

INTRODUCTION

Nina Berberova (1901–1993) almost appears to have lived several lives. First she was a young writer in the revolutionary Russia. Then (together with Vladislav Chodasevič) she witnessed the hectic 1920s in Berlin and achieved her literary breakthrough in interwar Paris with psychologically finely honed novels and short stories set in the Russian émigré community. Finally, she went on in the latter half of the century to a career as a Slavist in the United States.

Berberova had her eyes on Russia the whole time. As an academic she studied the cracks in the ideological wall and seems early on to have foreseen her return to her homeland. At last, as she approached the age of ninety, she had vanquished the Soviet Union and could go back in triumph in the “revolutionary” year of 1989.

She was uniformly productive in various genres. In addition to everything else she was an avid letter writer who maintained a great many correspondences. For nearly thirty years she was friends with her Russian countryman Sergej Rittenberg (1899–1975) in Stockholm, to whom she sent more than 150 letters and postcards between 1947 and 1975. A reflection of her thoughts and reading interests, they also provide a glimpse into the genesis of her huge memoir *Kursiv moj*.¹ Her contact with Rittenberg appears for a number of reasons to have been very important to her.

They belonged to the same generation. Both were loners and had been shaped by a specific Petersburg culture during a very dramatic revolutionary period. Rittenberg was a sophisticated reader of lyrical poetry and was equally at home in Russian and French literature – another point they had in common. He was gentle and docile by nature, something that appealed to Berberova.

In 1946 Berberova was in the process of ending a painful marriage. She had emerged from the war with a tarnished reputation for

¹ *Kursiv moj. Avtobiografija*, first published in English as *The Italics Are Mine*, London – Harlow 1969. Henceforward I will refer to the Russian 1996 edition, with a foreword by E.V. Vitkovskij (Moscow).

having collaborated with the German occupiers of Paris.² With little income and in the straitened circumstances of postwar rationing, she came to Stockholm in November 1946 to collect her royalties for her book about Čajkovskij, which had just appeared in a new Swedish edition.³

Čajkovskij was homosexual, and it was this previously well-concealed side of him that she revealed to be the evident source of his serious depressions and personal problems. Berberova was deeply interested in gender crossings. It was not for nothing that many of her favorite authors were (often self-revealing) homosexuals such as Proust, Gide, Montherlant, Verlaine, Wilde, Tennessee Williams, and Kavafis. Here she seems to be processing some sort of fundamental gender ambiguity of her own. For the most part, she does not explicitly talk about homosexuality in her letters, but she constantly alludes to the subject indirectly. Throughout the thirty years of her correspondence with Rittenberg she stubbornly asks him about the inner self that he refuses to disclose to her. She must have suspected and understood the homosexual orientation that appears to have had a connection with the recurrent emotional problems he encountered in a milieu where such a profile was still taboo.

Rittenberg was Jewish, the son of a well-known St. Petersburg lawyer. He became interested in literature at an early age. After the Bolshevik revolution he emigrated to Finland. He spent the 20ies in Helsinki. In the 1930s he became the assistant editor-in-chief of the émigré literary journal *Žurnal Sodružestva*, which was published in Viborg 1933–1937.⁴ As he himself described it in a letter to Gleb Struve, it was he who “in practice edited” this “teeny little journal.”⁵ He was very active as a reviewer, writing about both new poetry

2 See Maksim Šraer, “Perepiska I.A. Bunina i N.N. Berberovoj (1927–1946). Vstupitel’naja stat’ja,” *I.A. Bunin. Novye materialy*, vyp. II, Moscow 2010.

3 Nina Berberova, *Tjajkovskij. En ensam människas historia*, Stockholm 1946 (first edition 1936).

4 See *Redakcionnaja perepiska “Žurnala Sodružestva” za 1932–1936 gody*, ed. A.G. Timofeev, St. Petersburg 2010.

5 Letter of 5 December 1970 (Hoover Institution Archives. Box 34. Folder 18), quoted in A.G. Timofeev, “‘Žurnal Sodružestva’ v istorii ruskoj slovesnosti. Načalo puti (1933–1934)” in the above-mentioned work, 16.

and new prose in exile. He paid tribute to poets such as Boratynskij and Brjusov in connection with jubilees and wrote an obituary for Michail Kuzmin. He also occasionally touched on political issues, and he published his own poetry. At the same time, of course, he built up an important contact network. In 1944, when the Soviet pressure on Finland increased, he emigrated to Sweden.

How did Berberova end up in Sweden? Through Vladimir Zlobin in Le Cannet in Provence in the summer of 1946 she had become acquainted with the Swedish artist Greta Gerell, a confidante of Zinaida Gippius. Gerell had a special knack for making friends with female Russian art figures (which one day would result in her remarkable relationship with Svetlana Allilueva), and when she heard that Berberova was owed money that could only be paid in Stockholm, she immediately invited her to Sweden.⁶

Berberova's singular curiosity about people took the form of an increasingly high regard for the artistic confession. She explained to Gerell that she viewed Strindberg – the author of *Plaidoyer d'un fou* – as a pioneer in the genre and that she very much hoped to take advantage of her trip to Stockholm to indulge her interest in the Swedish writer by visiting his grave and getting in touch with his third wife, who was still alive at the time. Such were her plans for the trip.

Berberova now got a useful change of scenery and was also able to meet the actress Harriet Bosse, Strindberg's wife for a few years at the beginning of the century.⁷ She attended the Nobel ceremonies in the Stockholm Concert House (where literary laureate Hermann Hesse, however, was conspicuous by his absence).⁸ Most important of all, on December 13, when Swedes celebrate St. Lucia's Day, she met Sergej Rittenberg.

Berberova and Rittenberg were naturally in tune with each other.

⁶ Greta Gerell, *Med egna ord* ("In My Own Words"), ed. K. Neuschütz, Stockholm 2007, the chapter "Paret Gippius-Merežkovskij" ("The couple Gippius-Merežkovskij").

⁷ See Berberova's own account of the meeting in her diary entries from Sweden in *Kursiv moj*, 503–504.

⁸ In an interview with *Svenska Dagbladet* on 11 December 1946 "the young and charming Russian-French writer" talks about her future literary plans.

They took walks together, talked about literature and visited Swedish Slavists. It was almost as though she had sent for this friend from Petersburg, and in his Stockholm (which was not without similarities with the old Russian capital) she felt at home.⁹

Soon it was agreed that Berberova would return in the summer of 1947 to spend a few weeks in the archipelago north of Stockholm, where Gerell had a studio on Hemmarö, some distance from civilization, with no roads, electricity or telephone. There as well was Gerell's mentor, the gymnasium principal Greta Asplund. They went sailing and fishing. Berberova managed to overcome the hydrophobia she had suffered from her entire life. In Stockholm she strolled around the Skansen zoo and open-air museum, accompanied everywhere by Rittenberg.¹⁰

Soon Berberova was divorced and began writing a novel. She published the newly written monograph *Alexandre Blok et son temps* and her own translation of Dostoevskij's story "Večnyj muž." She got a job at *Russkaja mysl'* and became affiliated with *Novyj Žurnal* in New York. In letters to Rittenberg she refers with a certain humorous distance to Sweden as a land of happiness like France in the troubled imagination of Čackij toward the end of Aleksandr Griboedov's *Gore ot uma*, and describes Stockholm's "Tivoli" as a wonderful recreational point. Sweden was therapeutic for her. In the summer of 1948 she was back on Hemmarö and refreshed herself even more.

In 1949 Berberova covered the Kravčenko case in Paris for the émigré press, soon developing the reports into a book. She had in fact casually entertained thoughts of emigrating to Stockholm, but now she tried instead to lure Rittenberg to Paris. She thought that he should establish himself as a literary critic and pursue the career he had begun at *Žurnal Sodružestva*. Her appetite was whetted by his review of her new story collection *Oblegčenie učasti* (which she managed to publish in *Novyj Žurnal*). Well written and generous, it focused on the lucidity and painful duality of her character portraits.

⁹ Cf. Berberovas diary entries in *Kursiv moj*, 504–507.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 508–510.

This was just how she wanted to be judged. Still, it seemed as though in his new role as a teacher in Swedish exile Rittenberg had stagnated as a journalist. Despite Berberova's encouragement he was unable to resume writing and reviewing. That part of his life was over.

For most of 1950 Berberova had no intention of following in the footsteps of émigré colleagues who were moving to the United States. Toward the end of the year, however, something happened. In letters to Rittenberg she had complained that the writer collective in Paris consisted of decrepit oldsters. Těffi and Aleksej Remizov were struggling with poor health, the aging Ivan Bunin became more and more fragile, Georgij Ivanov suffered from alcoholism. She also shared the overall European sense of catastrophe. Late in the year she suddenly decided to take the big step. She emigrated for the third time and to the fourth language in her life.

Soon Rittenberg's life as well entered a new phase. After supporting himself for several years by teaching evening courses, now he secured a position as a Russian instructor at Stockholm University.

Berberova at first worked at various part-time jobs and for Tolstoj's daughter Alexandra at the Tolstoy Foundation. Remarkably energetic and ever hungry for new impressions, she was clearly stimulated by the youthful streak in the American mentality. Here she felt rejuvenated. Now that she was settled in her new society, the high point came in 1958 when she was offered a university teaching position. And so she began a new life as a Slavist at Yale University in close and creative contact with talented young students. Rittenberg as well had a position in Stockholm, albeit a more modest one teaching conversation at Stockholm University.

It was also in 1958 that Berberova published "Mysljaščij trostnik" in *Novyj Žurnal*. The story is set in the Stockholm she knew so well from her walks with Rittenberg. It tells about a woman who is forced to separate from her beloved at the outbreak of WWII. She comes to Sweden and finds him married: a spineless weakling. Shortly after it came out Berberova sent the story to Rittenberg asking for his expert opinion. Was her depiction of Stockholm accurate? His

judgment meant a lot – the story could be viewed as her homage to the nation that – exaggerating only slightly – had provided the starting point for her return to literature.

In the summer of 1959, after almost forty years in the West, Sergej Rittenberg paid his first visit to Leningrad. He saw his sister Tat'jana, who was married to the writer Jurij German. He went back to his literary haunts and met survivors from the past. This became a recurrent summer ritual for him. Eventually he managed to find some of Berberova's schoolmates and confirm her parents' tragic fate in the Siege of Leningrad. Understandably, his reports were extremely important to Berberova. He had built a bridge to the city that was constantly in her thoughts.

Berberova was especially preoccupied with Anna Achmatova, the very quintessence of Petersburg culture and its ability to survive. Her poetry – the remarkable depiction of the fate of an entire nation in *Requiem* and *Poem without a Hero* – was gradually realizing even greater potential now that it was published in the West. Rittenberg called on her in 1962 and 1964 and reported in detail on his conversations with her. He had in fact discovered her almost fifty years earlier, even before Berberova. As a fourteen-year-old he had read and been deeply impressed by her recently published *Četki* – thus it was through her that he became acquainted with modern Russian poetry. As he reported in a Swedish interview three years before his death, in 1916 he heard her recite her poetry at an event where Osip Mandel'stam and Sergej Esenin were also on stage.¹¹ His contact with Achmatova finally led to a meeting with her in connection with her sensational trip to the West: taking what was for him a typically modest position, he was in the background when Berberova saw her again after nearly half a century in Paris the year before she died.¹²

11 Sergej Rittenberg, "Minnen från Petersburg och dess poeter" ("Memories of St. Petersburg and its poets"), *Lyriskvänner* 5 (1972), 42–45 (translated by Bengt Jangfeldt, who was responsible for the interview together with Lars Erik Blomqvist and Magnus Ljunggren). Here he also talks about his recollections of Konstantin Bal'mont, Nikolaj Gumilev and Georgij Adamovič. There is a more detailed account of these early impressions in a recorded version.

12 See *Kursiv moj*, 600–601.

In the 1960s Berberova gradually established herself as a scholar. In 1963 she moved to Princeton. She was influenced by modern structuralist theory in her articles on the new Thaw literature and especially the literary discourse in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union. She read *Voprosy literatury* and came to the conclusion that Marxist analysis was no longer viable. Arguments suffered from circular logic, and the ideology underlying the much-vaunted theory of Socialist Realism was a deeply fractured edifice. That was her conclusion in her study “Sovetskaja kritika segodnja” in *Novyj Žurnal* in 1966, the same year Andrej Sinjavskij and Julij Daniël’ were harshly sentenced to years in a labor camp for their satires, which marked a swing of the pendulum after the liberation of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Berberova was now closely monitoring developments in the Soviet Union, especially in Leningrad. She followed every phase in the reconquest of the legacy of the “Silver Age.” She took note of every new artistic breakthrough. With help from Rittenberg she had her eye on the young Iosif Brodskij even before he was tried for parasitism in 1964. She read and reviewed Solženicyn’s major novels *Rakovyj korpus* and *V krugy pervom* in samizdat before they were translated into Western languages. She followed the emergence of the new Soviet civil rights movement. Typical of her is the fact that early on she had taken up correspondence with writers and literary scholars in Leningrad and thereby once again became a member of the “Petersburg intelligentsia.”

Rittenberg’s nephew, film director Aleksej German, has said that Rittenberg came on these summertime trips like a fascinating visitor from a different civilization. Rittenberg was preceded by his friend Leo(nid) Lindeberg, a poet living in exile in Finland, who in 1953 reportedly turned up unannounced in the middle of the night with greetings to the Germans from Stockholm. That startling visit is reflected in a charged scene in the 1999 film *Chrustalev, mašinu!* Rittenberg deeply impressed his young nephew with his profound knowledge of Russian poetry.¹³

¹³ See Anton Dolin, *German. Interv’ju. Èsse. Scenarii*, Moscow 2011.

Thus Berberova was early on aware that Soviet dogmas were disintegrating. In letters from 1969 – an important boundary marked by the invasion of Czechoslovakia and Andrej Sacharov’s breakthrough the year before – she describes this ongoing ideological erosion based on her reading of *Voprosy kommunizma* and other materials. It was as though she knew already that the Soviet Union was going to fail, and she clearly felt that her own time was coming.

At this point her memoirs *Kursiv moj* made its grand entry, and Berberova found herself in the role of a unique witness to the times. She knew how to take advantage of impressions as she sought to provide unexpected details and reveal secrets. She was not always reliable. She in particular glossed over her ignominious time in Nazi-occupied Paris, something that reviewers of the book duly noted. She attempted to defend herself in a tacked-on afterword.

There is no escaping the fact that while in Paris Berberova wrote a poem portraying Hitler as a Shakespearean hero (“Šekspiru”). In one letter to Rittenberg she does seem to be expressing her shame. She says that she simply couldn’t bear to see the journalist Aleksandr Bachrach siding with Stalin during the “Soviet patriotism” of the 1940s. Whereupon she compares herself to Bachrach: “He served one master, I quite a different one.”¹⁴

When writers began to be allowed (or forced) to leave the Soviet Union in the 1970s (by which time Berberova had retired but was still very much in contact with Academia), she arranged to meet a number of them, not least Joseph Brodsky, who was now based in Michigan.

Toward the end Berberova and Rittenberg’s familiarity seems not fully as genuine as it was in the 1960s. She was a recognized professor emerita who was still dynamically active and could view herself (in accordance with the American definition of success) as “permanently happy.”¹⁵ Rittenberg, in contrast, had unfortunately never achieved the appreciation he deserved at Stockholm University.

14 Letter of 17 December 1951.

15 Letter of 4 February 1975 (Berberova’s underlining).

He had embarrassingly lost his position without being either honored or thanked. His bouts of depression deepened, and he was as unable as ever to express his pain. The end came in the fall of 1975, shortly after Berberova had crowed about her “shameless happiness,” when he chose to take his own life.

There is a footnote here. As one of Rittenberg’s students I inherited his archive, and I read in his correspondence how pleased Berberova was to have gotten in touch with her closest friend, the poet and photographer Ida Nappel’baum. While on a research grant to the Soviet Union in 1977 I looked her up and later relayed my impressions of the visit to Berberova. In 1983 I sent Berberova my dissertation on Andrej Belyj’s *Peterburg*.¹⁶ She was an exceptionally early admirer of the novel. In 1951 she wrote that “he who is deaf” to this work “is deaf to his time,”¹⁷ and in 1975 she helped arrange a symposium in Kentucky that marked the beginning of the late twentieth-century Belyj renaissance in the United States.

Berberova’s response to my dissertation was very positive – and personal, perhaps because it touched upon her special idiosyncracies. She had known Belyj and held his art in remarkably high esteem. Through a close reading in her own spirit, I connected his person to his writing and attempted, among other things, to uncover a homosexual component in his psyche.

In her letter to me she described how Otto Weininger and his ideas about bisexuality had helped her understand her own personality. She wanted to discuss further with me Belyj’s – and his entire generation’s – sexual inhibitions. At first we agreed to meet in Paris and then in Philadelphia, but unfortunately it all came to naught. When I was in her vicinity in the United States in 1987 she was supposed to meet me with her car at the station, but she fell ill with the flu and the meeting had to be canceled.

Soon Berberova was ready to return to the Soviet Union. In 1989, the year that marked the definitive breakthrough of perestroika and

¹⁶ *The Dream of Rebirth. A Study of Andrej Belyj’s Novel Peterburg* (Stockholm 1982).

¹⁷ Nina Berberova, “A Note on Andrej Biely,” *Russian Review* 2 (1951), 101.

glasnost and sealed the fate of the Soviet Union, she came back to Leningrad and was greeted in front of the TV cameras by Ida Nappel'baum, whom she had not seen in 67 years. Berberova's works were now published in various venues in her homeland. Once upon a time, as a poetry-writing schoolgirl in 1916, she had met Aleksandr Blok and Anna Achmatova.¹⁸ Now she herself was the living link to the resurrected past.

MAGNUS LJUNGGREN

¹⁸ Berberova describes this meeting in her memoir article "25 let smerti Aleksandra Bloka." See note 23 to her letter of 16 July 1947. See also *Kursiv moj*, 98–101.