

6: Text excerpt, Isaac Babel's "The Story of My Dovecote," 1925.

I was only nine, and I was scared of exams. Now, after two decades, it's very difficult to express how horribly scared I was. In both subjects, Russian language and arithmetic, I couldn't afford to get less than 5's. [...] At our school, the quota was stiff: a mere five percent. Out of forty boys only two Jews could get into the preparatory class [...] Father [...] demanded a 5-plus in both subjects. He utterly tormented me, threw me into an endless walking dream, a long despondent childish stupor [...]

...At the exam [...] the assistant curator asked me about Peter the Great, and I experienced a feeling of total oblivion, the sensation that the end, the abyss, was near, an arid abyss lined with ecstasy and despair.

Of Peter the Great I knew things by heart from [...] Pushkin's verses. I recited these verses, sobbing, the florid human faces suddenly streaming and jumbling in my eyes, like cards from a new deck. They shuffled at the bottom of my eyes, and meanwhile, shivering, straightening, galloping headlong, I was shouting Pushkin's stanzas at the top of my voice. On and on I shouted them, and no one interrupted my squealing flood of words. Through crimson blindness, through total freedom, I saw only [the assistant curator] Pyatnitsky's old face bent toward me with its silver-touched beard. He didn't interrupt me but merely whispered to [the teacher] Karavaev, who was rejoicing for my sake and Pushkin's.

"What a nation," said the old man. "Your little Yids, there's a devil in them."

And when at last I could shout no more, he said:

"Very well, run along, my little friend."