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PROGRESS

MUSSA  
JALIL

1906-1981

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The poems in this book were written by the eminent Tatar poet, Hero of the Soviet Union and winner of the Lenin Prize, Mussa Jalil. In 1944 he fell at the hands of his fascist executioners in Moabit prison in Berlin.

Mussa Jalil never kept a diary. He wrote poems instead. Every poem was his reaction to an event in his life, a life that cannot be separated from that of his country. His poems are full of love for his wonderful land, and hatred for its foes. They tell of the poet's life and his character which formed in persistent labour and struggle.

Mustai Karim, a poet of Soviet Bashkiria, said of Mussa Jalil: "He has come to symbolise one of the summits of the greatness and pride of the Soviet people. It is just such people as he who, as ambassadors plenipotentiary, represent their country in the communion of the nations and peoples of the world. It is by them that the people of the world form their opinion of the character and heart of the nation that has given them birth."



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# MUSSA JALIL

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SELECTED POEMS

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## POETRY OF TRUTH AND PASSION \*

Jalil never kept a diary. "I don't feel inclined to and I cannot and will not make myself keep one," he once said. But when he left Kazan for the frontlines early in 1942, he felt an urge to entrust his feelings and thoughts to paper. The result, as he described it, was something intermediate between a diary and a letter. These notes convey his sorrow at parting from his beloved wife and his daughter Chulpan.... There is in them a premonition of his tragic fate. Some of the thoughts might sound trite, even slightly overstated had they not been intended for the eyes of the one person closest to him—his wife Amina:

"...I am not afraid of death. That is not an empty phrase. When I say I despise death, that is indeed so... There is a life... after death, in the awareness, the memory of the nation. If I have done anything of significance in my lifetime, anything that will remain, then I have deserved this other life—a life after death... Therein lies the objective of our lives: 'to live so we don't die after death.'"

"Disdain of death" to Jalil was not indifference. The thought that his dearly loved daughter would be orphaned caused his heart to turn over. "My heart is ready to overcome any trials, torture, and suffering, but it cannot reconcile itself to the

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\* Translated by Lydia Kmetyuk

thought that on the evening of January 8, when Chulpan saw her father off, she was seeing him for the last time." To die in the prime of life and talent is unnatural. Even the thought of death is unbearable for any human who is sound of mind. It was the more unbearable for a man who loved life to such a degree as did Mussa.

Yet Jalil was quite honest and did not contradict himself when he said he despised death. He felt he was an integral part of something much bigger, much greater than an individual, albeit an outstanding one. He felt he was a particle of society, of the nation, his Homeland. Without them he could not imagine his own life. He felt he was responsible for their destiny. Therein lay the source of his inner preparedness for his heroic feat. The very preparedness that he was soon to prove in word and in deed. For a poet, the former, incidentally, is tantamount to action.

\* \* \*

In the Soviet Union Jalil projects the image of a poet of courage. His name has become the synonym, the symbol of courage, heroism and unbounded service to his country. A passionate admirer of Jalil's poetry, the Azerbaijanian poet Samed Vurgun paid high tribute to Jalil's courage and the grandeur of his exploit which rank him among the world's greatest:

"The world and its literature know many poets who have made their names immortal, but there are few poets who have won immortality both by their unfading works and by the gallant sacrifice of their lives. They are: the great Byron, the renowned poet of the Hungarian people Petöfi, the heroic Julius Fučik and, finally, Mussa Jalil."

Mussa Jalil is the only poet of the Soviet Union's multilingual literature who was simulta-

neously awarded two of the highest government decorations: Hero of the Soviet Union for personal courage and meritorious performance of duty, and the Lenin Prize for his cycle *The Moabit Notebooks* (both awarded posthumously). The fact that the awards came together testifies to the identity of the heroic feat of the man and the poet. His life is a model of selfless service to country and genuine heroism backed up by poetry. The appeal of his poetry, I mean first and foremost the Moabit cycle, lies in its truthfulness. Every line has been paid for with the highest price imaginable—the sacrifice of blood and life.

This rare identity of word and deed is what appeals to the reader today, especially the young reader, in Jalil's poetry. It ranks among the literary works that do not lose their lustre with the years. Quite the contrary, as time passes they glitter with new brilliance revealing hitherto unnoticed facets. That is borne out by annual publications of the poet's works in the many languages of the USSR, the big editions his books come out in (well over several million copies) and translations into scores of foreign languages.

When I was in Berlin in 1976 for ceremonies to mark Mussa Jalil's 70th birth anniversary and to prepare the third edition of the Tatar poet's works in the German language, the writers of the German Democratic Republic, wanted to know in what editions Jalil's books came out in his land. I replied that the most recent Kazan edition of Jalil's poetry came out in an edition of 250 thousand copies. The German writers were astonished. "You probably mean 250 copies?" they asked me. "No, 250 thousand, a quarter of a million," I answered. I told them that Jalil's books in editions of 100 thousand copies take only a few months, sometimes weeks, to sell out. To the German writers those figures sounded fantastic.

The poet's great feat was prepared by his entire life. (Though I am far from thinking he prepared himself for it consciously. What's more, would that have been possible?) It was not a momentary inspiration, he was not acting merely on impulse.

In 1921 the 15-year-old Mussa wrote a passionate poem, a poem that was an act of faith. For an epigraph he took the motto of the Paris Commune: "We'll die but not be slaves."

*We are strong, we will not lose our bearings  
There is none can bar our onward tread.  
We are many, to the bright goal tracking,  
We cannot and will not be misled.*

*Without fear we'll close head on in battle,  
Every raging tempest we will brave.  
Even if for some the struggle's fatal  
None of us will ever be a slave.*

Twenty-odd years later the prisoner of the fascist prison Moabit Mussa Gumeroff-Jalil (as his name was marked in the files of the condemned) wrote lines in his self-made notebook that sound like the direct continuation of his youthfully uncompromising poem:

*Brave in battle you must be, djigit.  
Hope in battle never leaves the brave.  
Freedom goes with courage, they are granite.  
If you have no courage you're a slave!*

It would be very simple to draw a straight line between those two extreme points and view Jalil's entire life and creative work as a steady climb to the summit. But life develops along its own line, it has a logic of its own which will not be forced into straight-line blueprints. The poet had his ups and downs, his failures, he sought and was successful or

bitterly disappointed. *The Moabit Notebooks* is the summit of the poet's creative output, the summit to which his heroic spirit rose. But there is more to Jalil than the Moabit cycle. Jalil wrote lyrical poems, poems that were candidly of a publicistic nature, sometimes poems that were slogans from start to end, satirical poems and poems for children, librettos, satirical poems on topical subjects and reports in poetic form. Before the war Jalil was a well-known and widely recognised poet, the chief of the writers' organisation of the Tatar Republic, whose poems were included in school books. That is why it is difficult to reduce his very original and beautiful world to just one, albeit principal, line.

\* \* \*

There's a monument to Jalil at the Spasskaya Tower of the kremlin in Kazan, one of the highest points in the city open to the winds blowing freely from the Volga. The poet is depicted with his feet entangled in barbed wire, his hands tied behind his back. With proudly raised head and narrowed eyes he gazes into the vast distance where he is destined to "live after death". The muscles of his limbs are tensely knotted and his bare chest seems to breathe with unconquered power.

But there was actually nothing heroic about the appearance of the real, the earthly Mussa, as people who knew him say. Easy to get along with, high-spirited, sometimes hot-tempered, but always cooling off swiftly, he was, as they say, one of the boys. He enjoyed good company, heart-to-heart talks with friends, he loved a witty phrase and a good joke. He adored the nature of his land and was sensitive to the beauty of women.

Mussa Jalil was born in the small Tatar village Mustafino, in the Orenburg steppes. From childhood he knew what poverty and hunger meant

and the humiliation that his people were open to in pre-revolutionary years. In 1921, when a severe draught hit the steppelands, he left home so the family would have one hungry mouth less to feed and became a vagrant in the city of Orenburg.

He slept in the streets, ate what he picked up in the marketplace and even stole to keep from starving, as Jalil admitted years later in his autobiography. Soviet government enabled him to get an education and made a respectable man of him.

...“The Mussa we knew was shortish, reticent and not at all striking in appearance,” wrote the Tatar poet Sibgat Hakim, a friend of Jalil’s. “He was never still, I was used to that. He had an astonishing wit, and his eyes laughed and sparkled constantly with a quicksilver cunning...”

That was the portrait of Jalil—student of a workers’ university, subsequently the Moscow University, the instructor of the Orsk, and then the Orenburg district committees of the Young Communist League, the editor of the children’s magazines *Kechkene Ipteshlyar* (Little Comrades) and *Oktyabr Balasy* (The Children of October).

Jalil was never solely a professional man of letters. He was always studying or working, often combining two or three duties simultaneously. His friends never stopped wondering at his inexhaustible energy, his erudition and the steel-trap wit of his logic.

His poetry was like him. Impulsive and passionate, believing implicitly in the just cause of socialism, hostile to all the trash surviving from pre-revolutionary times, it was, at the same time, kindly responsive, tender and lyrical.

No definite line can be drawn between Jalil the journalist, the reporter, and the poet. He often contributed articles, essays and reports on how the Stalingrad Tractor Plant and the Moscow subway projects were progressing, on the new Bolshevik

productivity rates and about people who were in the fore, meeting targets set by the first five-year plans. He criticised bureaucrats and bribe-takers. He wrote about the youth movement and atheistic education, informed the readers of the sowing and harvesting. To one or another degree all those subjects subsequently found their way into his poems.

To Jalil there were no subjects that were below his dignity. Everything that concerned his country, concerned him personally. That is why he has so many poems that were timed for red-letter days. But he never treated such poems as shortlived. He gave them the same attention as he did to all of his other works.

Whereas his poetry on political subjects was usually written in the major key, his intimate lyrical poetry was much more low-keyed. It was sometimes sad, full of doubts and suffering: "It was quite unusual, our friendship! It was all sincerity and fire. But two strongwilled people, for each other to make hell of life we never tired." ("To Hadiya"). It is not the fact that matters in this case, but the veracity of the emotion.

\* \* \*

On April 23, 1945, the 79th Infantry Corps of the Soviet Army that was advancing on the Reichstag, took up positions along the Berlin streets of Ratenowerstrasse and Turmstrasse. A gloomy grey building encircled by a high brick wall appeared before the soldiers through the smoke of the bursting shells. That was Moabit prison. When the troops broke into the prison yard, it was empty. Only the wind stirred the remaining debris and scraps of paper, and turned the pages of some books, most probably those that had been thrown out of the prison library by a blast. A soldier who paused there before the next attack noticed several

lines in Russian on one of the clean pages of a book that was lying about: "I am the Tatar poet Mussa Jalil, held in Moabit prison as a prisoner-of-war against whom political charges have been preferred, and will most likely be shot soon. If some Russian finds this note, convey my regards to my writer-friends in Moscow and break the news to my family." The soldiers sent the page to Moscow, to the Union of Writers. That was the first his country heard of the heroic fate of Mussa Jalil.

In 1946, N. Teregulov, a former prisoner-of-war, brought a slim pad to the Union of Writers of the Tatar Republic. Closely written in it were 60 of Jalil's poems. A year later, the Belgian patriot André Timmermans, who had shared a cell with the poet, sent another notebook with Jalil's poems to Kazan. The poems in those notebooks have since become widely known as *The Moabit Notebooks*. But it took several years to trace step by step the path traversed by the poet through the death camps and to learn the details of his exploit.

In June 1942, the badly wounded and shell-shocked Mussa was taken prisoner when his unit was attempting to break out of a pocket. After months in concentration camps for Soviet prisoners-of-war, Jalil was transferred to Dęblin, a fortified stronghold in Poland. There Mussa met his fellow countrymen, for the fascists were assembling prisoners of Eastern nationalities in the camp. He sought out people he could put his trust in and together they subsequently formed a resistance group.

In late 1942, the fascists started forming what they called "national legions". Among others, the Idel-Ural legion was formed in Jedlino, Poland, of prisoners-of-war belonging to the nations of the Volga basin. (Since the majority were Tatars, the Germans usually called it the Volgo-Tatar legion.) The fascists brainwashed the prisoners in a rabidly

chauvinistic and anti-Soviet spirit, to prepare the legionnaires for action against the Soviet Army. Jalil's group set out to wreck the fascist plans, to convince the men to use the weapons they would be supplied with against the fascists themselves. The members of the resistance group infiltrated the editorial board of the *Idel-Ural* newspaper the German command produced, and printed and circulated anti-fascist leaflets among the legionnaires. They also organised the legionnaires into esoteric action groups consisting of 5 men each.

The very first battalion of the Volgo-Tatar legion that was sent to the Eastern front mutinied, shot all the German officers, and defected to the guerillas in Byelorussia.

In August 1943, fascist spies managed to track down the resistance group. Mussa Jalil and most of his militant comrades were seized. There followed nightmare days and nights of interrogations, torture, and more torture. The gestapo broke his left arm and injured his kidneys. His body was covered with welts from the beatings he got with an electric cord and rubber hose. His crushed fingers were swollen and would not bend. But the poet did not give up. Behind bars he continued his fight against fascism. He had only his poetry for a weapon.

\* \* \*

Much has been written about the horrors of fascist prison. New books, plays and pictures on the subject appear almost every year. But none are so eloquent as the story told by their inmates—the witnesses and victims of the horror. Their testimonials are more than just true to fact. They speak of a truth that has been paid for by the highest price imaginable—the price of one's own life.

*The Moabit Notebooks* of Mussa Jalil are one

of those inimitable, glaringly truthful historic documents. They contain few day-to-day details. There are practically no particulars about the prison cell, of the sufferings and humiliation to which prisoners were subjected. The poems are concrete in a totally different sense. Their concreteness lies in their emotional and psychological impact.

The feelings of the poet are stark to the extreme. He is totally cut off from the world, from his country, alone with his notebook. The absence of outside impressions brings out the wealth of his inner, emotional world.

Many of the poems of the Moabit cycle reveal how the poet suffered. Loneliness and despair were like a lump rising in his throat. One had to know Mussa's sociable disposition, his love of life, his attachment to friends, to his wife and daughter, and his love of people in general to understand how he suffered from his enforced solitude. It was not his physical suffering, not even the threat of approaching death that tormented Jalil most of all, but his separation from his homeland, from his near and dear, and the prospect of dying in a foreign and hostile land. He was not even certain that his country would learn the truth about his heroic end, he was not sure his poems would live to see freedom. What if the fascists managed to spread untruths about him and people at home would think he was a traitor? What if the "flowers of his soul", his songs, to which he had "entrusted his inspiration", the "warmth of his feelings" and the "purity of his tears", were fated to go down to the grave with him?

But the impression on reading even the most gloomy, desperate lines Jalil wrote is not oppressive. Quite the contrary, the feeling they leave is pride in the man, the greatness and nobility of his soul. A man who loves his country, his people to such an extent, who is interwoven with them with

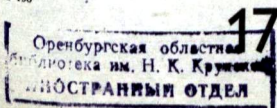
thousands upon thousands of threads, cannot disappear without a trace, as he exists not only in himself, and for himself, but in the hearts, minds and memories of many, many people. There are no traces of doom, despair and sacrifice in *The Moabit Notebooks* as there were none in the sane, life-loving heart of the poet himself.

Despite his exclusive personal fate, the poet's thoughts and feelings are typical of many people, as the mortal duel with fascism required that the Soviet people apply their entire abilities to the task before them.

*The Moabit Notebooks* mirror not only the individual features of the poet's character, but the very best qualities of the Soviet people, manifested clearly in the tragic, tense and heroic period of the war. Jalil's poetry is not limited to the framework of one destiny, albeit a most exclusive one, but reveals the very taproots of our victory.

I want to stress, furthermore, that the poems written in Moabit prison are not merely a document of a human destiny, but poetry in the most exalted sense of the word. This poetry is remarkable for its genuine culture, its style, and profoundly national character. The concensus of critical opinion is that the Moabit cycle is the summit of Tatar poetry of the World War II period and one of the very peaks of the Soviet Union's multinational literature.

The heroic feat performed by the Soviet people in World War II is gradually receding into the past. A whole generation has arisen for whom the past war is a story they have read in books or seen on the screen. But Jalil is among us to this day. Streets, Young Pioneer detachments, collective farms, theatres, community centres and ships proudly bear his name. A new city in the oilbearing region of the Tatar Republic and a central avenue in Naberezhniye Chelni, a new street in Berkakit



township on the Baikal-Amur Railway line and one of the highest peaks on the Antarctic continent have been named after Mussa Jalil. The poet lives on, he is still fighting, educating people with his own example, he participates in all our undertakings and talks with the living as one still alive.

*Raphael Mustafin*

SELECTED  
LYRICS



## СЧАСТЬЕ

Если б саблю я взял, если б ринулся с ней,  
Красный фронт защищая, сметать богачей,  
Если б место нашлось мне в шеренге друзей,  
Если б саблей лихой я рубил палачей,  
Если б враг отступил перед силой моей,  
Если б шел я вперед все смелей и смелей,

Если б грудь обожгло мне горячим свинцом,  
Если пуля засела бы в сердце моем,  
Если б смерть, не давая подняться с земли,  
Придавила меня кулаком,—  
Я бы счастьем считал эту гибель в бою,  
Славу смерти геройской я в песне пою.  
Друг-рабочий, винтовку возьми—и в поход!  
Жизнь отдай, если надо, за волю свою.

*Октябрь 1919*

## JOY

If a sword I could take and with it I could dash  
To defend the Red front and to strike at the rich,  
If the tyrants and butchers my weapon would slash,  
If onto the lines of my friends I could hitch,  
If I forged on ahead ever stronger and brash,  
If the foe to my power his defences would ditch,

If my bosom were pierced by searing lead,  
If an enemy slug in my heart would embed,  
And if death would not let me arise from the  
ground,

If it pinned me down with a fist that's of iron—  
I would deem it great joy in pitched combat to fall.  
I the death of the hero in battle extol.

Workers, friends, take a rifle and march to the  
front!

For your freedom, your life, if need be, sacrifice.

*October 1919*

*Translated by Lydia Kmetyuk*



## IF YOU ARE NOT THERE...

Though mad nightingales their joying  
  to the springtime garden tell—  
Will the world for me be joyless,  
  if you're not with me as well!

Though the woods and grasses rustle,  
  though the apple-tree blooms fair,  
Still the sweetest fruit is bitter  
  if my loved one isn't there!

Though the butterflies are flitting  
  and disporting on the lea—  
I'll be sad unless my pretty,  
  dainty butterfly's with me!

Even angels, even peris  
  are for me a host of shades—  
If there's not with me my lovely,  
  my incomparable maid!

1920

*Translated by Jessie Davies*

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