single family, many of whom disappeared into the maw of that cruel century. "Maybe Esther" of the title refers to one of Petrowskaja's great-grandmothers, whose name Petrowskaja's father thinks might be Esther. Little more is known about this Esther except that she stayed in the family apartment when all of her relatives fled the oncoming German army and thus falls victim to the massacre of Babi Yar. Like any good travel writer, Petrowskaja is adept at showing us how time — that great healer of sorrow — has transformed the once-isolated Babi Yar into a city park.

The tenacious connective tissue of Petrowskaja's family saga is their seven-generation vocation teaching in the deaf communities of Austria, Ukraine, and Poland. These anecdotal stories speak to a larger theme in the book: the need to give voice to those who were silenced not only by the death camps, but by the pervasive secrecy of the Soviet era. And Petrowskaja accepts that mission to give that voice to the voiceless. That she chooses to do so in German, rather than her native Russian makes for one of the many twists that make this book such a tour de force. Petrowskaja began to learn German at 27, which makes her task harder, certainly, but she uses this challenge in other ways that are more subtle.

Petrowskaja's Ukrainian relations, including "maybe Esther," were proud of their ability to speak good German, a hallmark of a well-rounded education in the pre-revolutionary era. Petrowskaja imagines "maybe Esther" tottering up to an SS-officer in Kiev and addressing him in her best High German and getting shot for her pains.

The Russian word for German is "nemets," from a root Slavic word for "mute" since Russians perceived them as unable to speak. Petrowskaja chooses the language of the mute to reveal the hidden secrets of a family that may not be able to understand them.

If language is a currency in "Maybe Esther," information and knowledge are precious treasures, and here the book pivots back to a compelling quest narrative. Petrowskaja as the

classic Campbellian hero, ventures forth to find the precious cache of memory and scraps of knowledge. For most of the heroic journey, her courage does not falter she breaches the high walls of knowledge and lays siege to the custodians of memory: archives, museums, databases, and even Google. Each hard-fought battle — with the precision of the lunch hour at Mauthausen, the chaos of a Jewish Cemetery, and deep in the rabbit holes of the internet — yields another clue, allowing the quest to continue. Only at the KGB archives, does Petrowskaja's courage falter.

It is hard not to interpret "Maybe Esther" as a cautionary tale. Toward the end of the book, Petrowskaja recalls her father telling her that, "Hitler killed the readers, and Stalin the writers; that's how my father summed up the disappearance of Yiddish." The fates of Petrowskaja's missing family members at the long dinner table she often wistfully imagines do not seem as improbable today as they might have a few years ago, in these same countries where far-right politics are once again becoming mainstream.

Finally, "Maybe Esther" is also, at its core, that quintessential German genre, the *Bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel. In an interview with the Los Angeles Book Review in 2018, Katja Petrowskaja said of her decision to write "Maybe Esther in German," "In Russian I am an adult woman, in German I am still a teenager. This childish naïveté was also part of a radical refusal to understand labels and historical causality as if they were natural or inevitable. Not accepting brutality or violence is, in a way, very childish." By the end of her quietly epic journey, through history, across time, and into the depths of memory, Katja Petrowskaja emerges from the exercise with a better, and perhaps more mature understanding of the nature of all three.

In the excerpt below, Petrowskaja imagines her great-grandmother, who might have been called Esther.

Maybe Esther

May the Lord God let you know as many things as I don't know, Babushka always used to say. She repeated this adage with offended pride. Her grandson Marik, my father, Miron, was unusually well read. By the time he turned nine, he had already devoured hundreds of books and would ask adults questions that he thought quite simple and basic. Babushka generally had no answer, nor had she heard of the saying of Socrates, "I know that I know nothing." Maybe her saying served as a consolation to herself or as a rebuke to her clever grandson; Babushka stuck with these words, which sounded like an ancient aphorism, May the Lord God let you know as many things as I don't know. Apart from this adage, only two things remain from my great-grandmother, my father's babushka: a photograph and a story.

In August 1941, when the family fled from Kiev to escape the German army and my grandfather Semion had to go off to war, Babushka stayed home, alone on Engels Street, which led steeply down to Khreshchatyk, the magnificent main boulevard of Kiev.

Babushka was not taken along. She could barely move, and during this entire summer of the war, she had not been able to get downstairs and onto the street. Bringing her was out of the question; she would not have withstood the journey.

The evacuation seemed like a trip to the dacha, and Babushka was left behind with the understanding that they would all see each other again when the summer was over. July was time for a change, and all these people on the street were carrying suitcases and assorted bundles, as they always did in the summer; it was just the haste and the overly large number of them that gave away the fact that in spite of the season and the standard belongings people were carrying, these goings-on had absolutely nothing to do with a trip to the dacha.

I think her name was Esther, my father said. Yes, maybe Esther. I had two grandmothers, and one of them was named Esther—exactly.

What do you mean, “maybe”? I asked indignantly. You don’t know what your grandmother’s name was?

I never called her by name, my father replied. I said Babushka, and my parents said Mother.

Maybe Esther remained in Kiev. She had trouble getting around in the apartment, which was suddenly empty, and the neighbors brought her food. We thought, my father added, that we’d be back soon, but it took us seven years to return.

At first nothing of any consequence changed in the city. The Germans had come, that was all. When the summons — “All Jews in the city of Kiev are to report to the corner of . . .” — reached even Babushka, she started getting ready without hesitation. The neighbors tried to talk her out of it. Don’t go! You can’t even walk!

The monitoring was exhaustive. Building superintendents combed through addresses and resident lists. Schools, hospitals, orphanages, and retirement homes were searched to make sure that All Jews went, all of them, each Jew in the German and every Jew in the Russian. Arrivals were supervised by German and Ukrainian patrol units. Yet at 11 Engels Street, the superintendent was ready not to report the old woman, to overlook her, but it was not to save her from death, no, no one was thinking of death, or better yet, no one was thinking as far as death, no one was thinking what was going on through to the end, they were lagging behind the events.

Think about it: Why should an old lady set out on this path if she can’t walk, even if it leads to the Promised Land? Don’t go, the neighbors said. Maybe Esther insisted.

The center of the city had been on fire for days. The unceasing explosions terrified residents. Buildings burst apart with deadly regularity. First the overcrowded offices of the occupation authorities, then a movie theater in the middle of a showing, a soldiers’ club, and an ammunition depot. It was never-ending. The retreating Red Army had laid mines in the buildings, and radio-controlled fuses set off explosions. A few days later, the Khreshchatyk lay in ruins. Fires blazed throughout the downtown area. The Germans, who had settled in the city almost peacefully at first, went from bewildered to flustered to frantic in the face of this unfamiliar form of partisan warfare. It seemed that the summons to All Jews was a logical consequence, retaliation against the allegedly guilty parties, as though they had not been guilty and convicted from the outset, as though this summons had been issued spontaneously, as though the sequence now unfolding had not been set long in advance. But Maybe Esther evidently knew nothing about that, or about what was going on in the city, even less than half a mile from her home.

For the bakery across the street, at the corner of Engels Street and Meringovskaya, was always open, as the neighbors told her. Only three steps down. Didn't you hear the explosions? Smell the stench of burning? See the fire?

If All, then All, she said to herself, as though it was a matter of honor. And she came down. Everything else stood still. There are no details about how she got down the stairs. Come to think of it, though, the neighbors must have helped her; how else could she have done it?

Downstairs, at the intersection, the streets were curving, growing rounder in the distance, and it could be felt that the earth does turn. Once she was on the street, she was alone.

Besides the patrol unit, no one could be seen at this moment. Maybe All were already gone. Two strapping, flaxen-haired, almost elegant men were strolling, unhurried and dutiful, at the intersection. It was bright and desolate, as in a dream. Maybe Esther walked toward them, and she saw that it was a German patrol unit.

How many Ukrainian policemen were out on the streets of Kiev to supervise the arrival of All on the first day of the operation? Nobody kept count. There were many Ukrainians, but presumably, or even certainly, Babushka would have rather approached Germans than Ukrainians, whom she distrusted. Did she have a choice?

She walked to them, but how long did this walk take? Here each and every one must follow his own breath.

Her walk developed like an epic event, not only because Maybe Esther moved like the tortoise in the aporias of Zeno, step by step, slowly but surely, so slowly that no one could catch up with her, and the slower she went, the more impossible it was to catch up to her, to stop her, to bring her back, and, above all, to overtake her. Not even the fleet-footed Achilles could have done that.

She took a few steps down Engels Street, a street formerly— and currently— named Luteranskaya after Martin Luther, a street where the loveliest trees grew, where German businesspeople had settled since the nineteenth century, and where two German churches had been built, one way up the street and the other at the corner of Bankovaya; one of them was right opposite my first school. Forty years after Babushka, I walked past these German churches every day.

First it was called Luteranskaya, then Engels Street—the street of Engels, or the street of angels. All those who didn't know which realm this street lay in might think it was really given over to angels. It was so impossibly steep, so precipitous, that it gave wing to anyone who headed down it. I was a Soviet child; I knew Friedrich Engels, and kept my feet grounded.

It may be that Maybe Esther's halting gait echoed an error of language. Yiddish was still the mother tongue of the older Jews in Kiev, whether they were religious and clung to tradition or followed their children straight into the bright Soviet future. Many elderly Jews were proud of their command of German, and when the Germans came, they may have thought, in spite of everything that was already being told, that hovered in the air and could no longer be dismissed as lies, that they, they in particular, were the closest relatives of the occupying troops, having that special entitlement of those for whom the word is everything. The rumors

and reports coming to Kiev from Poland and Ukraine, already occupied in large part, were simply not believed. How could you possibly believe such a rumor?

Older residents still recalled the year 1918, when military turmoil and never-ending games of musical chairs to determine who would wield power were followed by the Germans marching into the city and enforcing some degree of order. And now it seemed that the Germans were restoring order. Those exact instructions in Russian: “All Jews in the city of Kiev and the surrounding area are to report to the corner of Melnik and Dekhtyarev Street (at the cemeteries) at 8:00 a.m. on Monday, September 29, 1941. Documents, money, and valuables as well as warm clothing, linens, etc. are to be brought along.” Precise, clear, and comprehensible: All, 8:00 a.m., and the exact address. And neither the cemeteries nor the pejorative word *żyd* on the Russian posters alarmed them. Maybe it had to do with the slight nuances of the Polish and the Western Ukrainian language, which had no other word for Jews than *żyd*, which sounds so insulting in Russian. There was also something about execution there. Noncompliance — execution. In the case of theft of objects by Jews—execution. So it happened only if one didn’t follow the rules.

In the time it took Babushka to walk, battles could have broken out, and Homer could have begun cataloging the ships.

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