

Helen Betya Rubinstein  
"The case against Rubinstein:  
Redactions & Fissures in a fascist aesthetic"

GIDEST Seminar

May 3, 2024

12:00 pm

Room 411, 63 Fifth Ave

Material to be discussed at seminar

\*Please do not share or otherwise circulate\*

All of this is a work-in-progress, but the images especially so! Pages 1-25 are sequential and I've followed them with a pair of image drafts from later in the book. Looking forward to discussing with you all.

*A dream is but the story of a dream, yet the story of a dream is more than a dream.*

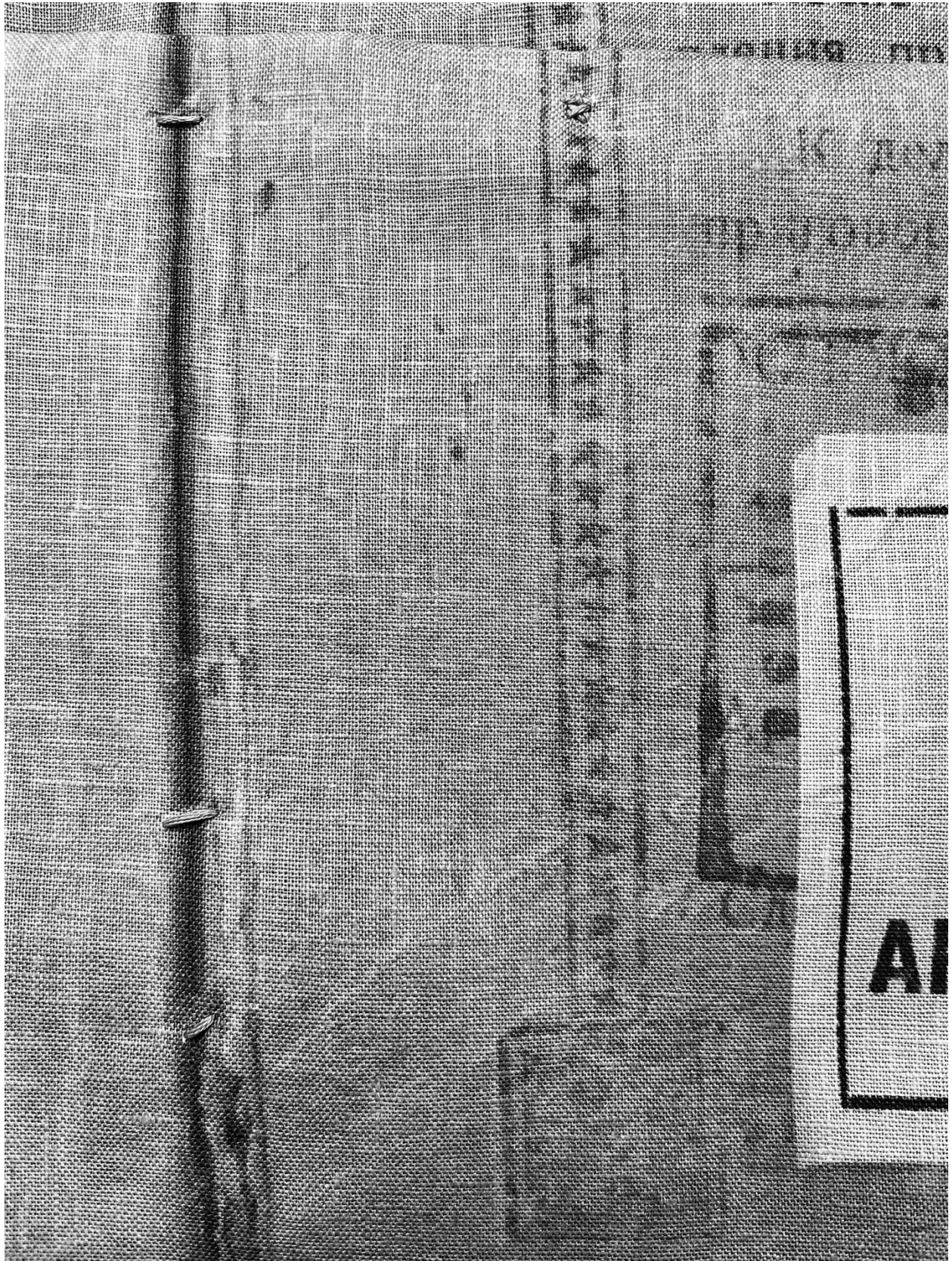
—Reb. Nachman of Bratslav

*For seventy years, Russians exerted the force of state terror against themselves... most people had played the roles of both victim and perpetrator.*

—Masha Gessen, *Never Remember*

## **THE CRIME OF STORY**

It pretends an ending. It plots. It distorts. It becomes coin. It's a form of propaganda, suspiciously seductive and suspiciously stylish. It can try to be true, like a wheel can be trued, but a story will always lie.



## EVIDENCE OF RUBINSTEIN'S CRIME

1987. I keep having to ask him, after school. Dad, what's the name of the city in Russia you're from?

On the globe it's just a dot near Kiev, which sounds too much the same. My mom and me are from New York, but my dad is from—

Dad, are you from Kishinev or Kiev?

From *Kiev*? My god.

In the bathroom in the new house Dad gives me the same haircut as always while I sit on a stool on the counter watching myself in the mirror wearing yellow goggles to keep out the falling bits of hair. Pick up your feet, he says, scooting the stool around to do my bangs, his hand pressing under my chin. You like it? Do not move. Good girl.

At school the kids ask if I'm a boy or a girl and if I'm a girl how come my hair is so short. Mom says it's a stupid thing to ask. Only in New Orleans, says Mom, would kids ask. Only here, where no one uses their turn signal, where you can't understand the people at the drive-through, where everyone assumes everyone else is Christian, even when your last name makes it obvious you are not. Where even the Jewish people, says Mom, don't know how to be Jewish.

In New Orleans I introduce myself: My mom and me are from New York but my dad is from—Russia.

Russia is the place he talks to on weekends, feet up on the metal desk in the corner of the den. He's angry, or else that's just how Russian sounds, full of rough consonants and plaintive turns. If I interrupt, he shoos me away, and if I keep trying, he calls for Mom—

It's very expensive, she says.

He's talking to the people in his pictures, who are stuck in the USSR, which is the reason he growls at the TV every night, spitting, This Gorba-*chhoff*! like it's the worst of all the bad words. The sharp-chinned woman in brown and white, the dark-eyed lady in black and white, and a cousin I can

never remember. I keep having to ask, Who's that?

Your cousin! Ella.

Is he a boy or a girl?

A girl.

Then why's his hair so short?

She's a dancer. Musya shaved her head to make more hair grow.

Who's Musya?

My sister.

You have a sister named *Moose-ya*?

But I forget, and go stare at the picture of the skinny-legged boy. He's too old-fashioned to be my cousin, with his knee socks and his heavy, un-childlike gaze. His red hair matches Mom's descriptions of Dad's once-upon-a-time beard, and the knapsack he wears, with straps in his hands, makes him look on the brink of running away. He is the person I picture when I say to people, about Dad, *He escaped*. That's the language he uses—*I got out*—and this is the place I imagine him fleeing: the hard green backdrop and bright props of a Soviet photo studio stage.



He loves to walk to the lake holding my hand, and I love to walk to the lake holding his. What should we talk about? he asks, and I answer, Let's talk about what to talk about.

OK. So what should we talk about?

*Daaaaad.*

Should I tell you how a car works? he asks one day. Are you interested? You want to know? and then he says, I didn't have anyone to explain it to me when I was your age. My father was in Siberia. Did I ever tell you that before?

What's Siberia?

You don't know what is Siberia? It's a place in Russia. With ice and snow on the ground the whole year. He was my age and I was your age, when he was there.

Like the North Pole?

How could I know what the North Pole is like? Siberia is far away also, but it's a prison there. He did some things they did not like. Not bad things, says Dad, but it's too late: I've already cast my grandfather as the raccoon-eyed bandit from the neighborhood watch sign, hunched under a Santa Claus sack, behind bars.

He saved the lives of many children, says Dad. But I had nobody to tell me how a car works, I didn't meet my father until I was seven years old. Those days, though, the only cars we saw were from the army. Soldiers would come and take us for a ride in their Jeeps. We got so excited.

At the lake the blue is magnificent, thirsty-making but polluted, I know. Motor and engine and gasoline and carburetor, Dad is saying: You understand? Ask me a question. You must have *some* question, after all that.

What color is the engine?

That's your question?

What color?

Gray, you silly girl.

He kicks at some broken glass, lobs a rock into the water. Ha. Did you think it was red?

Doh. You don't really care how the car works. Let's go home.

Yes I do.

You don't. Come on, you little stink.

But it's true: I want to know what he knows, want to be smart like he's smart, because once I asked Mom was Dad a genius, and she said, *I think so.*

At night on the couch in front of the TV he works on his yellow notepad, writing formulas that look like art. Math, he says, is the language they speak in every country.

What about music? I ask.

Music? Music too, I guess. Smart girl.

He works on his formulas and he farts, and if we complain he says, It's a free country!, a saying he copied from me. This is *America!* In *America* I can make a little *pook*.

Once, what I wanted, in my book, was to show the experience of persecution in a way that defied victimhood. In a way that gave dignity to the sufferers by showing how able they were to put suffering behind them and move forward; how, afterwards, they still felt deep love and loyalty; how they lived with a sense of purpose made clearer, more powerful, maybe, for what they'd been through. Because in my family there were no screaming nightmares, no bouts of rage or depression brought on, as might be affirmed in hushed, solemn voices, by the war—none that I knew of, that is. And so what I wanted was to lay this out, in contrast to the *Number the Stars* and the *Night* of things, which showed how life was in the thick of it: I wanted to lay out the after-ness, the victory inherent in putting things behind. My book would be about moving forward, about remaining a person, someone like Mendel—alert, and maybe on edge, but with this foolproof motto: Stop crying. *It's not good for you to cry like that.*

All of this grew from what I might have perceived as a kind of glibness about the war—because, really, how could you speak of what had happened in a way that sounded like anything other than a horrible joke? So it was about their moving forward; it was about a healthy kind of forgetting. The problem being that to know what has been forgotten it must first be remembered. And I had so little idea what to remember, in Dad's family's case: no idea what it meant to have *saved the lives of many children*—Jewish kids, okay, sent somewhere safer and less starved. Later I'd learn that he'd organized the orphanage alongside many other people, three years before he was arrested, in a ghetto in the region of Ukraine then called Transnistria, where he was an official leader. Still, the most I could summon was a flickering image, a bad signal, something black and white and Indiana Jones. *They escaped to Balta by horse*, Dad had said, which meant racing through the countryside at a gallop, his mother clutching her baby, his father his trumpet, as they fled Nazi danger—dust kicking up behind them. *Five hundred Jewish orphans*: a sea of Anne-Frank faces, sunken and dirty and

Don't write another book about the Holocaust. Don't tell it again. Don't deepen the groove. Don't say that it's over. That it's a story. That it isn't so familiar it's sick. *The way Americans talk about it—* give these words to a stranger—*It's disgusting! It's perverse!* Don't hear yourself agreeing, *I know.*

Don't say Hitler. Don't say Stalin. No Germany, no Meister, no death. No victims. No master narrative. No narrator. No resolution. No understanding. No giving in. No grief!

It cannot make sense. Must be silent. And loud. Fiction. And not. Poetry after. The all and the only, the whole and nothing but, so help me, so God.

In New Orleans Dad teaches me to ride a bike. He teaches me the secret to turning a corner: to look where I'm going, not where I am. He teaches me math the Russian way, by making me figure it out, at least until it makes me cry. He takes me to the university rec center, where every day he swims three kilometers, and in the summer in the outdoor pool he teaches me breaststroke and backstroke and how to hold my fingers together so that my hands work like flippers. He tells me not to be afraid, that he had a sister who drowned in the bath before he was born and if only his grandmother had not been afraid of water, then maybe she could have been saved. This sister, he says, my parents never forgot. They never stopped feeling sad about her death. Doht, he says—short for *daughter*, *dochka*. Isn't it sad?

He reads me Russian fairytales, crocodile stories in a singsong that sounds like teasing, but the language is one thing he doesn't teach. Do you know what that means? he asks each time one ends. You don't know what it means?

Mom says, I can't believe it, your own daughter doesn't know Russian.

He says, I cannot believe, my own daughter doesn't know Russian. You don't know Russian, do you.

And I beg, Teach me, Teach me Russian, but then he reads it again and I wonder if the alligators, with their dark watercolor greens swaying across the pages, are supposed to be scary or friendly, and I don't remember the words. You don't want to learn, he says. Agh. Never mind.

I don't want her to learn, he announces. I'm not Russian.

You're not Russian?

No. I am American.

You're not American! You're from Russia.

But I took a test, and now I'm American. I had to know Mickey Mouse.

I tell everybody he's Russian anyway, adding details to explain his escape. *A taxi took him across the border. They broke through one of those orange-and-white-striped gates.*

Your dad's Russian? Is he a spy?

I don't think so.

Dad, are you a spy?

A spy! Where did you get such a ridiculous idea?

Are you?

Of course I'm not a spy. I'm Jewish.

Jewish people can't be spies?

Not for Russia.

Could you be a spy for America?

For that you have to be born in America. *You* could be a spy.

*I* could be a spy. A woman spy.

And if I were a spy?



DRAFT 3,319 | SPRING 2024



## EXHIBIT

### ON THE DEFENDANT'S RECALCITRANT, HARDHEADED, FOOLISH, & ARGUABLY LIFE-THREATENING COMMITMENT TO COMMITTING THE CRIME

2017

Here is our defendant, marching up the steps of the Department of Ukrainian State Security, American passport in hand. It's a blue day in Odesa, early spring. She wears sky-colored corduroys with a red cotton puffer coat that's still bright but which she'll continue to wear until the sleeves tear and go gray. She's chatting with the friend at her side as they stride toward whatever is inside, and she may not feel bold, but she will look bold to the cluster of citizens in the vestibule, all of whom are dressed in the austere blacks and whites appropriate for a visit with the state.

When the defendant told her father she planned to try to access the file on *his* dad, he was furious: *They wouldn't give it to my father. Why would they give it to you or to me?* The effort wouldn't just be futile, he claimed, it would be dangerous, meant announcing herself to the current iteration of the KGB. *They're afraid you will make a story out of it*, he said. *Which you obviously want to do.*

Our defendant approaches the building as if she is popping into the store for bananas and milk, or strutting toward anything else to which she thinks she has a right. Despite her father's warnings—despite the fact he'd regaled Mom with so many examples of what could go wrong that neither of them could sleep—she seems nevertheless to have failed to internalize his sense of caution, his wariness of anything pertaining to the state.

Inside, she and her friend yank on a set of locked glass doors, ignoring the armed guard, who taps on the window of his booth with a rifle to alert these underdressed Americans to the order of things. A moment later, her friend is dialing the extension of the archivist upstairs and pronouncing

her grandfather's name: RUBINSTEIN, P. I. Five minutes after that, when he redials the number, the archivist responds, I have his file right here.

It's March 15, 2017. Almost thirteen years have passed since RUBINSTEIN dragged her father to Russia and Moldova in search of a history she is still trying uselessly to see. Five years since she started recording her conversations with him—or, as she put it to friends, *KGB'ing my poor Soviet-traumatized dad*. Four years since she showed him the pages she wrote about that trip, three years since he stopped answering her questions (calling her nonfiction *the worst fiction there could be*), and one year since she gave up trying to ask.

So here is a question for the defendant, who by 2017 had already sworn to quit telling stories of her family's lives. Tell us, RUBINSTEIN. Why did you travel to Odesa? What did you think would change? When you tugged on the locked doors of the former KGB, what the hell did you expect to find?

## PETITION FOR REHABILITATION

2024

I, RUBINSTEIN H. B., was born in 1982 to a practical family. My father was an engineer and my mother a law student. I admit he liked to draw pictures with me, and sometimes surprised me with his inventiveness when he did. I admit she had wanted to study journalism, which some people consider a storytelling art, instead. I admit that my mother's father, my grandpa Mendel, was a storyteller if not by profession then by personality, the kind who could make his face shrink and expand to illustrate whatever he said. He had a repertoire of jokes, and stories passed on from friends, and stories of himself, and yes, some experts believe repeating the same stories in the same ways, using the same words, the same pauses and intonations, is a sign of hiding, or lying to oneself, an emphasis meant, if only unconsciously, to lock out whatever else threatens to attach to the tale—a totalizing impulse, one we might call authoritarian—and yes, the theory sticks with me for a reason; yes, I know and believe it as surely as I know and believe the words in the pages of the case file here—and yet I return to them, here I am returning to them to plead once again for your reconsideration, for the possibility of rehabilitating my record and my name, after so many years of sitting hunched at my desk, in a condition we might call “arrest.”

I would like to say I am not guilty. But I put myself on trial because I wanted to correct the Soviet Union's case against my grandfather Pinkhas, because some part of me believed that if I wrote my own case, then I might overwrite his. *He always said it justified his existence*, Dad repeated, about his father's so-called “crime,” to the researchers we sought out before any of us saw the Soviet file ourselves. That even knowing he'd be imprisoned, even knowing he might not survive, he still would have helped orchestrate those children's escape.

I hadn't expected to open that file's soft stamped folder. To turn its browning pages,

examine the different handwritings, the purple blotted ink. That spring, in Odesa, I was just trying to figure out how to be more fully alive. I had already given up defending my so-called “crime,” and while it’s tempting to cast the trip as a desperate attempt to repair something between me and Dad that had broken, it was more an act of defiance—or no, an appeal: my body traveling to the source of the history I had promised to stop imagining and stop trying to write.

Between 1947 and the day I saw it myself, state officials turned the pages of Dad’s father’s file some twenty or fifty times, using the words printed there to pronounce him guilty and then guilty once more. The file’s relationship to what actually happened between my grandfather and his investigators was tenuous, as was the relationship between the state’s telling of his history and the history he lived. But in the eyes of the Soviet government, the file itself—that state-serving story, corrupt fantasy of the past—mattered more than the events it claimed to document. The events were what the file sought to replace.

I photographed the brittle pages and brought the images home to translate, parsing the legalese beside Dad, Musya, and Russian-speaking friends. Two-hundred-some folios, numbered once in pencil and once in pen, by two conflicting hands. A table of contents. A series of interrogations. Witnesses summoned by the state. The pages failed to tell the story we expected. Even after translating them, I found myself still wondering what they meant. Testimony after testimony recited the same accusations using the same phrases—and in those days, said Dad, *people would testify anything to save their own ass*. The only certainty, it seemed, was that a fiction was what the file contained. And so I resolved to return to my anti-fiction, my investigation and my collected evidence, this time in the form of a case against me.

Like my grandfather’s, my case would begin with interrogations—questions I asked once upon a time, and those I now ask of myself—and proceed with confrontations between me and other witnesses, between me and the mythologies of the language and the nation that shaped me.

Like my grandfather, I would have a chance to appeal. But my appeal would be long-belabored and long-winded, and even afterward, I would have many opportunities to try to decriminalize myself. Unlike his case, which accrued just underlines and marginalia as it was revisited over the years, my case would be a document I could revise, and revise, and revise. I knew the Soviet Union's storytelling had been criminal. So had the storytelling of the United States. But what about mine? Did storytelling only leave my grandparents more dead, or could it also bring them to life?

I, RUBINSTEIN H. B., have been charged with THE CRIME OF STORY, which is to say betrayal of family, betrayal of state, betrayal of state-as-family and family-as-state, betrayal of so many given states of affairs. I stand accused of being insufficiently pious toward the past, which is probably fair. I've chosen not to imagine my grandfather's situation in prison while the pages in his file were inked and typed. I've chosen, just now, not to reprint their accusations, or call them *the pages that determined his fate*. I wanted to save stories. My grandfather wanted to save lives. I would like to say I am not guilty, but it's possible this whole book is a crime.

ДЕЛО

УЧТЕНО в 19

обвинению

*Рудинский*

*Копия в 10...*

в то . . . 19

ено . . .

*Л. В. 24*

ВОЕННЬ

# THE CASE AGAINST RUBINSTEIN

an anti-fiction

Helen Betya Rubinstein

*for Nadya (1914-89)*  
*Pinkhas (1911-77)*  
*Chaye (1924-76)*  
*& Mendel (1911-2006),*  
*who told what they could*  
*& lived what they couldn't*

Опись

находящиеся в следствии

Кованые инструменты

1

о прикати гена

2-3

на ерей

4

об изобразки меза пича.

5

засемятиско

6-7

меховой обшлаго

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обшлага

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токой судзаседани

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ловор

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из препроводительного

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интереса осужденного

раскылки конит

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раскылки

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It pretends an ending	00
<i>evidence of the crime</i>	
<i>interrogations</i>	
<i>ochnaya stavka, witness testimony, statement of charges</i>	
It plots	00
<i>interrogations</i>	
<i>exhibits</i>	
It distorts	00
<i>ochnyye stavki</i>	
It becomes coin	00
<i>defendant testimony</i>	
<i>witness testimony</i>	
It's a form of propaganda	00
<i>appeals</i>	
<i>interjections</i>	
It can try to be true	00
[        ]	
But a story will always lie	00
<i>petition for rehabilitation</i>	

061

Решение

между генералом и своим производством /

августе мес., 13-го дня, г. Бух

и. Карабулаккин, рассмотрев

знаком преступной деятель

тайна ~~журнала~~ Шукорова

старшиной, с обвинением

Харенко Оккупационной

ердженки ответственности за совер

лен ответственности за совер

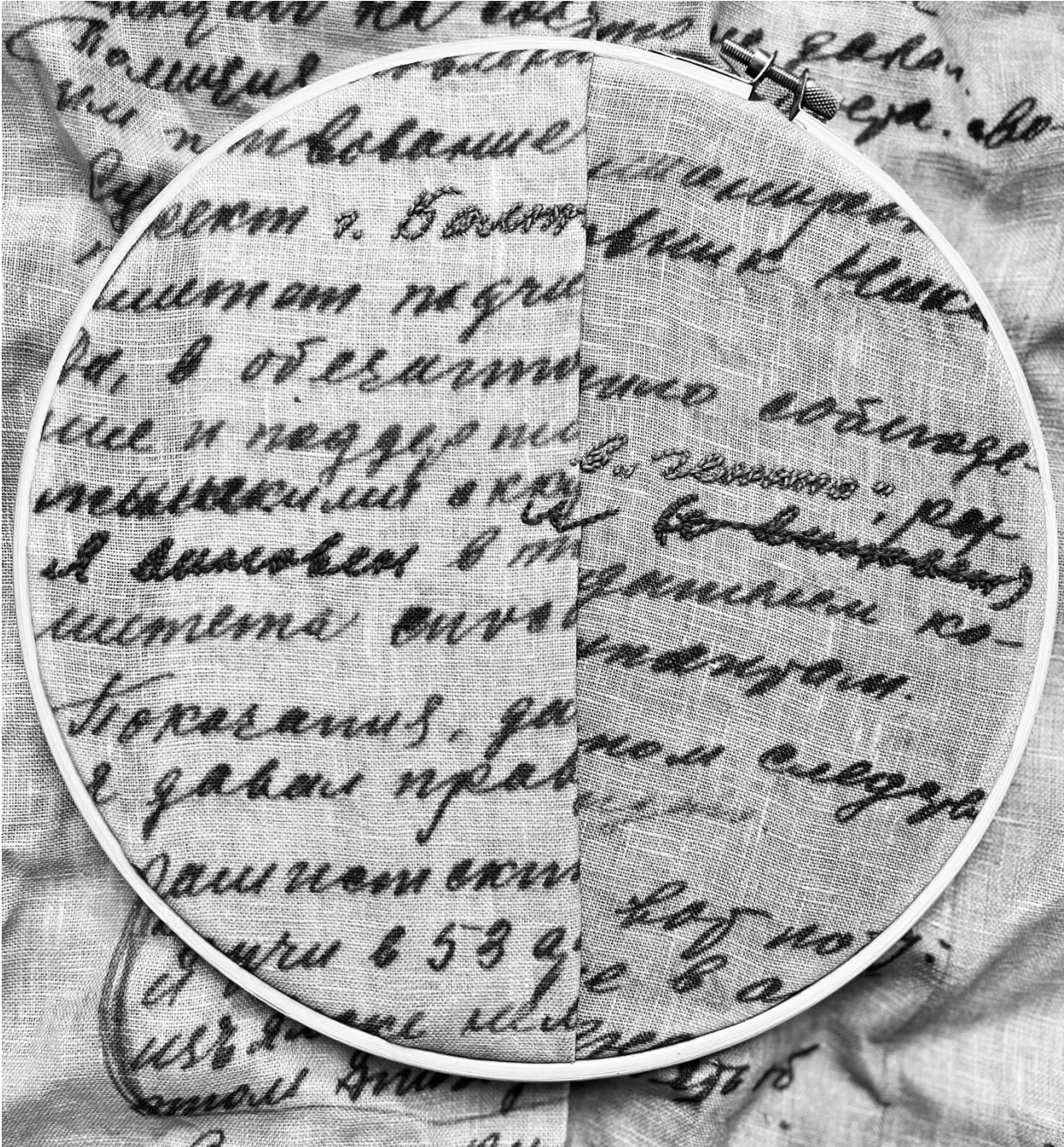
Дувановича Шукорова

шну.

Resolution (for proceeding with the case), August 13, 1947. Having considered the materials of the criminal investigation—

Троцкий-Гайман  
года, августа мес, 14-го. гуде, г. Б.  
арестованного —  
Рубинштейна Пинхос  
расскажите с какой целью вы  
из г. Кишинёва переехали в г. Буря  
После окончания в г. Киш  
крупнейшей школы  
каменным карьером  
При камне, автодроме, в  
мал 1940 г. Вы нелегально пере

Interrogation, August 14, 1947. Question: Tell us, with what intent did you travel... Under what circumstances and with what purpose...



Trial, December 30, 1947. and (~~I am guilty~~) I am guilty