Fifty-Five Years with Russia

Magnus Ljunggren

Translated by Charles Rougé

Exclusive Sampler
FIFTY-FIVE YEARS WITH RUSSIA
MAGNUS LJUNGGREN

Series: Studies in Russian and Slavic Literatures, Cultures, and History
Paperback | $25.00 | October 2016 | 9781618115386 | 102 pp.; 8 b&w illus.; 7 color illus.

SUMMARY

The academic career of internationally recognized Professor of Slavic Studies Magnus Ljunggren spans more than a half century. Here he looks back over his meetings with prominent members of the Russian intelligentsia who from the liberalizing XXII Party Congress in 1961 and down to the present have in various forms struggled with the totalitarian structures of Soviet and post-Soviet society. As a literary scholar Ljunggren has focused on Andrei Bely’s novel Petersburg, Russian Symbolism and Russian Silver Age literature and culture. His memoirs reflect on how his study of Symbolism and his commitment to the Russian civil rights movement over the years have stimulated each other and contributed to a deeper understanding of Russia’s distinctive character. Ljunggren’s gallery of intimate and colorful portraits of prominent cultural figures includes Bulat Okudzhava, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Joseph Brodsky, Viktor Shklovsky, Lidia Chukovskaya, and Nina Berberova.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR


PRAISE

“Magnus Ljunggren’s history allows us to revisit many lesser-known chapters from the cultural history of Russia’s twentieth century. Like an experienced stage director, in his emotionally charged narrative he shows the interconnections between the history of culture and the struggle for intellectual freedom. The author selects his details masterfully, avoiding polemics and describing famous artists and scholars who, in the face of difficult circumstances, did not betray their ideals. Ljunggren’s book is a valuable witness testimony to the era.”

— Fedor B. Poljakov, Professor of Russian and East-European Literature, University of Vienna

Thank you for downloading this free sampler of:
click www.academicstudiespress.com to order now
Fifty-Five Years with Russia
Studies in Russian and Slavic Literatures, Cultures, and History

SERIES EDITOR
Lazar Fleishman (Stanford University)
Fifty-Five Years with Russia

MAGNUS LJUNGGREN

Translated by CHARLES ROUGLE

Boston 2016
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-changin.” 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 obšchee 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 Nadezhhdina. 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 Nadezhhdina 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 Nadezhhdina’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