

TMJ Blogs

Babi Yar, War in Ukraine and the Tasman Medical Journal

[TMJ Blog 6. Published 3 March 2022]

War causes death, disease, destruction, despair and destitution. It is a valid topic for inclusion in a medical journal.

Spare a momentary thought for Mr Vladimir Putin. He does not seem to realise that by invading Ukraine he may have signed his own death warrant. A week ago he might have expected to live a full life, notwithstanding earlier adventures, and he appears not to realise that violent adventurism based on lies only ends in tragedy. Mother Russia, whom he is indulging, exists only in the creative minds of Russian romantics. How do we respond as doctors to such an unfortunate but disturbed person? Is he entitled to sympathy due to his lack of insight? Perhaps, but the negative side of the Putin ledger is now inescapable. Like most of the world, we denounce his actions in Ukraine.

Several days ago the invading Russian army attacked a broadcasting station in Kyiv. The station antenna was a short distance from Babyn Yar, also known as Babi Yar or Babiyy Yar. This infamous gully was the site of a despicable massacre of around 35,000 predominantly Jewish men, women and children by Nazi soldiers, on a pretext, over 2 days in September 1941. There were other repeated massacres at the same site until 1943. The details are highly disturbing (1). Oddly, the Russian authorities of the day, which also regarded Ukraine as part of Russia, or at least of the USSR, was reluctant to recognise the massacres for complex reasons including Soviet antisemitism.

What has this invasion and the above event to do with this Journal and myself as proprietor and editor? Two things. First, there is no doubt in my mind that no medical journal should avoid the implicit pathology of war, the human misery it causes, and the illness and death. Propensity to war is the worst example of human fallibility, and how to prevent it remains elusive. Second, I responded personally to the news, as others have, and wish to document my emotions as others will. But in addition, current events in Ukraine sparked a memory created 60 years ago, and it seems relevant to describe it.

In my teens I was a reader of LIFE magazine. My recollections of events are hazy and possibly mixed up, but I recall an article or articles, I think in LIFE, about a poem called Babi Yar, a celebrated Scottish poet named Edwin Morgan (1920-2010), and another poem about the death of (wait for it) Marilyn Monroe which occurred in 1962. I clearly recall the opening 2 lines in the LIFE version, though I cannot find any record of it now:

*“There are no memorials at Babi Yar.
The steep slope is the only gravestone”*

Why or how one’s brain selects items to memorise, in this case over 60 years, is a mystery. In my recollection, Morgan composed the poem. But last week I was shown to be wrong. In fact, the poem was written by the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko (1932-2017) in 1961. According to the report at <https://www-tc.pbs.org/auschwitz/learning/guides/reading1.4.pdf>, the translation of the same lines is

*“No monument stands over Babi Yar.
A drop sheer as a crude gravestone.”*

Another translation, at <https://holocaustmusic.ort.org/memory/memorials/>, is

“There are no monuments over Babi Yar,

the steep precipice, like a rough-hewn tomb”

Dmitri Shostakovich set Babi Yar to music and gave the same title to the first movement of his 13th symphony.

Edwin Morgan was a Glaswegian polyglot who translated poems from a variety of languages into English as well as writing in English, and what is now known as Scots (2). He believed that translating poetry was very important. I have now amended my belief that he wrote Yevtushenko’s poem to the alternative that he translated it. I await confirmation of this from the Edwin Morgan Trust in Glasgow. LIFE, in possibly the same edition, published the poem about the death of Marilyn Monroe, written by Morgan. In fact, the LIFE article(s) may have been about Edwin Morgan, rather than either Babi Yar or Marilyn Monroe. Unlike Babi Yar, his poem focused on an individual but asked questions similar to those posed by Yevtushenko: what was the ultimate cause of the deaths? Who was to blame? Morgan’s poem is about an individual, in contrast to Yevtushenko’s celebration of a population. This resembles the distinction we have to bear in mind between populations and individuals, when we apply epidemiological findings to treatment.

So, we have an elderly and melancholic Medical Journal editor with lasting memories, possibly of little value. They surfaced unannounced because a new oppressive and unjust conflict has caused the awful five D’s above, this in a continent that since the mid-20th century has attempted to avoid repetition of major war by creating a Union where differences were negotiated instead of fought over. We also note that great poets (with artists and composers) present us with ultimate truths and in the long run are more effective than battalions of soldiers bearing Kalashnikovs. This gives us hope. We are also reminded that modern wars are often caused by deluded despots, thus how to prevent them rests on recognising their deranged psychology as early as possible, and taking action.

Alasdair Millar
Editor, TMJ

Babi Yar by Yevgeny Yevtushenko (translated by AZ Foreman) is at
<http://poemsintranslation.blogspot.com/2018/02/yevtushenko-babi-yar-from-russian.html>

A Poem for Marilyn: The Death of Marilyn Monroe by Edwin Morgan is at
<http://blog.everlasting-star.net/2010/10/books/a-poem-for-marilyn-by-edwin-morgan/>

References

1. US Holocaust Memorial Museum. Mass shootings at Babyn Yar (Babi Yar).
<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/kiev-and-babi-yar> . Accessed 3 March 2022
2. Scots Language Centre (Centre for the Scots Leid).
https://www.scotslanguage.com/What_is_Scots%3F_uid2/What_is_Scots_%3F . Accessed 3 March 2022