Fifty-Five Years with Russia

To put it directly, I have lived my entire adult life with two native countries: Sweden and Russia. This is what I want to talk about.

So how exactly did it all start? Well, it all began in 1961 when upon graduation from high school I entered the Armed Forces Language School in Uppsala as pretty much a blank page. There in an old barracks I spent a very effective year studying Russian under an extremely challenging instructor and surrounded by a stimulating circle of friends. My life took a new turn under the enchantment of the Russian language and Russian culture.

After Basic Training, at the age of nineteen a friend and I traveled by car through France. This was in the summer of 1962. On a Mediterranean beach in Juan les Pins I read Nils Åke Nilsson's *Soviet Russian Literature 1917–1947*. It was an important experience. The book spoke to me, telling me about a strange Soviet, occasionally Stalinist reality. Society and literature in intimate association. Nilsson had a talent for explaining all these difficult topics with artless simplicity. I believe I wanted to follow in his footsteps and become an interpreter of all things Russian.

Soon it was time to get some academic qualifications. There in the old building on Drottninggatan in Stockholm that housed the Russian Institute Nilsson became my warmly appreciated instructor in Russian literature. He had just published an article in the journal *Ord & Bild* about Yevgeny Yevtushenko and his famous poem about the taboo but vigorous anti-Semitism that banned even the mention of the Nazi massacre at Babi Yar. We had worked our way through it already when it was first published in September 1961. Now in the early autumn of 1962 he issued his prophetic poetic word of warning against Stalin's heirs. And a few months after that the time had come for Alexander Solzhenitsyn to make his sensational debut with *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

Just then I was working on my own article about Yevtushenko, stressing even more than Nilsson had done his rebellious spirit. Soon I was reading everything I could get my hands on about the subject in the archives of the old Klara district newspaper offices in downtown Stockholm.

It was as though the shoots of freedom that had sprouted in the post-Stalinist Thaw were entwined with my own personal growth. The whole world seemed to be in the throes of flux, and I turned twenty. It was the age of Kennedy, the Beatles, and Bob Dylan: "The times they are a'changing." Although I was mostly looking eastward.

I soon came into contact with a journalist my age, who had just started the cultural magazine *Origo*. Its first issue in a newly revamped format appeared in early 1963 and carried my Yevtushenko essay. But something was going on in the middle of all the euphoria. In March 1963 Khrushchev called Soviet writers and artists on the carpet in a speech he gave in the Kremlin. The pendulum was swinging back. Stalin's heirs were brooding on revenge. *Origo*'s third issue that year published my article on Alexander Yesenin-Volpin, Valery Tarsis, and Mikhail Naritsa, three Russian writers who for political reasons had been committed to mental hospitals. Referring to poems by Yesenin-Volpin published in the United States, I emphasized his powerful yearning for freedom: "One goal is clear / an insane goal: freedom!"

I had already begun my journalistic career, and at times I could be a bit forward. In early September I had made my debut on the cultural page of the daily *Expressen* in the form of a full-page interview with the Soviet playwright Anatoly Sofronov during his visit to Stockholm. Just to be on the safe side, since I didn't want to risk being refused a visa, I signed it as "Bertil Block." Bertil is my middle name, and I took Block from Alexander Blok. It was originally *Expressen* cultural editor Bo Strömstedt's idea. "Block" just seemed natural, since I'd heard that a couple of years earlier he had published a contribution on a Russian theme by someone signing as "Karl Erik Mandelstam." Osip Mandelstam's poetry was just beginning to be rediscovered in the West, and it is tempting to guess that it was none other than Nils Åke Nilsson who had come upon this clever way to conceal his identity.

The story behind my interview was as follows. The émigré newspaper *Nashe obshchee delo* had recently published a letter from an anonymous Soviet Russian claiming Sofronov was a graphomaniac who had made a career during Stalin's final years by ruthlessly denouncing and eliminating more talented colleagues. He gradually usurped enormous power over literature, and he used it after Stalin as well to stifle creative originality. The letter, which we later learned was written by the prominent and earlier "repressed" literary scholar Yulian Oksman, was in reality a cry for help. Sofronov's circle of hack writers was about to get their revenge on Yevtushenko, Solzhenitsyn, and everything else that was new.

Oksman drew special attention to the case of the children's author Nadezhda Nadezhdina. In 1950 she had been sentenced to eight years' hard labor on the basis of a denunciation by Sofronov, who had discovered that she once had been expelled from the Komsomol for doubting Stalin's brilliance. Parenthetically, it turned out that Sofronov's slander of Nadezhdina was actually aimed at her teacher Samuil Marshak, in the context of the late Stalinist anti-cosmopolitan campaign. Thus, Sofronov was a rabid anti-Semite.

Now I got it into my head that I would take a closer look at Sofronov. With no authority whatever, I set off for the offices of the Swedish Writers' Union in Stockholm, where the visiting Soviet writers had convened a press conference. After the reporters from *Dagens Nyheter* and *Stockholms-Tidningen* had asked their polite questions I jumped in. First, I wondered whether we could regard 1956 as a borderline in Soviet literature. Sofronov didn't think so. Boundaries arise when a great new talent emerges. Was Alexander Solzhenitsyn such a talent? No, Sofronov explained. The newcomer had attracted a lot of attention, but he was already beginning to fade. "He has to learn to understand life in all its depth." And with that the Stalinist had put the former camp prisoner in his place.

Finally, I asked my main question: "What do you think of Nadezhda Nadezhdina's writing?" Silence. For a brief moment he seemed slightly confused. Then he collected his wits and, considering that snitching was his profession, exclaimed with remarkable ambiguity: "There are five thousand writers in the Soviet Union. Surely you realize that I can't keep track of them all."

Fairly soon a translation of the interview appeared in *Nashe obshchee delo*, so to some extent it must have also trickled into the Soviet Union. It won me praise from our old émigré instructor Sergei Rittenberg, himself a Petersburg Jew like Oksman, but just a few years younger. He gave us conversation exercises in his refined, old-fashioned Russian and exciting reports on his summertime visits to Leningrad, where among other things he called on Anna Akhmatova.

Soon I wrote a review for *Expressen* of Vasily Aksyonov's novel *Ticket to the Stars*, which had just been translated into Swedish. With its portrayal of young people during the Thaw who in every way they could tried to liberate themselves from dogmas and coercion, its basic theme was freedom. It was not for nothing that Aksyonov was among the writers whom Khrushchev attacked in his harangue.

I continued working for *Origo,* writing pieces such as an interview with Mikhail Sholokhov when he visited Stockholm. He was obviously on a fishing expedition for the Nobel Prize. My cowriter, Jan Lövgren, and I stated clearly already in the lede that he was a heavyweight candidate, which may have contributed to the slightly highfalutin tone of the exchange and to our failure to ask any really tough questions. The answers we got were mostly empty clichés. Among other things, we noted that on this occasion he didn't want to criticize Dostoevsky, although on a visit to Sweden a couple of years earlier he had dismissed him as "out-of-date." He glossed over almost everything. Sholokhov, of course, sometimes bellowed out some rather spicy remarks at Soviet writers' congresses, but we heard nothing like that here.

In December 1963 Yevgeny Dolmatovsky paid a visit to the Russian Institute, where he read some of his humdrum patriotic Soviet poetry and answered a few questions. He was quite clearly not in a very good mood. He was shocked to discover that his works stood next to General Denikin's memoirs on the Institute's bookshelf. When he returned home he published an aggressive article in *Literaturnaya gazeta* in which he poked his nose into the private life of one of our émigré teachers. Nils Åke Nilsson sent a sharply worded response to *Expressen*, noting that Dolmatovsky had complained about Sweden before. In a 1957 poem commenting on his trip to Stockholm he had written a poem entitled

"A Nightmare" about a frigid city in which he was aggressively attacked by both buildings and automobiles: "How hard it would be to live here / as a minister (even without portfolio), / as a shrill MP and a soldier in an unjust army."

In March 1964 I strode into the Hotel Foresta in the Stockholm suburb Lidingö and knocked on the door to Ilya Ehrenburg's room. He was here on a regular basis, since he had for some time been having an affair with City Commissioner Hjalmar Mehr's wife. I was interested in his comments on alarm signals about growing anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union—most recently in connection with an inflammatory and disgustingly illustrated book entitled *Judaism without Embellishment*, published in Kiev. Ehrenburg denied that the problem even existed. What else could he do when he was confronted by a total stranger on his own doorstep? But he condescended to speak with me, perhaps because my information (gathered from the émigré press) was of interest to him. I remember him emphasizing that he had talked on the phone with his friend and colleague Leonid Pervomaisky in Kiev just the evening before and that Pervomaisky had not been at all worried. What he didn't mention was that for certain obvious reasons, Pervomaisky chose to hide his Jewish name behind that bold pseudonym, which means "First of May."

In April I served as an interpreter for the exceptionally successful and medal-winning Soviet women's gymnastics team. Two Russians from Kiev who had participated together in previous years stood out from the rest: Larisa Latynina and Polina Astakhova. It turned out that in her room at the same Hotel Foresta Polina was secretly reading a samizdat tracing-paper copy of poems by Osip Mandelstam, who had not yet been rehabilitated or published in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union. It was quite remarkable—an Olympic gold medalist and the Gulag victim Mandelstam, who was still barely mentionable in his homeland. Symptomatically enough, it was thanks to Yulian Oksman, who had passed on the poet's later works to his old friend Gleb Struve at Berkeley, that Mandelstam was rediscovered in the West in the early 1960s.

In Nilsson's advanced seminars I was assigned to present another of the great modernists that were being rediscovered in the West together with the entire "great experiment" in Russian literature and art: Andrei

Bely. It was soon decided that I would write a licentiate thesis on his prose. I had become a Belyist.

In the fall Nikita Khrushchev was deposed, and the Soviet Union entered the long so-called stagnation period. My articles in *Expressen* took the new situation into account. In early 1965 I reviewed two books that had touched me deeply. One was by the satirist Valery Tarsis, who was incarcerated in a mental hospital, and the other was written by General Alexander Gorbatov, whose recollections of Stalin's Terror had been published in the final phase of the Thaw and had now been translated into English.

A passage in my review of Gorbatov's *Years of My Life* indicated the direction of much of my future writing, which arose out of empathy for the prisoners:

> He was taken to the Lubyanka Prison, driven together with other likewise innocent "traitors" and subjected to a series of provocative interrogations. They wanted him to admit he had spied for a foreign power, but despite both physical and mental torture and horrific treatment in three different prisons that sometimes left him unable to leave the interrogation room on his own power, he never admitted any of the charges leveled against him. Later, during his time in the camp, he didn't meet anyone who like himself had managed to avoid signing a confession. Sooner or later the psychological pressure broke everyone, and they admitted to almost anything about themselves and others. This awareness gave him strength in the rare moments when he was filled with despair and was even prepared to welcome death as a liberation.

At one of Nilsson's seminars in April 1965 I talked about Bely's *Petersburg*. This was going to be my topic! Why did this novel affect me so deeply? Because it was a chameleonic text that reverberates with enormous symbolism for Russia. The young Oedipal hero Nikolai Ableukhov is imprisoned – in his room, in his house, in his city. The split in St. Petersburg between the mainland in the grip of the regime and the revolution

fomenting on the islands mirrors the rupture in his own psyche. He feels a bomb ticking away in the depths of his being. Russia in 1905 seems to be hanging over an abyss that is at the same time a chasm within himself.

I opened my presentation by pointing out that "Bely's role in the history of Russian literature is difficult to survey and still far from thoroughly explored"—a wonderful understatement, considering what was to come. I applied for a grant from the university to travel to meet Bely's first wife, Asya Turgeneva, who was living among the Anthroposophists in the Swiss village of Dornach. Unfortunately, I was turned down.

Early in the fall of 1965 Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuly Daniel were arrested, accused of publishing "anti-Soviet" literature abroad under a pseudonym. Sinyavsky as a champion of modernist poetry had in particular made fun of Dolmatovsky's empty tirades. On December 5 something remarkable happened. A demonstration in support of the pair was organized in Moscow on Soviet Constitution Day. It signified that a Soviet civil rights movement was slowly taking shape. With the help of the well-informed émigré journal *Posev*, I followed everything closely. I acquainted myself with underground publications such as *Feniks* and *Sfinksy* and read about the SMOG writers who gathered on Mayakovsky Square and about Vladimir Bukovsky, who together with Alexander Yesenin-Volpin was the driving force behind the demonstration, whose demands included something called "glasnost." By this time, I had moved far beyond Yevtushenko—now my focus was on samizdat and the "underground."

December 10, 1965, was a momentous day from a different viewpoint as well. Mikhail Sholokhov was in Stockholm to pick up what became the third Nobel Prize in literature awarded to a Russian. I had attended his press conference a few days before. It was an almost ridiculous performance in which he came off as outright anti-intellectual. He dismissed the earlier Russian laureates as "émigrés"—one external (Bunin), the other internal (Pasternak). They didn't belong in the Soviet Union. He claimed he knew nothing about Iosif Brodsky, who had recently been released and returned from internal exile. He mostly wanted to talk about cows and kolkhozes. Even then voices were already raised wondering whether he had really written the works for which he was awarded the prize.

During these days I worked as an interpreter for a two-man Soviet TV team that had come to Stockholm to report on the celebrated event. What I remember most clearly is how they tried from various angles to photograph the desk in the National Library reading room in which Lenin once sat. It felt bizarre.

In February 1966 Sinyavsky and Daniel were sentenced to seven and five years at hard labor, respectively. The trial aroused considerable attention in Sweden as well, and I carefully read everything about it that I could get my hands on.

Toward the start of June, a group of Soviet writers unexpectedly arrived in Sweden, Bulat Okudzhava and Yevtushenko among them. Soon they appeared in public at a meeting arranged by the radical political association Clarté at the Borgarskolan (the Bourgeois School) in Stockholm. As far as I was concerned, Okudzhava overshadowed Yevtushenko at this point. I managed to attend a party in publisher Per Gedin's home where the Soviet guests met fellow Swedish writers and I could negotiate an interview with him. This was in fact his first trip to a capitalist country, and it would be exciting to get his reactions.

We met for a chat at Hotel Malmen, where the writers were staying. This encounter resulted a few days later in a full-page article in *Expressen* in which Okudzhava spoke as openly as was possible about his problems with the censorship, remarking that what he wrote—it sounded almost like Bely's *Petersburg*—was viewed in some quarters almost as bombs. Despite important differences between them, I drew a parallel with Bob Dylan. Okudzhava himself talked about what Jacques Brel had meant for him. I began like this: "He looks exotic: slightly built, thin and swarthy, with a moustache and black curly hair, a Bulgarian cigarette bobbing in the corner of his mouth. He looks at you with his friendly, rather melancholy eyes. He is 42 years old."

Okudzhava told me that he was working on a screenplay about Pushkin's tumultuous youth in Petersburg and his exile to the south. Much later I learned from Dmitry Bykov's huge biography that that scenario was perhaps one of the best things Okudzhava ever wrote. It never became a film because he had portrayed Pushkin as too provocatively willful and impudent.

Bulat Okudzhava in Stockholm in 1966, with dedication (Courtesy of Jonny Graan)

Yevgeny Yevtushenko in Stockholm in 1966, with a dedication alluding to Okudzhava's "Bud' zdorov, shkolyar!" ("Good Luck, Schoolboy!"): "Bud' zdorov, starik!" ("Good luck, Chap!") (Courtesy of Jonny Graan)

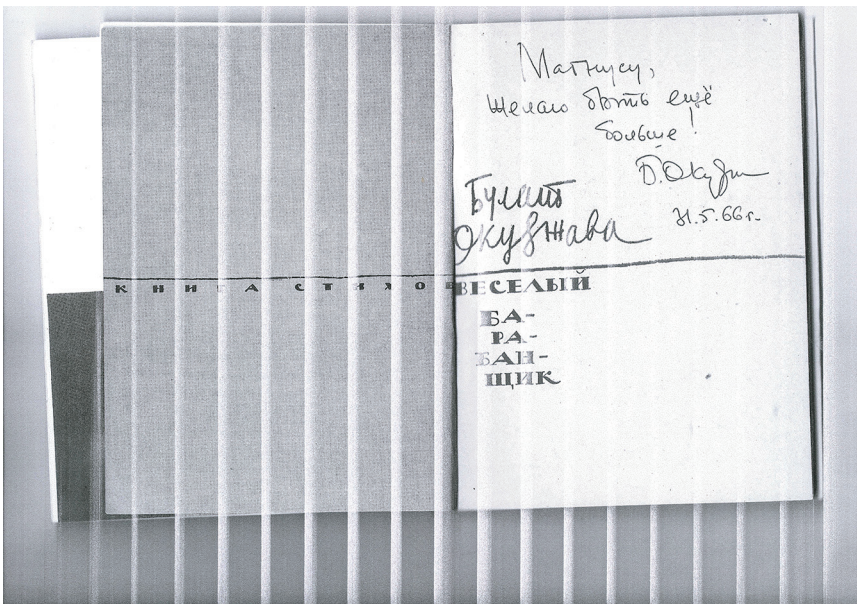
Bykov emphasizes in retrospect that Okudzhava was out of sorts and nervous. Just before his departure he had been warned by ideological instructors about the depraved West, describing in particular Swedish youth groups as full of provocateurs and agents. This was the background to a comical incident that Okudzhava mentioned in our conversation. In front of a Coca-Cola vending machine outside the hotel he had run into what at the time we called a "Mod"—a member of a youth group that on rather vague grounds protested against society. Okudzhava was jittery and feared the situation might turn violent. As it turned out, however, the Mod just wanted to help him wrest that capitalist symbol he had paid for out of the machine.

In my interview he reflected, "We have so many prejudices and wrong ideas about each other. When you actually get a first-hand look you see your preconceptions collapse one after the other. For example, I came here firmly believing that your 'Mods' were depraved, degenerate adolescents. That's completely wrong, isn't it? Many of them are definitely committed politically, socially conscious? Perhaps they are on the contrary the most progressive? There are so many 'legends' going around in the Soviet Union…."

I noted that many of his answers ended in questions: about living conditions in Sweden, about Swedish film, about our churches and our religious services, about how much our cars cost, about the king, about censorship and freedom of the press, about Sinyavsky (whom he'd never read), about Sholokhov's Nobel Prize.

When the article was ready we met again at the hotel. He had me quickly translate my text to assure him that it contained nothing inappropriate. I availed myself of the opportunity to ask on behalf of *Expressen*'s cultural editor whether he would consider occasionally contributing a column. It was a stupid proposal to make in the wake of the Sinyavsky-Daniel affair. He looked a little frightened. His wife confided to me that the recent sentencing of the writers had aroused considerable anxiety among the intelligentsia.

He handed me a collection of his poetry, "The Merry Drummer," in which he had written, alluding to the Latin meaning of my name: "To Magnus—I hope you'll be even greater!" And in the dedication he wrote on



Okudzhava's dedication in "The Merry Drummer"

one of the countless pictures taken at the Borgarskolan meeting he was even more familiar: "Dear Magnus, thank you! I wish you all happiness! Bulat 4.6.1966." We had become friends, it seemed.

Okudzhava was extremely modest. At the Borgarskolan he excused himself by saying that he hadn't played the guitar for three years—which didn't really matter, he added, since he couldn't really play anyway. Yevtushenko, in contrast, was intensely extroverted. When the microphones malfunctioned at this meeting he warned the young socialist organizers that their clumsiness might prove disastrous when they tried to "carry out the revolution." Combined with his declamatory performance, that sort of levity was received well by the audience. At Per Gedin's reception he was in such high spirits that after the writer and comic Hans Alfredson did a hilarious sketch, he planted a spontaneous kiss on Alfredson's lips.

There were two other poets in the background: Robert Rozhdestvensky and Stanislav Kunyaev. They kept pretty quiet. Kunyaev would later show himself to be a nationalist and a harsh and envious critic of both

Yevtushenko and Okudzhava. It was fairly obvious how unpleasant it was for him to be in their shadow. For his part, the result of his visit to Sweden was a poem describing Stockholm as a hostile city full of cold skyscrapers and alienated people: "Alone, like the specter of communism, / I wander across a desolate square." Here there seems to be an echo of Dolmatovsky's confrontation with the Swedish melancholy.

Shortly after this I went to the Soviet Union for the first time. In a writers' house on Lenin Street in Leningrad I paid a special visit to the Symbolist scholar Professor Dmitry Maksimov. He had childhood memories of Andrei Bely. Most important, however, was what he told me about his neighbor Anna Akhmatova, who had died only three months earlier. I had written in *Expressen* about her cautious return to literature and had in fact hoped to meet her.

Maksimov mentioned two significant writers I should get to know: Daniil Kharms and Arseny Tarkovsky. I had never heard of them. In Kharms's case, at least, I redeemed myself. My friend Lars Erik Blomqvist and I soon gave him an unpretentious introduction in our little publication *Rysk bokrevy*.

In February 1967 I finally made it to the Anthroposophists in Dornach, only to learn that I had tarried too long: Asya Turgeneva had died in October. I was dogged by bad luck. Not far from Vevey, where Dostoevsky had worked on *The Idiot* and where I was staying, I went to see Vladimir Nabokov, who was permanently residing in an apartment at the Montreux Palace overlooking Lake Geneva. Completely unannounced, I called him from the reception desk and asked to speak with him about *Petersburg*, which in a 1951 interview with Nina Berberova he had mentioned as a catalyst for all of his own writings. As the case had been with Ehrenburg, it was of course impudent on my part not to have written in advance and set up a meeting. "I don't have the time," Nabokov responded pithily. But at any rate, I got to hear his voice.

In 1968 I defended my licentiate thesis on allusions in *Petersburg*. This was during the so-called '68 revolt. Many in my generation began raving about Mao Zedong and bringing communism to Sweden as well. These born-again Marxists turned out to be insufferable know-it-alls. My experience ran exactly counter to theirs. My commitment was to the Russian

civil rights activists. In the fall of 1967 Vladimir Bukovsky had been condemned for demanding freedom of speech and bringing to light the crimes of the past. His only weapon was the pen, but he managed to triumph over his persecutors. He was enormously impressive.

Throughout the spring and summer I of course followed the freedom struggle in Czechoslovakia. On August 21 Soviet tanks rolled over the border. For the first time in my life I marched in a demonstration.

I continued to follow the Soviet civil rights struggle, stage by stage, and soon, in the spring of 1969, I realized that its most important documents, which were often disseminated as samizdat carbon copies needed to be translated into Swedish. So Lars Erik and I compiled what in the fall became a pocket book entitled *Soviet Protest: The New Russian Opposition in Documents*. That spring we also started our little publication *Rysk bokrevy* (Russian Book Review), which dealt with Russian cultural life in a rather cautious Soviet fashion, ignoring trials, arrests, and growing political dissent. This was of course a kind of duplicity. Soon we renamed the journal *Rysk kulturrevy* (Russian Cultural Review).

In the summer of 1969 Lars Erik and I drove his aging Peugeot to Leningrad and Moscow. In many ways that trip shaped us and our interests. The full significance of the meetings we had then was not entirely clear to us at the time, but as it eventually turned out, they held clues pointing toward the collapse of the Soviet state. It was as though we had landed right in the middle of the Russian intelligentsia just at the point in time when that intelligentsia in the narrower sense was about to abandon its last illusions about the Soviet regime. It felt burdened by increasingly heavy remorse after the sentences meted out to Sinyavsky and Daniel and the invasion in Prague, and in the hardening climate of Brezhnev's rule it began to suffer acutely from its isolation. Doors were opened to us everywhere, and because of the stagnant state of things, everyone we looked for seemed to be available. Thus, we were able to get a lot done in a short time, sometimes in a single day. The conversations surged freely, for this was an oral culture in which the hardening oppression seemed to reinforce a genuinely Russian need to talk. The desire to reconnect to a "before"—to a lost, pre-communist avant-garde culture—had by this point become only more desperate.

Myself on Red Square, in 1969 (Photo by Lars Erik Blomqvist)

We learned that the core of the intelligentsia's resistance—especially in Leningrad—had a very strong Jewish component. Intellectuals read samizdat and tamizdat and followed the *Chronicle of Current Events* closely. They conversed in whispers about everything that seemed to be going on beneath the surface, and often continued the exchange on so-called erasable tablets. It almost felt as though we were in a pressure cooker. Several months later, nine Leningrad Jews would attempt to hijack a plane, an act that led to the huge emigration to Israel in the 1970s.

After just a few days we made the acquaintance of a young poet we had read quite a bit about, especially in connection with the trial in 1964 that sent him into exile in northern Russia for his social "parasitism": Iosif Brodsky. The morning we visited him in his little apartment on Liteiny Avenue turned out to be very dramatic. We found him lying on a couch reading the philosophical works of Lev Shestov and the seventeenth-century English poet John Donne. He was on the outermost periphery of society and could be arrested again at any moment. He described the KGB agents shadowing him as "people kleptomaniacs": the minute they saw a free person, their fingers began to itch. Brodsky's friend Yefim Slavinsky (subsequently a familiar voice on BBC's Russian broadcasts) had been detained that very morning. His wife, Tatosha, was suddenly standing there in the apartment in utter despair. What should she do and what was going to happen now? It all seemed like something out of Kafka. Josef K. was lying there on the couch. On the wall hung two posters, gifts from American friends. One said "Wanted: Joseph Brodsky." The other announced a heavyweight boxing match between ruling champion Cassius Clay (as he was then known) and this same Joseph Brodsky. In 1972, as we know, Josef K. was thrown out of the Soviet Union and became Joseph Brodsky for real.

When we left Brodsky's apartment, he went with us. He was constantly looking around him, at every step aware of the KGB men following him. He had been close friends with the excellent young literary scholar Konstantin Azadovsky, but just then they had had a falling-out. When we met Azadovsky, we were struck by the fact that he was even more "backward-looking" than Brodsky, constantly glancing over his shoulder everywhere we went. He was obliged to wait a long time for his arrest.

It didn't happen until 1980, but when it did it was all the more diabolical. The KGB planted a few grams of hashish in his apartment and sent him to a labor camp for three years for "spreading drugs." We strolled around with him in the central areas of the city, which was also one way of eluding the constant threat of being bugged.

One member of the circle we had entered—a Jew, like most of the others—was Yury Mekler, who would eventually become a professor of physics in Israel. He was funny and smart and utterly free of illusions. He saw no hope for improvement in Russia. In retrospect, the scenario he imagined was prophetic. In a situation where Marxist doctrine was atrophying, he anticipated the birth pangs of a Russian patriotic movement. He foresaw at best a future sham democracy with two parties: one communist, the other nationalist. In the end, it wouldn't last anyway, and they would fight together for the good of Russia. It was Mekler who first gave Lars Erik some of the insights that he later presented in his 1972 book, *The Soviet Union Looks Back*.

Eventually, we came into contact with another former political prisoner, Sergei Bernadsky, and his wife. He was not Jewish. Instead, typically enough, he was interested in Russia's lost cultural individuality. In the summer he would take long bicycle tours in the north, where he collected relics of centuries-old Russian peasant culture. Typical as well was the fact that his wife read Vladimir Nabokov in tamizdat and nurtured a cult of her favorite writer. As so many would soon do, she had visited his childhood home in Rozhdestveno, southwest of Leningrad, and tracked down and photographed what remained of the Nabokov estate. Like Mekler, Bernadsky was in close touch with other former prisoners, and together they formed an underground network that naturally played a part in spreading forbidden information. In his kitchen we heard whisperings about the "All-Russian Union for the Liberation of Russia," whose members had been arrested six months previously and been given harsh sentences.

The photographs of Rozhdestveno made such a strong impression on us that we felt that we just had to visit the place. It didn't end well. On the way we were arrested by the police in Oranienbaum and underwent an interrogation that was recorded in detail—in indelible pencil. We had

strayed outside the permitted zone. Eventually, we were obliged to sign the report, and I guess we feared the worst. But at that moment our interrogator's attitude changed. We were released with a warning and cordially invited to come again under different circumstances.

Following another line of inquiry, we called on the literary scholar Tamara Khmelnitskaya, one of several older individuals regarded as authorities by young intellectuals. These "mentors" had first-hand experience of avant-garde culture, which, like a sunken Atlantis, was being rediscovered by the younger generation. Khmelnitskaya had written an insightful foreword to the sensational 1966 publication of Andrei Bely's poetry in the Poet's Library series. Since I was now working on a doctoral dissertation on Bely, it went without saying that I should get in touch with her. At one time, she had been one of Yury Tynyanov's favorite students. She had also managed, to the extent it was possible, to preserve a formalist approach to literature. Yet her analytical acumen existed side by side with an aura of innocence, so that in one and the same person we seemed to see before us both a seasoned literary scholar and a young girl. It must have had something to do with her very special background. She had married a young artist at the time of the German invasion in 1941. The day after the wedding, he left for the front and never returned, and from then on she lived her life through literature. In 1946 she was arrested. The guileless young woman understood nothing. Her quiet bewilderment reportedly made even the NKVD waver—perhaps she wasn't really suited to the role of enemy of the people and conspirator. After a while she was released. Now she sat there in a little room in a communal apartment surrounded only by books, a piano, and her husband's drawings.

Khmelnitskaya was able to provide inspired and very interesting glimpses into Bely's archives. Relatively little had been written thus far about him, and no one in the West knew anything at all about such materials. She referred to his then entirely unknown so-called intimate autobiography, in which passages describing Bely's dramatic "otherworldly" experiences in the Dornach colony brought to mind Strindberg's *Occult Diary*. There with her was her friend and classical scholar Yekaterina Melior, once one of Vyacheslav Ivanov's pupils, who began reading aloud for us from a novel she was working on set in fifth-century Rome.

Nina Gagen-Torn and Tamara Khmelnitskaya, in 1974

Suddenly, we were transported from a city in the grip of the KGB to Symbolism, its leaders Bely and Ivanov, and ancient Rome.

From Leningrad we drove via Novgorod to Moscow. There we met a young intellectual we later lost track of by the name of Vladimir Kasaravetsky. Expressing himself categorically, he declared that the entire Russian intelligentsia had given up and given in to the powers that be. The one shining exception was Boris Pasternak, who had met the challenge, passed the test, by refusing to legitimize the death sentences in the Moscow Trials, by persevering with *Doctor Zhivago*, and, finally, by dying a martyr's death. Kasaravetsky was probably not aware of Pasternak's complicated situation in the 1930s. At any rate, he voiced the same sort of pessimism as Mekler. Nothing better was in sight.

At the Mayakovsky Museum we got a few extremely fruitful tips. We were advised to get hold of two persons with a close connection to Mayakovsky: Nikolai Khardzhiev and Viktor Shklovsky. We had already thought of Khardzhiev, especially since Lars Erik had translated his article on Modigliani's portrait of Anna Akhmatova for our first trial issue of