

SLAVFILMS

***Podstrochnik*: Translation Between the Lines**

Part 2

by Susan Welsh

This is the second part of a two-part review and will be published in the Spring 2011 SlavFile. The first part of the review is published in the Winter 2011 SlavFile and can also be found separately on this web page.

- Lilianna Zinovyevna and her mother were evacuated from Moscow to Naberezhnye Chelny at the outbreak of World War II. After a traumatic and impoverished life there, they return to Moscow, where, in the summer of 1944, Lilianna observes a column of German prisoners of war being marched from the Belorussian Station to Three Station Square, amid crowds of onlookers. She describes the scene:

First came the old generals in crumpled uniforms with the epaulets ripped off, wearing the caps of the Wehrmacht. They marched in the Prussian step, with their unshaven chins thrust forward, tucking first one hand and then the other into a pocket; it was cold, and fingers grew numb in the wind. And behind them, pell-mell, came a throng of those of lower rank. Some leaned on makeshift crutches, some had their arms in slings, covered with dirty bandages. Some were barefoot. Blackened faces, emaciated to the bone, sunken cheeks, dark circles under the eyes, ghastly looks.... With great difficulty, they dragged themselves along; some still tried to hold themselves erect, while those who lacked the strength were bent over from cold and pain.... It was a pitiful sight, but I told myself not to pity them, reminding myself that they had pitied no one.

What I saw next struck me more than anything else. Some old ladies, haggard old women, like black moths, approached the convoy of prisoners and held out pieces of bread. You can imagine how, during the war, there was not enough bread to go around, so the old ladies were giving a share of their own meager, minuscule rations. The soldiers drew back, not knowing what was expected of them. But the old ladies, crossing themselves, insisted that the men take some. And some women also held out cups of water. Despite the hatred of the Germans, the horror at what they had actually done, which was being inflated even more in the newspapers—but still, God knows what terrible things they had done—there were old ladies and women who brought prisoners bread and water, who pitied them; that struck me, an impression that has stayed with me for a lifetime.

- Her discovery, toward the end of the war, that anti-Semitism was now becoming official state policy (in the Army) and was not merely the aberration of some deranged individuals. Both she and her husband, Sima, came from secular Jewish families, and their ethnic/religious origins had never previously been an issue. At first, she could not believe it: “It’s totally against Soviet ideology! The Nazis are the anti-Semites, and they are the ones we’re fighting!” But as the postwar period unfolded, the ugly truth became obvious to all, and the campaign against “rootless cosmopolitans” took off. When Lilia tries to get work as a translator, she learns that quotas for Jews are now in effect, and the company to which she applies has already met its limit. But since they had no

Scandinavian translators there (compared to many French translators, for example), hiring her could be justified to the “higher-ups.”

- Her forced participation in “culture” enforcer Andrei Zhdanov’s 1946 persecution of poet Anna Akhmatova and satirist Mikhail Zoshchenko. All members of the IFLI Philological Faculty are summoned for a meeting to condemn the two as “alien influences.” Lilia knows that she can neither raise her hand in support of their ostracism, nor can she bring herself to defy the authorities. She arranges to leave the hall before the vote, telling those sitting around her that she has a horrendous migraine. “And even that cowardly act cost me enormous effort, that’s how afraid I was to leave the hall.”



Credit: Izdatel’stvo Corpus/Lungin family

Semyon and Lilianna with friends, including Flora Litvinova (center). She discovered that the KGB had tried to get her son to spy on his grandfather, former foreign minister Maxim Litvinov. The ouster of Litvinov (who was Jewish) in 1939 preceded the signing of the German-Soviet non-aggression pact by three months.

- Her observations on Stalin’s death in 1953. Unlike many Soviet citizens—even, unbelievably, in the camps!—who weep and think the world will now surely come to an end (“I think it was mass hypnosis,” she says), Lilia and her husband are relieved that the dictator had died. But like everyone else, they want to see him lying in his coffin (“we felt the need to live this story through to the end”). They witness untold thousands, or was it millions, rushing toward the Hall of Columns where the body is lying in state, the crowd becoming a mob, pushing and shoving. The Lungins manage to extract themselves and go home, learning later that some 400 people were trampled to death. “Above and beyond the millions whom Stalin destroyed during his lifetime,” says Lilia, “even after his death he dragged so many people after him.”
- Her role in the emergence of the dissident movement, including her acquaintance with leading figures from Yevtushenko to Solzhenitsyn. Of particular interest is her

description of the network in which she participated, which sent parcels to political prisoners:

It was very difficult to live in a camp without outside help, with no parcels coming in. And so an entire system was organized to collect personal items and money, and all the honest people around us, and we too, of course, participated. On certain dates, there were people who assembled it all and sent it off. And this also fostered trust. I, for example, collected a little money from academic circles: My uncle, Academician Frumkin, and his wife, my aunt Amalia Davydovna—we can talk about it now, since both have long been in their graves—gave money very willingly, but repeated a hundred times: No one must know where it came from. Only anonymously, only if nobody knew who gave it. And many more were like that. When the opportunity arose to do it, not directly themselves, but through others, it turned out that many were willing to help. Carefully, concealing their involvement.

- Her joyful collaboration with Astrid Lindgren in the translation of many of Lindgren's delightful stories for children. Lindgren, says Lilia, is a person right out of her own books. She comes to visit in Moscow, and Sima and Lilia accompany her by trolley back to her hotel. Astrid gets out, and starts to dance along the street. "At 1:00 a.m. Saying good-bye to us. And it was so infectious that Sima and I could do nothing but reply, dancing some sort of pirouettes in the empty trolley."



Credit: Izdatel'stvo Azbuka-Classika SPB

Lungina's translation of "Pippi on the Run."

The Film

The film itself is a monologue. Lilia, talking to the camera at age 77, seems to remember everything. Often in the narrative, when discussing something especially important, she says, “I’ve remembered this for my whole life.” But of course, she has remembered *all* of it for her whole life. She speaks apparently without notes, without prompting (and without the “er ... um ... uh” that peppers most people’s speech, notes Parfenov in his foreword to the book).

It’s as though you had dropped by her apartment for a coffee, sat on her sofa, and stayed to hear her life story. That is more or less what happened to Dorman, who had been Semyon’s film student and got to know the family in 1983. They talked over breakfast, leaving both Semyon and Dorman to exclaim: This should be a film! Dorman reports that he went home feeling so moved by her story, that “it couldn’t just be told to me.” He felt like “the first person who had listened to Homer’s *Iliad*!” When filming eventually began, he says that his role was quite minimal (video of forum at Boston College, April 26, 2010, <http://frontrow.bc.edu/program/dorman/>).



Credit: yandex.ru/users/jekakuznetsova. <http://altapress.ru/story/56810>

Oleg Dorman says that the first time he heard Lilianna Zinov'yevna's story, he felt like the first person to hear Homer's "Iliad," and determined to make sure others could hear it too.

The filming was done over five days at her home. The film was produced with virtually no money; the illustrious cameraman Vadim Yusov worked without pay, because he believed in Dorman and the project. Yusov points out that Dorman, to allow the lengthy monologue to “breathe,” assembled a rather astonishing array of photos and other artifacts from the lives of Lungina, her parents, her husband, and her friends. He also incorporates contemporary music and film footage of places she lived, studied, and worked. Some of this cinematographic material would mean more to a Russian than to a foreigner, but Lilianna’s narrative propels the story forward so vigorously that it was hard for this foreign reviewer to turn off the TV or put the book down. (In fact, cameraman Yusov watched all 15 episodes without interruption when the film was finally completed, so enthralled was he with his subject and the artistry of the production.)

The Future

What next for the director who has thrown down a gauntlet to both the TV establishment and Russia’s political elites? Time will tell. I interviewed Dorman after his refusal of the TEFI award, and he expressed his deep disgust with what he sees as the repressive environment and deliberately fostered cynicism of the past decade, which he calls a

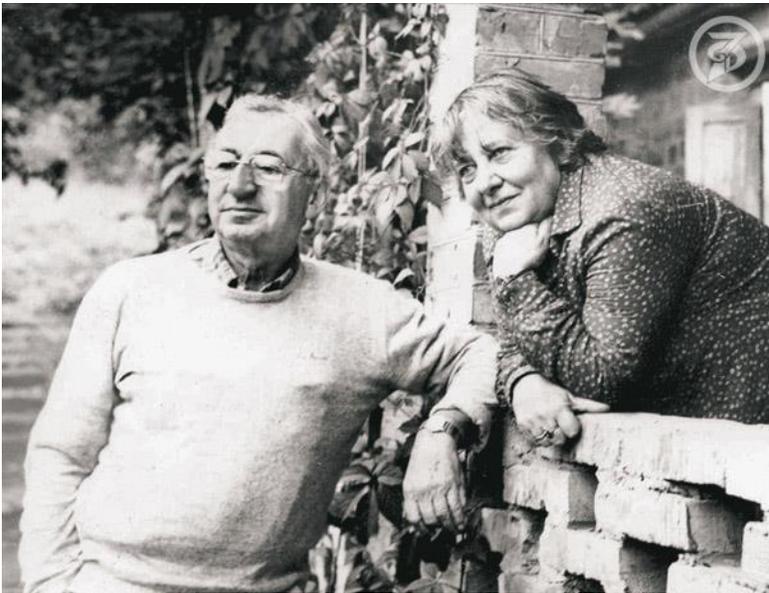
return of “Soviet power.”

I asked him what he would say to a young person, just starting a career in—let’s say—filmmaking, who is considering whether or not to emigrate. Dorman replied: “I have stayed only because to leave would be, for me personally, a kind of escape, a defeat. However, I am not at all sure that staying here is, in itself, a display of strength. I have told young people on more than one occasion: You should live where you can be the most productive.”

And what was Lilianna Zinovyevna’s prognosis for Russia’s future? Hopeful, but worried. Despite the irrepressible optimism that suffuses her monologue, she begins her tale on a somber note, as she describes her reason for undertaking this project:

Generally it seems to me that now, at the end of the century, when there is such frightful mental confusion and when our country is hurtling along to who knows where—there is a feeling that it is hurtling, at constantly accelerating speed, toward some kind of abyss—perhaps it is really important and useful to preserve as many of the fragments as we can of the lives we lived, from the 20th century and even, through our relatives, from the 19th. Maybe the more people bear witness to this experience, the more we will be able to preserve from it, and in the end, combine these fragments into a more or less complete picture of what it means to live a life that is actually human, a life with a human face, as people say nowadays. And thus to give something, to help the 21st century in some way.

While there are no crystal balls in this business, it is certain that *Podstrochnik* is a contribution to this worthy goal. It should be circulated to a much larger audience, both in Russia and abroad.



Credit: Izdatel'stvo Corpus/Lungin family

Semyon Lungin and Lilianna Lungina. She likens their marriage to the cameos made by a master craftsman of legend: He always made them in pairs. After being scattered about the world, those that came back to their “other half” were guaranteed happiness. “Sima and I had that feeling,” she says.

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