

Memories of a land in stagnation

During the final years of socialist stagnation, dissident culture in the Soviet Union reawakened. Everyone listened to the songs of Vysotsky, most people had a distrust of official statements. And Sabina Spielrein's fate began to unravel in unfathomable ways.

BY **MAGNUS LJUNGGREN**

THE USSR IN 1983

In the spring of 1983 I spent a few months in the Soviet Union, working at Moscow State University on a research grant. I tried to make maximum use of my time to perform essentially three different tasks: to conduct research in government and private archives related to Russian Symbolism; to converse with colleagues – and survivors – in my particular field; and, finally, on behalf of Amnesty International, to give aid and succor to political prisoners and their families. During the day, I traveled back in time and lost myself in the bottomless well of the Russian archives. In the evening, I often lived very close to the struggle for civil rights that was to lose momentum so definitively that very year of 1983.

At that point, it was nearly impossible to breathe in Russian society. Everything seemed to have stagnated. Leonid Brezhnev had died in November of 1982. Power had been passed on to Yuri Andropov, head of the KGB. At his last public appearance, Brezhnev had almost staggered onto the Kremlin podium. Andropov was so sick that he was nowhere to be seen. The war in Afghanistan ground on. Several of the leading cultural figures had been driven into exile and successively stripped of their citizenship. The figurehead of the civil rights movement, Andrei Sakharov, and his wife Yelena Bonner were in domestic exile, isolated and watched around the clock in an apartment in Gorky. More civil rights activists were constantly being ar-



Singer and poet Vladimir Vysotsky's (inset) grave in Vagankovo Cemetery, still heaped with flowers three years after his burial.

rested. One friend of mine, historian Arseni Roginsky (now executive director of the organization Memorial), had been in a camp since the decade began; another, literary scholar Konstantin Azadovsky, had just been released – he could testify first-hand about the bitter cold in Kolyma.

I felt the grotesqueness of the situation the moment I crossed the Finnish-Soviet border by train. I had with me a three-volume American edition of Vladimir Vysotsky's songs and poems in the original language: songs and poems of corruption and queues, of the black market trade and vodka tippling, of despair and the reality of imprisonment. The whole thing was a gift

to Yelena Bonner from Russian émigré friends. In those days, Vysotsky's gravelly voice sounded all over the country on tape recordings – *mag-nitizdat*. Three years after his death, people were still gathering at his grave in the Vagankovo cemetery in Moscow. He lived in the hearts of the people – but he could not be published. Naturally, the customs officials immediately pounced on the three-volume set: most likely, the truth was that they loved Vysotsky as much as everybody else in this country. I was bold enough to ask them if they were not ashamed to steal such a precious thing from me for their own gain. Something utterly unexpected then happened: they gave the volumes back.

And so I installed myself at Moscow State University and began my work in the manuscript department of the Lenin Library. I had recently defended my doctoral dissertation on Andrei Bely and wanted to keep writing about his friend, publisher and music writer Emili Medtner, who had ended up in therapy with C. G. Jung during the First World War. My work was also done in private family archives, where I was kindly given free rein. One day, the Medtner family gave me permission to take 700 pages of letters to the Swedish embassy for photocopying. I rarely felt watched, but could sense a few shadows that time. When my taxi driver understood our predicament, he took on a gleeful expression, stepped on the gas, and made sure he left the shadows in the dust.

Everything in the Land of Andropov was built on paradox. Nothing was really clear-cut. The ideology



Sabina Spielrein with her family. The year is 1909, the photograph was probably taken in connection with the celebration of her parents' silver anniversary. From left to right, Sabina's mother Eva, Sabina, Sabina's father Nikolai, and her three brothers Emil, Isaak, and Yan.



Above: Linguist and ethnologist Vyacheslav Ivanov and his friend, psychiatrist Viktor Gindilis.



Left: Linguist, ethnologist and literary scholar Vladimir Toporov.

was so weakened that the powers that be had been forced to seek support from symbolist Aleksandr Blok, whose birth centennial had recently – in 1980 – been celebrated, and who was lauded as an important patriotic poet. Meanwhile, Chingiz Aitmatov had published a novel, *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years*, which had garnered a state prize, even though it related an old Kyrgyzian myth about “mankurts”, slaves made to wear caps of raw hide that dried and shrank, compressing their heads like iron bands until they lost all memory. The Soviet Union was existing in a kind of mankurt reality. Stalin's Terror was taboo, the opposition silenced, the great artists driven out. And yet dissenting voices trickled through. When I was not buried in the manuscript archive, I was allowed to work in a reading room for professors, where I could take from the shelves a physics journal that included Andrei Sakharov's most recent scientific paper, published even though the man now had been elevated nearly to the status of an enemy of the people.

One day I was invited to give a lecture on Medtner and the early Russian interest in psychoanalysis at the Institute of Slavic and Balkan Studies. The two mainstays of the department, Vyacheslav Ivanov and Vladimir Toporov, both possessed encyclopedic knowledge of the kind one could perhaps only find in the Soviet Union. Ivanov – now an octogenarian who commutes between Boston and Moscow – is primarily a linguist, ethnologist, and literary scholar. He has written about the two halves of the brain, the film theory of Sergei Eisenstein, and the dialogic philosophy of Mikhail Bakhtin. He is equally at home with Tocharian as with Strindberg's plays (since he also reads Swedish). Toporov – who died a few years ago – was, if this is even

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possible, still broader in his erudition. He had been the foremost contributor to the recently published, very fine dictionary of mythology (a total of 1,400 pages). All told, he wrote 1,500 works (without a typewriter, much less a computer) about ancient Slavic literature, Russian saints, Old Prussian vocabulary, the Siberian Ket language, Slavic locatives, and the literary Petersburg myth from the semiotic perspective, as the challenge of the periphery against the center. Ivanov and Toporov had close ties to Yuri Lotman's cultural studies in Tartu – the Tartu that was, of course, itself a periphery that was ideologically balanced against (and would in the end overcome) the center in Moscow. Their institute stood out as a unique free zone.

Ivanov and Toporov soon extended invitations to their homes. At that moment and in addition to everything else, both were writing about symbolism. Ivanov, it turned out, was particularly keen to ask about current psychiatric theory in the West. He was interested because young people in Soviet society (where some were losing themselves in occult speculations and others had become Oblomovs) had such pal-

pable personal troubles that people were crying out for new psychodynamic ideas. Ivanov and his wife's dinner guests included a young woman psychologist and a psychiatrist named Viktor Gindilis and his wife (of Swedish ancestry). Gindilis was a fascinating acquaintance, since he had dual roots in the healing arts and the struggle for civil rights. He was Jewish and had grown up having a father in a Gulag camp. He was able to tell stories of the political mental hospitals from the inside and about how the diagnosis of “insidious schizophrenia” applied to dissidents had once arisen at the notorious Serbsky Institute.

Eventually, the conversation turned to Sabina Spielrein. There had been a powerful upsurge of outside interest in this key figure in the early history of psychoanalysis, the Russian link between Freud and Jung, after her letters and diaries had been found in a basement in Geneva. I had planned to get in touch with any surviving relatives who might be in the Soviet Union to gain clarity about her fate. The prevailing opinion in the West was that she had died in Stalin's Terror. At dinner, I was told there was a biochemist in Moscow, whose first name was Menikha, who was apparently the daughter of Sabina's brother Isaak, a professor of psychotechnique.

Ivanov finished the evening by doing something quite remarkable. He brought a little blackboard and chalk to the dinner table and began to lecture while sketching on the board. In all seriousness, he discussed whether a high-tech civilization might have existed in Africa sometime around the time of the birth of Christ that later fell and left few traces. Perhaps the spirit of the times, the chimerical Andropov society, allowed greater scope for speculations like these.



Sabina Spielrein back in the Soviet Union. The photo is from the 1920s.



Sabina Spielrein in the early 1890s with her mother Eva and her sister Emiliya, who died young.



Sabina Spielrein's three brothers: the physicist Yan, the psychotechnician Isaak, and the biologist Emil. Photos from 1937 and 1938.

At Toporov's house, the walls were all covered in books. He seemed gravely preoccupied, his gaze far off in the distance. Based on my lecture, he noted that the Russians – who had been the leaders of the aesthetic avant-garde at the beginning of the century – were also the first to adopt the new psychotherapeutic ideas of the times. Afterwards, the situation progressively declined. He saw the communist epoch as an appalling national cataclysm. The country was now in a painful phase of decadence. “But one thing you should remember”, he added. “Sooner or later, Russian literature always overcomes power. It is invincible in the long run.” And he gave me an example: in 1937, at the apex of the Terror, Stalin was forced to seek legitimacy from Pushkin. The commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the poet laureate's death was celebrated in parallel with the murdering.

Toporov believed there were only ten or fifteen people in all of Russia with insight into the real state of society. The odd thing was that I found the same words in the Lenin Library in an unpublished section of Andrei Bely's memoirs, which remarked on the status of Russia during the years that particularly interested me: 1913–1914. In hindsight, I am inclined to believe that I – and all of us – semi-consciously used the past as a filter to form an understanding of what was happening around us. The crash came very soon, as it had done then. Things were not so petrified. Gorbachev gained power just eighteen months later. Soon – under glasnost – previously banned literature rolled in like a shock wave that carried everything before it.

Eventually found Menikha Spielrein. She lived in a dismal concrete suburb called Tyoply Stan. Suddenly, there I was on her doorstep, describing for her in a single breath the dawning world fame of her aunt. She had a very hard time connecting this information to an aunt she had, as a young member of Komsomol, per-

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Now I was told that Sabina – in her utter disillusionment with communism, which had executed her three brothers, all of whom worked in various scientific fields – had believed German assurances and thus refused to flee from Hitler's troops when they occupied her home town of Rostov. Ultimately, she, both of her daughters and hundreds of other Jews were shot in the “Snake Ravine” outside the city. Quite simply, Stalin and Hitler had divided the family between them.

Menikha remembered her father's arrest in 1935, when she was 19 years old. As a pioneer in psycho-technique, he was very close to Sabina. Menikha had loved him above all else in life. But she had also been fostered to become a Soviet woman, full of enthusiasm for the building of the new society. She could not rationally interpret the dreadful events. Her father's disappearance and her mother's subsequent expulsion remained a mystery: it was as if the family had been shattered by a force of nature. Despite general difficulties, she remained active in Komsomol. And then came Khrushchev, who ripped apart the myth of Stalin. Her father's name could once again be spoken aloud. The Nobel laureate Igor Tamm himself delivered an emotional speech commemorating her father at the House of Scientists. As she sat there in the first row with her mother and listened, the horrible wound split wide open. She wept inconsolably – 25 years of repressed anxiety flowed out.

In later years, Menikha increasingly devoted her energies to the memory of Sabina. She translated texts and attended conferences. She had been born in Berlin during the First World War and was given a name that meant “peace” in Hebrew. Her lifelong dream was to see this Berlin once again. When she finally made it, at more than 80 years of age, she suffered a stroke that led to her death.

After my homecoming (on July 15), I published an article in the Swedish evening paper *Expressen* about the meeting with Menikha that included the new information about Sabina and her brothers' deaths. It was illustrated with the first known pictures of her – taken from Menikha's personal files. It turned out that shortly before (on June 30), the famous Bruno Bettelheim had, in the *New York Review of Books*, publicly sought Sabina's relatives. Eventually, he rather slyly took credit for the scoop in his memoirs, where he implied that he had dispatched me on the mission. That was not true.

A woman lecturer from a state research institute soon came to the university to drone on about Poland's unhappy situation. Interest was minimal: out of a student body of thousands, the audience numbered a total of eight. Poland was declared “the center of the international class struggle”. Solidarity was mentioned only in passing as the “underground provocateurs”. The lecturer expressed her fears about the Pope's forthcoming summer visit to Poland, designed to incite new “social explosions”, with the class enemy – the CIA in cahoots with the Vatican – acting as the undercover director. The interesting thing was that her representation of the Polish church perfectly described the state of the Soviet Communist Party: a massive propaganda machine that forced people into subjection, disengaged youth caught up in empty rituals, a belief utterly diluted and dead. Afterwards, a visiting student from Ireland asked: “How can it be?”



Menikha Spielrein, biochemist and Sabina's niece. When she retired, she devoted herself to the life and work of her aunt. She translated Sabina's German texts and participated in conferences about her pioneering work.



Menikha Spielrein in Berlin with her father Isaak and her mother Rakhil, around 1917.

Why have I never met a single Polish communist?" The lecturer answered: "That shows the seriousness of the situation. Leninism will have to be beaten into the entire Polish society."

After this, she most likely went home and complained like everybody else about the misery around her – perhaps while listening to Vysotsky on the tape recorder. Was she schizophrenic? No, she was simply equipped with a Soviet double consciousness. It was the same situation with the much-admired artist who shocked my Danish neighbor (in the adjoining room at university). He appeared on television and praised the Party's policies, while privately he had just warned the Dane about "socialism".

I met the Byzantologist Sergei Averintsev at the Department of World Literature. Some years before, he had garnered attention for an erudite and completely non-Marxist article about Sophia, the Divine Wisdom, in the major Encyclopedia of Philosophy. He was another giant of scholarship. In her memoirs, Nadezhda Mandelstam mentions that Averintsev and Ivanov, in particular, had been able to acquire such broad knowledge because both had, as a result of illness, been spared a Soviet education. Now we talked about Jung, another of Averintsev's areas of expertise. He regarded the double consciousness as an obvious trait among essentially all Soviet men and women.

One early morning, I dropped in to visit art historian and literary scholar Ilya Silberstein. He was then well advanced in years and diabetic, but still worked like a horse. He received me at exactly seven o'clock. It was he who had once upon a time (1932) started the scholarly literary publishing series *The Literary Heritage*, weighty tomes that excelled in footnotes and factual details in that specifically Russian way. Now he was deeply involved in a magnificent five-volume publication of material related to Aleksandr Blok and symbolism, the 92nd volume of *The Literary Heritage*.

He seemed utterly unaffected by the opposition against which he had to struggle now and then. He could imagine eventually including Bely in the series. Priceless art hung on his walls. He had landed in acute political difficulties on one occasion. He had then walked up to the Central Committee and quashed the grumbling at the price of "one Aivazovsky" – a work by the renowned marine painter now valued so highly in our auction rooms. Silberstein was born to succeed. His status was not exactly hurt by the fact that he had also been married for some time to the female head of the State Archives of Literature and Art.

I was able to learn more about Andrei Sakharov's peculiar life in exile at the home of mathematician Yuri Shikhanovich, a close friend of Yelena Bonner. Since 1980, he had been one of the secret editors of the samizdat bulletin *Khronika tekushchikh sobyitiy* [Chronicle of current events], while "officially" he wrote articles for the popular mathematics journal *Quantum*. *Khronika* had been distributed by the chain letter method in typewritten copies every other month since April 1968, reporting on all that was unseen in the Soviet reality: new arrests and trials, new samizdat literature, current conditions in camps, prisons, and political mental hospitals. It was an essential source of information, the very mirror of the struggle for civil rights.

Shikhanovich looked frail, but he was tough as nails. He knew what he had taken on and was prepared to pay the price. He held a 50th birthday party one evening, where despite the serious situation, the activists met in great cheer: Yuli Daniel's son Aleksandr (now one of the driving forces behind Memorial), the talented balladeer Pyotr Starchik, Leonid Vul, editor of earlier editions of *Khronika* and grandson of one of the later executed camp commandants of the 1930s ("As long as I have my Vul, I am secure", said Stalin before the reversal of fortunes), theater scholar Yuri Eichenwald, disabled rights activist Yuri Kiselyov, and others.

I happened to end up sitting between Eichenwald and Kiselyov, who had the same first names and patronymics. I was told this meant I had the right to make a wish. My wish was for us to gain final clarity about the fate of Raoul Wallenberg. Kiselyov, who had no legs and rolled around on a board, was the maximalist among us. He looked me straight in the eye and said:

"The Swede on Russian soil who is not constantly seeking information about Wallenberg is derelict in his duty."

Shikhanovich, Starchik, and Eichenwald had an experience in common: they had all at various times been victims of repressive psychiatry. Eichenwald was declared mentally ill as early as 1952, towards the end of Stalin's reign. While at the hospital, he had jotted down Gorky's dramatic poem *The Song of the Stormy Petrel* on a scrap of paper. The doctor treating him took this socialist classic to be a flagrant manifestation of his mental illness. The attitude toward him reportedly did not become more benevolent once the error was discovered. When we met, he had not been visited by the KGB for a long time, not even for the tiniest raid, even though he had published his satirical study *Don Quixote on Russian Soil* in the West. He interpreted this as a particular strategy on the part of the security service: to seemingly pay no attention and feign disinterest, only to suddenly swoop in.

"Shikh" introduced me to Natalya Sarmakesheva, wife of his mathematician colleague Vadim Yankov. Her husband's research in the field of hyperintensional logic had gradually taken on increasingly stronger leanings toward moral philosophy. Shortly before the military coup in Poland in 1981, he had sent out a seven-page samizdat letter in which he encouraged the Soviet working class to follow Solidarity's example in order to (1) regain self-respect, (2) recreate the sense of social participation, and (3) demonstrate non-violence as a way to take back personal freedom. He was sentenced in January 1983 to seven years' deprivation of liberty for those seven A4 sheets. When I was there,



Vadim Yankov with his wife Natalya and daughter Anastasiya, 1981.

he was still in remand detention at the Lefortovo prison. I interviewed Natalya – at home with three kids in the Moscow suburb of Dolgoprudny – about the high price the family had had to pay for his exceptional courage. She declared, curtly: “To be able to stand tall and tell it like it is at least once in your life – that’s worth seven years.”

Natalya had the right to send Vadim two one-kilo packages of food per year to supplement his meager prison diet. She and I went to a special “Beryozka” store (to which ordinary citizens did not have access and where the shelves were groaning with luxury foods) and bought sausage and chocolate. She also got a bottle of wine for herself. On their wedding anniversary, she took the bottle in hand and took a symbolic walk around Lefortovo before going home to drink the wine with great ceremony.

Once or twice I ended up in a quandary. Literary scholar Mikhail Meilakh came in from Leningrad. He had published annotated editions of the absurdist works of Daniil Kharms and the OBERIU (Union of Real Art) writers in the West. He told me that he could feel how the KGB was slowly tightening the noose around his neck. I decided on behalf of Amnesty International to invite him to a fabulous lunch at the unlikely International Hotel, jerry-built in the old working class district of Krasnaya Presnya by the Soviet Union’s favorite American capitalist, Armand Hammer. The brand new building housed seven fine restaurants, three saunas, a specialty food store, a perfume store, and a Beryozka bookstore (selling literature that was very hard for Soviet citizens to get hold of). There sat the OBERIU expert in the midst of all this excess, browbeaten, unemployed, unable to publish a single word in his native country – thoroughly enjoying himself.

I received word shortly after I arrived home: Meilakh had been arrested. He was later sentenced to seven years in a camp followed by exile. Shikhanovich was arrested that autumn and also got seven years – and *Khronika* had to cancel its publication. A 15-year epoch was over. As for me, a year and a half later, oddly enough in conjunction with Gorbachev’s coming to power, I was declared persona non grata. The KGB had caught up with me. The visa ban was not lifted for five years. By then, the new era had come and all political prisoners had been released. A few months later, the Soviet Union collapsed. Absurdistan was no more. ❌

FEMINISTS IN EASTERN AND WESTERN EUROPE – RESEARCHERS AND ACTIVISTS

“Why is there no happiness in the East?” was the, according to many, provocative title of a conference put on by CBEES and Södertörn University September 8–10 of this year. The organizers of the conference, Teresa Kulawik, Renata Inbrant and Youlia Gradszkova, wanted to bring together feminist scholars for a discussion about conditions facing feminism in the East and in the West after the Berlin Wall, as well as the role of the EU and politics in the development of feminism.

Agnieszka Graff, Warsaw University, said that the situation is quite distinct in Eastern Europe. In the West, namely the United States and northern and western Europe, the academic feminism was an offshoot of the feminist movement; in the East it is rather the other way around.

IN POLAND, however, being a gender researcher and being an activist is the same thing. In post-socialist countries, communism and feminism are also linked.

“Viewed today, communism seems like an upside-down world, an incorrect order of things. Now, when society needs to be recreated as a capitalist society, patriarchy is also re-created”, Agnieszka Graff explained.

Under communism, there was a well-established childcare system and women participated in professional life. When the communist system fell, public childcare disappeared. Today, people who push the issues of greater possibilities for parental leave and expanded childcare facilities risk accusations that they are communists. The backlash was, in certain areas, so profound that in the Eastern Europe of today, one must fight for basic rights.

There is a paradox here, noted Marina Blagojevic, of the Institute for Criminological and Sociological Research, Belgrade: “Feminists in the West experience a certain fatigue or feeling of déjà-vu when confronted with the issues that feminists in the East are struggling with today. They have already dealt with these questions and do not want to be reminded of their struggle by joining in as activists. They want rather to use Eastern Europe as a testing ground for their theories, formed in the West. But they do not understand the particular history here. They do not take the time to study that reality.”

Marina Blagojevic also says that she and other researchers in Eastern Europe must devote considerable time and effort to translating theories and concepts from the West into their own language and their own reality – in order



Agnieszka Graff.



Conference invitation.

then to have to translate their results and findings back to the audience in the West.

There is another paradox that was highlighted at the conference. Gender equality is a value Europe claims to stand for. The EU nonetheless accepts patriarchal oppression, as an expression of unique cultural characteristics and a part of national identity.

Take for example the Polish legislation that has been drafted which would prohibit abortion even in cases of rape. According to Agnieszka Graff this bill is a consequence of the nationalistic movement that has given the church a strong political position. The Polish Church is now claiming that embryos should be regarded as living people and protected by law.

AS A DISCUSSANT at the lively panel “Conceiving Bodies”, Jenny Payne Gunnarsson, Södertörn University, posed the question “whether it is a human right to be a mother, whether everyone with fertility problems should be offered treatment, and if so, how many, by no means cheap, fertilization attempts should be offered”.

What values lie behind the notion that a woman who cannot give birth to children should be entitled to help from society? asked Kathrin Braun, University of Hannover. Isn’t there a presumption here that motherhood means true happiness for women, that which unites all women? Kathrin Braun: “Neoliberalism regards happiness as the norm. The next step is that all people must be happy. This can lead to measures such as the state paying all addicts who sterilize themselves. For us German feminists, the idea of setting a value on human