VINTAGE

# THE DOGS AND THE WOLVES

IRÈNE NÉMIROVSKY

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# About the Book

Ada grows up motherless in the Jewish pogroms of a Ukrainian city in the early years of the twentieth century. In the same city, Harry Sinner, the cosseted son of a city financier, belongs to a very different world. Eventually, in search of a brighter future, Ada moves to Paris and makes a living painting scenes from the world she has left behind. Harry Sinner also comes to Paris to mingle in exclusive circles, until one day he buys two paintings which remind him of his past and the course of Ada's life changes once more…

# About the Author

Irène Némirovsky was born in Kiev in 1903, the daughter of a successful Jewish banker. In 1918 her family fled the Russian Revolution for France where she became a bestselling novelist, author of *David Golder*, *Le Bal*, *The Courilof Affair*, *All Our Worldly Goods* and other works published in her lifetime or afterwards, such as *Suite Française* and *Fire in the Blood*.

Némirovsky was prevented from publishing when the Germans occupied France and moved with her husband and two small daughters from Paris to the safety of the small village of Issy-l'Evêque (in German occupied territory). She died in Auschwitz in 1942.

Sandra Smith is a fellow of Robinson College, Cambridge, and has translated ten of Irène Némirovsky’s novels into English.

Also by Irène Némirovsky

*Suite Française*
*David Golder*
*Le Bal (including Snow in Autumn)*
*The Courilof Affair*
*Fire in the Blood*
*All Our Worldly Goods*
*Jezebel*
*The Wine of Solitude*
*The Misunderstanding*

IRÈNE NÉMIROVSKY

# The Dogs and the Wolves

*Translated from the French by Sandra Smith*

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# TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

*The Dogs and the Wolves* was originally published in French in 1940 as *Les Chiens et les Loups*. As with many of Irène Némirovsky's titles, its translation was problematic for it evokes a particular expression in French. '*Entre chien et loup*' means 'dusk': the time of day when it is difficult to distinguish clearly between similar shapes. Simultaneously, dogs and wolves are members of the same family: the ones domesticated, the others, savage. Though the subtlety of the French expression is lost in English, the recurring theme remains clear.

Throughout the work, Némirovsky also uses variations on the word '*étrange*'. In French, this word has several connotations: 'strange', 'foreign', 'different', and, as a noun, 'outsider' as well. As a translator, it is necessary – though frustrating! – to choose one meaning. Readers should therefore keep in mind the many implications when these words arise.

The novel opens in a Ukranian city that is home to two distantly related Jewish families: the Sinners. The wealthy Sinners live high up on the hill, while their poor relations are confined to the worst part of town, down near the river. The novel follows the two sides of the family as they move to Paris, where their destinies become more and more entwined. As with many of Némirovsky's works, *The Dogs and the Wolves* explores the intricate social problems foreigners faced in 1930s France as they try to assimilate. In addition, Némirovsky provides great insight into the

complex relationship between the different social classes within Jewish society itself.

The use of the family name ‘Sinner’ is also striking, particularly given the fact that Némirovsky had excellent English. When I asked her daughter, Denise Epstein, if she felt the choice of name was significant, she replied that she thought it had been chosen deliberately. Throughout the novel, Némirovsky plays on the concept of sin by forcing her characters constantly to make moral choices.

*The Dogs and the Wolves* is an important novel. It combines Némirovsky’s lyrical prose with a perceptive exploration of Russian history, French society between the two world wars, immigration and religion, against the backdrop of passionate love.

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# 1

THE UKRAINIAN CITY in which generations of the Sinner family had been born was, in the eyes of the Jews who lived there, made up of three distinct regions. It was like a Medieval painting: the damned were at the bottom, trapped among the shadows and flames of Hell; the mortals were in the middle, lit by a faint, peaceful light; and at the top was the realm of the blessed.

In the lower part of town, down by the river, lived the scum. These were the unsavoury Jews, the self-employed craftsmen, the tenants of sordid little shops, the vagabonds, the people whose children rolled in the mud, spoke only Yiddish and wore ragged clothes with enormous caps perched above their frail necks and long dark curls. Far, far away, where lime trees crowned the tops of the hills, and important Russian officials and members of the Polish nobility had their houses, were a few beautiful villas owned by wealthy Jews. They had chosen this location because of its clean air, but most importantly because in Russia, at the beginning of the century under the reign of Nicholas II, Jews were tolerated only in certain towns, certain districts, certain streets, and sometimes only on one side of the street; the other side was out of bounds. Such restrictions, however, applied only to the poor: it was unheard of for a bribe not to circumvent even the most severe laws. It was therefore a point of honour amongst the Jews to defy them, not out of any sense of insolence or

pride, but to send a message to other Jews: to show that they were worth more, had earned more money, got a better deal for their beets or corn. It was a convenient way of demonstrating wealth. So and so was born in the ghetto. By the time he was twenty, he'd made a bit of money so he could climb a rung of the social ladder; he moved and went to live away from the river, near the market, on the edge of the lower town. By the time he got married, he was already living on the even-numbered side of the street (the forbidden side); later, he climbed another rung: he moved to an area where, according to the law, no Jew had the right to be born, to live, to die. He was respected. To his friends and family, he was simultaneously an object of envy and the very symbol of hope: proof that it was indeed possible to attain such heights. Hunger meant nothing; being cold, living in filth meant nothing given such prospects. And from the lowest, poorest part of town, many eyes looked upwards, towards the cool hills where the rich men lived.

Between these two extremes was a middle ground, a drab land where neither great poverty nor great wealth existed, where the Russian, Polish and Jewish middle classes lived together, more or less in peace.

Yet even here, halfway up the hill, the community was divided into little groups who were envious and despised each other. At the top were the doctors, the lawyers, the managers of large estates; at the bottom were the common rabble: shopkeepers, tailors, pharmacists and the like.

But there was one section of society that served as a link between all the different districts, and whose members scraped a living by running from one house to the other, from the lower end of town to the top. Ada's father, Israel Sinner, was one of this brotherhood of *maklers* or go-betweens. Their profession consisted of buying and selling on behalf of other people – beet, sugar, wheat, agricultural machinery, all the usual merchandise of the Ukraine – but

they could also get hold of silk and tea, Turkish Delight and coal, caviar from the Volga and fruit from Asia, depending on their clients' needs. They begged, they pleaded, they belittled their rivals' goods; they moaned, they lied, they used every ounce of imagination, all the subtle arts of persuasion to win a commission. You could tell who they were by their rapid speech, their gestures, the way they hurried (at a time and in a country where no one hurried), by their humility, their tenacity, and by the many other qualities unique to them.

Ada, who was still little more than a baby, sometimes went with her father to do his buying. He was a short, thin man with sad eyes who loved her and found comfort simply in holding her hand. For her, he walked more slowly; he bent towards her anxiously, made sure the heavy grey wool shawl she wore over her old coat and little brown velvet hat with ear flaps were properly arranged, cupped his hand over her mouth in winter: on the street corners, the bitter wind seemed to lie in wait for the passers-by and slap their faces with joyful ferocity.

'Be careful. Are you cold?' her father would ask.

And he told her to breathe through her shawl so that the freezing air would warm up a bit as it passed through the wool. But it was impossible: she felt she was suffocating. As soon as he looked away, she used her fingernail to make the little hole in the shawl a bit bigger and tried to catch snowflakes on the end of her tongue. She was so thoroughly wrapped up that all you could see of her was a small square bundle on top of thin legs, and, from close up, two large black eyes peering out between the dark cap and the grey shawl; her eyes looked even bigger because of the dark circles beneath them, and their expression was as intense and fearful as a wild young animal's.

She had just turned five and was beginning to take in everything around her. Until now, she had wandered about in a world so out of proportion to her scrawny body that

she barely realised it existed; it dwarfed her. She gave it no more thought than an insect hidden in the grass might. But she was older now and determined to know life: those motionless giants standing in the doorways, icicles hanging from their moustaches, who breathed out the fetid odour of alcohol (curiously, their breath seemed to transform into a spurt of steam, then into little needles of snow), were in fact ordinary men, *dvorniks*, caretakers who looked after the houses. And those other men whose heads seemed to disappear into the clouds and who dragged shining sabres behind them, they were called 'officers'. They were frightening because whenever her father saw them he clung to the walls and seemed to try to make himself even smaller. But, despite this, she believed they belonged to the human race. For a while now, she'd dared look at them: a few of them wore grey greatcoats lined in red (you could see the scarlet fabric, symbol of their rank of General, when they climbed into the sleighs), and some of them had long white beards, like her grandfather.

At the town square, she stopped for a moment to admire the horses. In winter, they wore green or red blankets decorated with pom-poms, so that the snow they kicked up didn't fly on to their backs. The square was the heart of the town – there were beautiful hotels, shops, restaurants, lights and bustle – but soon she and her father descended once more down the narrow, steep streets that sloped towards the river, had gaps in the paving stones, and were poorly lit by lanterns, until finally they stopped in front of the home of some potential client.

In a smoke-filled, half-lit room with a low ceiling, five or six men were screaming, like chickens whose throats were being slit. Their faces were all red; their veins throbbed on their foreheads. They raised their arms and pointed to the heavens or beat their chests.

'May God strike me dead on the spot if I'm lying!' they said.

Sometimes, they pointed to Ada. ‘I swear to God on the life of this innocent child that the silk wasn’t torn when I bought it! Is it *my* fault, me, a poor Jew with a family to feed, if the mice got at some of it while it was in transit?’

They argued, they walked out, they slammed the doors; on the doorstep, they stopped, they came back. The buyers drank tea from large glasses in silver holders, feigning an air of indifference. The go-betweens (there were always five or six of them who showed up at the same time once they’d caught wind of a deal) accused each other of cheating, theft, fraud or worse; they looked as if they might tear each other to pieces. Then everything calmed down: a deal had been struck.

Ada’s father took her hand and they left. Once in the street, he let out a long, deep sigh that ended with a nod of his head and a mournful, heavy moan: ‘Oh, my God, my dear God!’ Sometimes he groaned because the *gescheft*, the deal, hadn’t worked out, and all his efforts, the weeks of endless discussions and schemes had been in vain; sometimes because he’d actually managed to win out over his rivals. But he had to sigh or moan no matter what happened: God was immovable and ever-present, like a spider at the centre of its web, stalking man and ready to punish anyone who seemed proud to be happy. God was always there, fervent and jealous; it was necessary to fear Him and, while simultaneously thanking Him for His goodness, also to make sure that He didn’t believe He had granted all of His creature’s wishes, so that He didn’t lose interest and continued to provide protection.

Afterwards, they visited another house, and then another. Sometimes they even went up to the wealthy homes. Ada would wait in the entrance hall, so overwhelmed by the magnificent furniture, the number of servants and the thickness of the carpets, that she dared not move. She sat dead still on the edge of a chair, staring wide-eyed and trying not to breathe; sometimes she

pinched her cheeks so she wouldn’t fall asleep. Finally, they would return home on the tram, in silence, holding hands.

# 2

‘SIMON ARKADIEVICH,’ SAID Ada’s father, ‘I’m like the Jew who went to complain to a *zadik*, a holy man, to ask his advice about his poverty…’

Israel Sinner mimed the encounter between the poor man and the saint:

‘“Oh, Holy One, I am poverty stricken; I have ten children to feed, a difficult wife, a mother-in-law in perfect health, with a hearty appetite and plenty of energy … What shall I do? Help me!”

‘And the holy man replied: “Get twelve goats and let them live with you.”

‘“But what will I do with them? We’re already piled one on top of the other like herrings in a barrel; we all sleep on thin straw mattresses. We’re suffocating. What will I do with your goats?”

‘“Hear me, ye of little faith. Take the goats into your house and you will be glorifying God.”

‘A year later, the poor man returned: “Well, are you happier?”

‘“Happy? My life is a living Hell! I’ll kill myself if I have to keep those damned animals!”

‘“Well, now you can get rid of them and you will appreciate the happiness you didn’t realise was yours before. Without their stench and their butting horns, your poor hovel will seem like a palace to you. Everything on this earth is relative.”

‘In the same way, Simon Arkadievich, I complained about my Fate. I had my father-in-law to lodge and my daughter to feed. It was hard to find work and they had little to eat. But it is natural for man to sweat a great deal to earn a little bread. I was wrong to complain. Now I find that my brother has died and my sister-in-law, his widow, is coming to live with me with her two children. Three more mouths to feed. Work, toil, pitiful man, poor Jew: you can rest when you are deep beneath the ground …’

That was how Ada learned of the existence and imminent arrival of her cousins. She tried to picture their faces. It was a game that kept her occupied for hours on end; she saw and heard nothing of what was happening around her, then seemed to wake up as if out of some dream. She heard her father say to Simon Arkadievich:

‘Someone told me about a shipment of raisins from Smyrna. Are you interested?’

‘Leave me in peace! What would I do with your raisins?’

‘Don’t get angry, don’t get angry … I could get you some cotton from Nijni cheap?’

‘To hell with your cotton!’

‘What would you say to a batch of ladies’ hats from Paris, just a tiny bit damaged after a railway accident? They’re still being held at the border and would cost half what they’re worth.’

‘Hmm … how much?’

When they were in the street, Ada asked: ‘Are my aunt and cousins going to live with us?’

‘Yes.’

They were walking down an enormous empty boulevard. As a result of ambitious planning, a number of new avenues intersected the town; they were wide enough for a squadron to march between the double row of lime trees, but only the wind rushed from one end to the other, swirling the dust around with a sharp, joyous whistle. It was a summer’s evening, beneath a clear, red sky.

‘There’ll be a woman in the house,’ Ada’s father finally said, looking sadly at her, ‘someone to take care of you …’

‘I don’t want anyone to take care of me.’

He shook his head. ‘Someone to stop the servant from stealing, and I won’t have to drag you around with me all day …’

‘Don’t you like me coming with you?’ asked Ada, her little voice trembling.

He stroked her hair gently: ‘Of course I do, but I have to walk slowly so your legs don’t get tired, and we brokers earn our living by running. The faster we run, the quicker we get to the rich people’s homes. Other brokers earn more than me because they run faster than me: they can leave their children at home, where it’s nice and warm.’

‘With their wives …’ he thought. But you weren’t supposed to speak of the dead, out of a superstitious fear of attracting the attention of disease or misfortune (demons were always lying in wait), and so as not to upset the child. She had plenty of time to learn how difficult life was, how uncertain, how it was always poised to steal the things you cherished most … And anyway, the past was the past. If you dwelt on it, you lost the strength you needed to keep going. That was why Ada had to grow up barely ever hearing her dead mother’s name, or anything about her or her brief life. There was a faded photograph in the house of a young girl in a school uniform with long dark hair spilling down over her shoulders. Half-hidden behind the heavy curtain, the portrait seemed to watch the living with a look of reproach: ‘I was also once like you’ those eyes seemed to say. ‘Why are you afraid of me?’ But no matter how shy, how sweet she may have been, she was still frightening, she who lived in a realm where there was no food, no sleep, no fear, no angry arguments, nothing, actually, that resembled the fate of humans on this earth.

Ada’s father feared the arrival of his sister-in-law and her children, but really, the house was too neglected, too

dirty, and his little girl needed a woman to look after her. As for himself, he was resigned to never being anything but a poor man, uneducated, even though he'd dreamt of better things when he'd got married … But his own desires, he himself, in the end, counted for little. You worked, you lived, you had hopes for your children. Weren't they your flesh and blood? If Ada managed to have more than he had on this earth, he'd be happy. He imagined her wearing a beautiful embroidered dress with a bow in her hair, like the rich children. How could he know how to dress a child? She looked old-fashioned and sickly in her clothes; they were too big and too long. He'd bought them because the fabric was of good quality, but sometimes the colours didn't go well together … He glanced over at the Tartan dress she was wearing with the little black velvet bodice that Nastasia, the cook, had made. He didn't like his daughter's hairstyle either, that thick fringe on her forehead that came right down to cover her eyebrows, and the uneven dark ringlets around her neck. Her poor little thin neck … He put his hand around the back of her neck and gently squeezed it, his heart bursting with tenderness. But since he was Jewish, it wasn't enough to dream of his little girl with plenty to eat, well cared for, and, later on, making a good marriage. He would love to find within her some talent, some extraordinary gift. Perhaps she could one day be a musician or a famous actress? His desires were modest and limited out of necessity, since he only had a daughter. Ah, vain wishes, hopes dashed! A son! A boy! It hadn't been God's will, but he consoled himself with the thought that the sons of his friends, far from being the delight of their twilight years, were the affliction, the disgrace and the obvious punishment inflicted by the Lord: they were involved in politics; they were imprisoned or exiled by the government; others wandered from one place to another, far away, in foreign cities. Not that he would object to sending Ada to study in Switzerland, Germany or

France when she was older … But he had to work, tirelessly save money. He looked at the filthy little notebook where he made notes on the various merchandise he had to sell, and walked faster.

# 3

IN THE EVENINGS they drank tea, squeezed together on the leather settee in the narrow dining room, one glass after another of strong, hot tea, with a slice of lemon in it and a sugar lump to nibble, until Ada fell asleep in her seat. The kitchen door was always left open, allowing the smoke from the stove to pour into the room. Nastasia rummaged through the dishes, stirred the wood in the stove, sometimes singing as she went, or muttering, her voice sounding tipsy. Barefoot, wearing a scarf on her head, she was fat, heavy, flabby and smelled of alcohol; she suffered from chronic toothache, and an old faded shawl framed her wide red face. Nevertheless, she was the ‘Messalina’ of the neighbourhood, and rare were the nights when there wasn’t a pair of boots belonging to one of the local soldiers standing in the kitchen, just in front of the dirty, torn curtain that screened off her bed.

Ada’s maternal grandfather lived with his son-in-law. He was a handsome elderly man, his face adorned with a white beard; he had a long thin nose and a receding hairline. His life had been strange: when he’d been a very young man, he’d escaped from the ghetto and travelled in Russia and Europe. He hadn’t been motivated by a desire for wealth, but rather a thirst for knowledge. He’d come home as poor as when he’d left, but with a trunk full of books. His father had died and he had to support his mother and find husbands for his sisters. He had never spoken a word to

anyone about his travels, his experiences or his dreams. He had taken over his father's jewellery business: he sold moderately priced silver, along with rings and brooches decorated with gemstones from the Urals which newlyweds from the lower town liked to buy. But even though he spent his days behind a counter, when night fell, he padlocked and chained his door closed and opened the trunk of books. He would take out a wad of paper and the old quill pen that made a scratching sound and work on his book, a book that Ada would never see completed; all she would ever know was its incomprehensible title: 'The Character and Defence of Shylock'.

The shop was on the ground floor of the Sinners' house. After evening tea, it was her grandfather's habit to go down into the shop, the manuscript under his arm and carrying a small pot of ink and his pen. An oil lamp burned on the table, while the stove, filled with logs, roared, spreading warmth and casting a reddish glow throughout the room. Ada, whose father had gone back to town, would leave Nastasia in the arms of her soldier, and go downstairs to sit beside her grandfather, rubbing her heavy, tired eyes. She would slide silently on to a chair next to the wall. Her grandfather would read or write. An icy draught slipped through the crack in the door and made the end of his long beard flutter. These winter nights, full of tranquil melancholy, were the sweetest moments of Ada's life. But they were about to be lost because of the arrival of Aunt Raissa and her children.

Aunt Raissa was a thin, energetic, dry woman with a pointy nose and chin, a scathing tongue and eyes as sharp and shining as the point of a needle. She was rather vain about her slim figure, which she made look even slimmer by wearing a narrow buckled belt and the full corset popular at the time. She was a redhead; the contrast between her flamboyant hair and her thin, aging body was strange and painful to behold. She wore her hair like the