

special theme

Introduction.

St. Petersburg – intangible heritage of the 1990s.

Archiving work in progress

I have rewritten this introduction many times and can continue to do so. We have stepped into a river which is moving very fast – all the meanings, symbols, and stereotypes we grew up with have changed rapidly, so there is a need for constant re-thinking, re-turning to the past, re-considering, regretting. Thus, in this version of the introduction, I want to refer to Irina Sandomirskaya's recent book, which also includes "re-" in the title: *Past Discontinuous: Fragmenty restavratsii*. In her introduction, Sandomirskaja refers to Jean-Luc Nancy's epigraph to one of his books: "There is no heritage". From her 30 years of research in Soviet and post-Soviet memory, Sandomirskaya paraphrases Nancy: There is no memory.

I interpret this claim to mean that there is no unquestionable, unchanged heritage nor unquestionable, unchanged memory. There are artefacts from the past, significantly changed by "the present" in our attempt to make them look like old things. Yet they still remain a part of contemporary materiality and the current value system, rather than a time capsule from the past.



On the eve of fireworks
on the Spit of Vasily-
evsky Island. Late 90s.

PHOTO: MIKHAIL BORISOV

Sandomirskaja proposes using another concept to deal with the past, neither *heritage* nor *memory*. According to her, the relation with the past is better described by the concept of *restoration*, which "serves to fulfill the desire for a collective belong-

ing to the past, which is constantly adapting to the present day" (p.13).

It is interesting that the concept of "restoration" has at least two meanings. The first has to do with materiality – the technique to repair a historic object – to clean it from the layers of recent history, fixing what can be fixed, aiming to make the object resist becoming dust, preserving the touch of the past enough to claim the object's authenticity. Another meaning of "restoration" is an attempt to bring back a former condition, a nostalgic move backwards, hunting the disappeared past, pretending that it could have been brought back, if only we had performed the right restoration technique.

IN THIS COLLECTION of memoirs on St. Petersburg during Boris Yeltsin's time, the authors are trying to do both. From the perspective of what is happening now, we suddenly have found that the 1990s, which are usually considered to be not far enough in the past, uninteresting, a desperate time of Russia's first decade as an independent state, are actually a decade in history which is worth contemplation. That time which is considered to be mate-



Picnic on the shore of Vasilyevsky Island Late 90s.

PHOTO: MIKHAIL BORISOV



The festive crowd returns from the fireworks.

rially poor and anxious is demonstrated to possess other qualities, which can be appreciated nowadays – the feeling of freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of hope. Because the culture of the 1990s was primarily intangible, our restoration is the restoration of that cultural heritage in its immateriality as well as an attempt to revive the time when openness was one of the important conditions of existence. It is an attempt to re-vitalize and re-experience that feeling of not being afraid to talk, to hope for a united Europe, which would include even a forever changed, democratized Russia. This romantic side of the 1990s is more vivid in the texts of Tatiana Samokhvalova and Mikhail Borisov. Samokhvalova dives into the Bohemian life of the St. Petersburg State University dormitory, as well as her discovery of the non-touristic part of the cityscape. The touristic infrastructure which made St. Petersburg so pleasant in the 2000s did not yet exist. For example, there were no established coffee chains and we mostly met at our homes, making basic salads, and covering the lack of taste with mayonnaise.

Mikhail Borisov tells about a vivid cultural life in St. Petersburg, which was often spontaneous and almost always lacked financial support from institutions. To be

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honest the cultural institutions themselves often lacked financial support for projects too. In the 1990s, most of us still did not have the financial possibility to travel outside Russia, so the investigation of the habits of Westerners was left to our imagination, listening to music, watching films, and reading, but by time filled in by our encounters with guest artists, designers, journalists, filmmakers from the West, that started to come more often as it gradually became easier to travel to Russia.

THE CITY OF ST. PETERSBURG then was gloomy and Bohemian as well as creative and intellectual – and very, very poor. There was not big difference if one was born in Leningrad or moved there later. 50 per cent of my classmates came from

other parts of Russia, but it did not play big role for their adaptation of St. Petersburg identity. There was no difference, who was really born here or who came from some other region. You automatically became a real St. Petersburg citizen if you embraced that this cold and rather uncomfortable place on Earth at the same time is the greatest place to be. In his contribution to this collection of memoirs, Vladimir Rannev describes what was characteristic of the city at that time and gives the readership a clue to the meaning of its intangible deviant culture.

So we make an attempt to restore that time and place. However, one can say, paraphrasing Nancy and Sandomirskaja, there is no restoration either. Restoration is an attempt that always fails. The failure is part of the concept of restoration. One cannot go back in time and cannot experience it as it was. Yet this collection of memoirs is an attempt at the restoration of the immaterial culture of the 1990s in St. Petersburg. It was written with the awareness of the integrated failure of the project by all its participants. At the time of the current cruel and absurd war with Ukraine, which broke all previous understanding of where the border of insanity begins, silence took over our work for some months, as a sign of the impossibility



PHOTO: MIKHAIL BORISOV



PHOTO: MIKHAIL BORISOV

Rock festival at the Petrovsky stadium *Let's fill the sky with kindness*, 1996.

for a human brain to digest the reality. We had to postpone digital meetings several times, because participants of this writing project did not have strength for anything more than their most necessary everyday work. We had a sense of the impossibility of managing the project to revive private memories from the 1990s, describing the time when democracy had a chance. All this suddenly became meaningless – our memories, our voices, our stories. When we started to discuss this project in 2021 there was a feeling that we are coming back to the beginning of *perestroika*, that the circle of openness came to its end. This openness of the 1990s felt like a short moment in history which we wanted to record and preserve. Doors opened and have been closed again. We, born in the USSR, becoming adult in the new Russia, did not even manage to reach retirement age before this openness came to its end. February 24, 2022, changed this still romantic metaphor of a circle which we had in mind. It probably has to be exchanged for a metaphor of Moloch, but events are happening so fast that there is no longer any time to search for the right metaphors.

Nevertheless, some texts have emerged during this time, and here they are, connected to the city and for almost all participants of this project to the

St. Petersburg State University. They probably say something to someone as a written attempt of archiving that time. The 1990s were a very immaterial time, and creativity was concentrated on cultural absorption: books and music, reading and listening. This time was an attempt to restore access to European culture, which Soviet citizens were deprived of for many years. In the 1990s we tried to assimilate, get access to, understand, appropriate, and learn Western culture very fast to fill in the gap of discontinuity during the Soviet era. I think that because that time has not been archived systematically and generally did not produce so many material artefacts – for example, one cannot speak of architecture and design of the 1990s – there is a need to archive it in stories, memoirs. Otherwise this intangible very subtle culture gradually vanishes and disappears forever, especially being overwritten by nowadays brutal narrative, which dominates Russian media during last decade.

IT IS GENERALLY unusual to write memoirs about such recent times, but it felt as though something is about to be finished – a balance that began in 1991 when the USSR dissolved, and new countries started to get their shapes has been shaken. No

one I knew in the 1990s was sad or nostalgic about the Soviet Union, even though ordinary life after its collapse was more difficult for many. My mother lost her job, as did the mother of my twin friends. The job market collapsed together with the USSR; many places where one could have been employed were closed. After one year of desperation and constant searching, my mother found a less qualified job than that she had before, more physically challenging, which with the combination of her being stressed led to her serious illness. Still, she did not complain; she was satisfied that she could participate in real elections and listened to TV debates with representatives of different new political parties.

Thanks to our age – I was 16 when the USSR disappeared – we did not immediately need to be breadwinners like our mothers. What we had to do was to apply and be accepted at some university, which I and my friends did. The opening of society had actually already started before 1991 thanks to Mikhail Gorbachev and his idea of *glasnost*. At school, we were already free to discuss new books that were not part of the Soviet curriculum. We read Varlam Shalamov's *Kolymskie rasskazy* [Kolyma Tales], a powerful judgement of the Soviet era. History books were rewritten, trying to give a balanced view of

different history actors – for the first time, they were not the history of one party, but an attempt to tell a story without taking this or that side. When we finished our Soviet school, our minds were already formed by *glasnost* and *perestroika* to take these ideas further at university. With the criticism of the former Soviet grand narrative came our ignorance of everything connected to that, including our university teachers who had previously taught Leninism and Marxism. After 1991 they could retain their teaching positions, but they had to adjust what they were teaching to the significantly changed view on reality. At the same time came the tendency to ignore political ingredients in private life as well as denial of the ideology of collectivism. As Olga Serebranaya mentions in her memoir, we were very apolitical back in the 1990s.

ONE OF THE CULTURAL movements in the 1990s was necrorealism, a macabre art trend founded by St. Petersburg filmmaker Yevgeny Yufit, an absurdist, dark narrative with references to Socialist realism. In the 1990s I actually did not get the point of that artistic expression and thought that it was just trying to be provocative and quirky. However, as history was unveiled, the movement started to reveal its depth and even in some sense the possibility to predict the future. One can say that nowadays, necrorealism has become a part of mass culture, blessed by Russian political and religious leaders, just without that humor and intellectual distance which was essential to the necrorealist artists in the 1990s. One of the memoirs in this collection, written by Andrei Patkul, reveals his own and his friends' take on this matter.

Another special feature of the 1990s was that intellectuals started to be interested in the work of the Russian Orthodox Church, and tried to find the meaning of life there. As with many other institutions of power which survived the historical catastrophe, the church system demonstrated its rigidity, despite the fresh air of the newcomers: educated cultural young people. As we know now, that new generation of believers did not manage to reform and modernize this institution; instead it was appropriated by the official

power and ideology structures, as we can read in Julia Kravchenko's history.

To collect memoirs of the 1990s is a work in progress. I hope that many people who lived in the 1990s will write their own memoirs and reflect on why democracy did not get its roots into society. United by the city of St. Petersburg then and scattered around the world afterwards, we were often driven not by a personal dream or career but by the impossibility to stay or accept the taste of reality in Russia. This exodus continues even now. As Mikhail Borisov said in our private chat – St. Petersburg feels unusually silent now in 2022. This must be because many whom one could have as a conversation partner left, or resists talking, as dialogue with other citizens became meaningless and even impossible.

Unfortunately, the window of openness which opened in the 1990s is closed now. Russia has come back to where it started, in fact to an even worse place. The decade of the studies of nostalgia is coming to an end. *Nostalgia* from Snow White turned out to be a wicked witch, demonstrating the degree of violence it can lead to in the attempt to revive the past: from melancholic visits to nostalgic cafes to the demolishing of societies and lives. We would do better to abandon our feeling of nostalgia, to wake up and come back to our senses and minds. By writing our 1990s stories down, we let them go at the same time. The 1990s were about openness and democracy but that time did not bring any healthy fruit.

MY WISH IS that a new rationality is on its way to overcome nationalistic and imperialistic animosity and lead to modernity and democratic freedoms. There is a third meaning of *restoration* – restoration of a political regime. The post-Soviet time developed a dream of pre-revolutionary Russia, an idealized picture of how it was. This idealization was frequently used to stimulate the nostalgic drive of the Russian population – backwards in history, not forward. The extensive reading of our favorite writer, Vladimir Nabokov, as I see it now, fitted well in the framework of this trend. We lived through his nostalgia. But the reading of good books is not modernizing as such.

The restoration of the Russian connection with the West is failing not only as a project directed to the future. It also fails as a *retrotopia*. We did not manage to restore Nabokov's childhood Russia, which was then a part of Europe, either. As Konstantin Zarubin summarizes in his concluding comments, while we were occupied by renewing our thoughts, "the fragile new institutions created in the 1990s have since been destroyed or rendered utterly decorative". ❌

Anna Kharkina

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Literature:

Irina Sandomirskaja, "Past discontinuous: фрагменты реставрации" [fragments of restoration] in *Новое литературное обозрение* [New literary review], (Научная библиотека [Scientific Library]: 2022).

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From left: Anna Mateeva, Olga Chegodaeva, Tatiana Samokhvalova in room 184, on the 5th floor, Shevchenko 25, June 1993.

The Bohemian life of the St. Petersburg State University dormitory

by **Tatiana Samokhvalova**

I have spent my student youth in the scenery of St. Petersburg and Russia of the 1990s. These were the times of tremendous change. Looking back from May 2022, I have to tell you the following.

I have spent the first four years of my life in St. Petersburg in a university dormitory on Vasilyevsky Island, a stone's throw from the Smolensk Cemetery that was ancient by the standards of a 300-year-old city. Built in Stalin's years, the five-story dorm building was filled with freaks and strange characters of all sorts, as well as mosquitoes, mice, cockroaches, and bedbugs. In fact, this place has become the most serious university for me.

Year 1992. I am 17 years old; the Soviet Union has already collapsed, my parents have divorced with a big scandal after 20 years of difficult marriage, my sister and I have graduated from school against this wonderful background.

I clearly remember the doorbell ringing; my kindergarten friend Anya was standing on the doorstep. We went to different schools, albeit located in the neighbourhood, and practically

TATIANA SAMOKHVALOVA entered the newly renamed St. Petersburg State University September 1992. She belonged to the last freshmen that had to spend their first month of study picking potatoes in the fields of the Leningrad Region. Dorm-life during this decade was intense and explorative, many life-lessons were learnt. Since 2014 she has been living in Berlin.

did not communicate with each other through all school years. However, for some reason, she came to me to invite me with her to St. Petersburg, to enter the Faculty of Philosophy at St. Petersburg State University.

"What was that?" I asked. "This is the former Leningrad State University (one of the leading universities in the USSR, which law faculty Vladimir Putin graduated from), it has changed its name after the renaming of Leningrad to St. Petersburg", laughed



Classmate Ilya Kozhurkin and schoolfriend Edward Kuzmin on the roof of the Philosophical Faculty.



Roomates and friends: Olga Chegodaeva and Tatiana Samokhvalova on the roof of the Philosophical Faculty.

Anya. A couple of months later, she and I found ourselves 2,000 km from home. She eventually entered the University of Culture (which is popularly called “Kulyok”, aka plastic bag) and I joined the Faculty of Philosophy!

I have heard from my parents as a child, that “there are only two decent universities in the country: Moscow State University and Leningrad State University”. It is not the most typical opinion for a provincial family, but my parents were higher school-teachers, they met and got married while studying at the post-graduate school (aka Aspirantura) in Leningrad.

I was an excellent student at school, and it was easy for me to learn. I enthusiastically read Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, which were not particularly interesting and understandable for my classmates. I adored Eugene Onegin, identifying myself with Tatyana, and sometimes felt like a 100 per cent Turgenev woman capable of a real heroic act for love.

Therefore, my admission to the Faculty of Philosophy, though unexpected, was quite “in my spirit”.

NOW, TO SHOCK or to entertain my companions, I just have to tell something about my life at that time, without even embellishing anything much. Looking back, I understand that only the recklessness of youth helped to experience things so easily and cheerfully.

What I experienced and lived through then made me resistant, and sometimes insensitive, to things that would cause shock to many. This very, very peculiar experience has made me who I am now, with all the pros and cons that it implies. It was also very important for my family and my school friends, who often visited me in Peter (this is how St. Petersburg is usually called

by its residents’ people on the entire post-Soviet space).

What was so special about St. Petersburg when I first came there in autumn 1992? To be honest, the city was very gloomy and very uncomfortable, in places. And it did not look much like Leningrad that I knew from my childhood, with its clean and neat central streets.

September 1992 was extremely warm, and we were the last freshmen that had to spend their first month of study picking potatoes

in the fields of the Leningrad Region. This is a very Soviet tradition, to go picking potatoes with the whole company or the entire university course. It was not only me having great doubts about the economic feasibility and effectiveness of such actions. In fact, it was very similar to the German gymnasium Kennenlernenfahrt, new acquaintances, the first serious, I would even say grave, experiences with alcohol (for the first time I got properly drunk with the di-

luted hard alcohol called Royal, popular at that time in all stores in the country). And this was me, a 17-year-old dreamer from the southern and very much wine-growing region of Russia. I also remember how, being a child of the southern forests, I was amazed with the blueberries near an old Finnish cemetery on the edge of Polyany village, where we spent this month.

IT WAS A FASCINATING START. Almost the entire academic year golden tubers then fed those in the dormitory who were smart enough to take more potatoes with them. My classmates, or almost all of them, were very bright personalities. We ate with those who were living in the dormitory a huge pound of salt (an expression that is used in Russian to refer to those with whom you went through serious difficulties). This salt was greatly

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Tatiana Samokhvalova. April 25 and snowing in St Petersburg.

PHOTO: YURA NOSOV



St. Petersburg State University is situated on Vasilevskiy Island.

PHOTO: ARSENIY BORISOV

sweetened by youth, a healthy hormonal background, and the run-down beauty of St. Petersburg in the 90s.

It was really so! Who else could, in such a rebellious time for the whole country, go, sometimes thousands of kilometres from their hometown, to study philosophy? How could I not fall in love with St. Petersburg completely and irrevocably for many years, growing up hearing the stories about my parents' student youth? Almost every year my mother "took out" my sister and me to Moscow and/or to the city on the Neva River (one of the many poetic names of St. Petersburg).

Vasilevskiy Island, aka "Vas'ka" (the diminutive form of the male name Vasily, a typical nickname for a cat in Russia), a large island in the delta of the Neva River, is connected to the neighbouring large island, Petrograd Side, and the city centre with drawbridges.

Vaska is still my favourite district of St. Petersburg, I feel so comfortable there as in few other places in the whole world. It is almost the city centre but separated by the Neva Delta from the rest of the city, featuring historical buildings and huge quarters of "newly built buildings" of different periods. It features a chequered layout of streets (some of which, in imitation of Peter the Great's beloved Amsterdam, were once channels). They are not just streets, but lines, thanks to the "channel" past, each side of the street has its own number! And the Spit of Vasilyevsky Island, on which the university buildings are located, is one of the most beautiful architectural ensembles in the world. I lack the words to describe it, it is better to look at the photos or just to visit it in person.

You can imagine what impression all this made on the girl who grew up, although not in the most typical Soviet provincial city (it was a large port on a warm seacoast), but in the city, almost destroyed by bombs during the Second World War. All this abundance of monument buildings, all these memorial plaques with the names of great writers, poets, and composers, numerous museums, theatres, and clubs made a lasting impression on me.

The reverse, shadow side of my life in St. Petersburg was no

less colourful: the dormitory where I lived had not been renovated since Stalin times when it had been constructed. It featured the romantic view of the giant pipes of TPP-7 (thermal power plant number 7), the infinitely long corridor on each of 5 floors and the abundance of interesting people as well as giant cracks in the old window frames. Mice, mosquitoes, bedbugs, and cockroaches; kitchens and toilets littered with garbage on weekends and holidays; regular heating shutdowns, including at -20 Celsius degrees outside; document checks in the entire building at night done by Special Purpose Unit of the Militia aka OMON; as well as a dark and scary shower in the basement.

But I, a domestic girl who grew up in an almost sterile apartment, thanks to the efforts of my mother, treated all this easily and with the good humour. I was surrounded by friends, I took my favourite bus 47 to one of the most beautiful places in the world to study, my father supported me financially, and I did not have to worry about my daily bread.

NOW, LOOKING BACK, I see how the recklessness of youth painted the gloomy Peter of the 90s for me in the bright colours of friendship, love, joy, and inspiration with its culture and its real-life plots. But in fact, what was happening in my life, in the life of the city and the whole country was sometimes frankly terrible. It was better to go to the basement shower of the dormitory together with my friends, because at some point a girl was raped there. Half of the first three floors of the dorm were inhabited by immigrants from Dagestan and Chechnya, and some of them simply gave no peace to females. Therefore, we sometimes went in pairs even to put the kettle on the fire in the kitchen!

OMON conducted very strenuous checks of documents and seized anyone who did not have registration under this address. In most cases, people paid off, as far as I understood, and continued to live in the dorm. Or they were hiding on other floors or even in toilets, so as not to be caught by policemen with their loud voices, bulletproof vests, and the machine guns.



The Twelve Collegia is the largest edifice from the Petrine era remaining in St. Petersburg.



Tatiana Samokhvalova and friend Yulya Starova in the colonnade of Kazan Cathedral in 1993.

PHOTO: YURANOSOV

Many of those living in the dormitory were drinking regularly and a lot, mostly vodka. I also learned to do it pretty quickly. It was a kind of youthful bravado, as it should be. I started smoking immediately upon arrival in Peter, and by the end of my first year I switched to “Belomorkanal” cigarettes, which were extremely strong and cheap. But the decisive factor was the impression that I made with this cigarette between my teeth on others. Ah, wild-wild youth... We were young and reckless! Later, my older friends taught me how to insert a piece of cotton wool into a cigarette instead of a filter. Afterwards I went back to “normal” cigarettes.

I was surrounded by a strange, difficult, and interesting environment. Some of my classmates at that time were incredibly erudite and clearly thinking. I did not spend much time reading, more talking about everything in the world. Like peripatetic philosophers, we wandered around Saint Petersburg and discoursed. We were sitting in the smokeroom next to the room I lived in (number 184) and looking into the infinity of the corridor. We thought out loud about everything that was worrying us.

Having exhausted our souls and bodies with not the healthiest lifestyle, 2 times a year we went to our hometowns for a long vacation to recover next to our parents’ refrigerators and old schoolmates.

I remember a lot of sun in my St. Petersburg of those years, and many gloomy days without it. It was perishing cold and cosy warmth outside. There were drunk philosophers crawling down the corridor of the second floor of our dorm and quoting Nietzsche in wonderful German. There were senior students who seemed demigods to us, and newly arriving provincial boys and girls with big naive eyes. There were stupid lectures that made it easy to fall asleep and lecturers we listened to with our mouths open and bated breath:

Incredibly charismatic Professor of the Department of Ancient Philosophy Sergeev, brilliant thinkers and speakers Askold Timofeenko and Alexander Sekatsky. Professor Torchinov, a world-renowned expert in Chinese philosophy. Professor Markov, who was affectionately loved by all students. World-famous film director Alexander Sokurov who taught a special course of studies at the faculty.

This list is far from being complete! After all, there were also

Kobzar, Sukhachev, Litvinsky, Perov, Ivanov and others who greatly influenced me, all of us, our worldview. We have learned from these people to think clearly, to see beyond the surface and not to get lost in the bubbling abyss of humanitarian knowledge.

And there was also an ancient, built like an amphitheatre, auditorium No. 24 that amazed me already during the preparatory courses. When I go back to my years at university in my mind, I often remember it in the first instance.

And the building itself, which still houses the faculties of history and philosophy, was magnificent! It is a rebuilt Gostiny Dvor (shopping arcades) with covered outer suites along the entire perimeter, high ceilings and long booming corridors, a courtyard in the centre, which was rarely visited by students.

SPEAKING HONESTLY, I did not really bite into my studies, I grabbed it at the top, as they say. Many things, due to my youth and immaturity, I was simply unable to understand and assimilate then. And the “spirit of change” that reigned throughout the country at that time, actually a spirit of laxness, to be honest, allowed even those who returned to school from vacation a month later to study further.

What was good then is that freedom of thought that was almost absolute. None of us even thought about how his or her opinion corresponded to the “general line of the party”. It simply did not exist then, or it was called “perestroika, democracy, and freedom (of self-expression)”. Now, in mid-May 2022, when I am writing these lines, I cannot even believe that this was once possible in Russia...

Many of those living in the dorm in 25 Shevchenko Str. had serious financial difficulties, ate what they managed to “compose” in the kitchen from products collected from various friendly rooms. Or they just went “out to eat” to those to whom parents regularly sent money or parcels with groceries.

Oh, those parcels from sunny Moldova! There were quite a few guys and girls in the dorm from this former Soviet republic, which is now a separate state. Life in Moldova was definitely not easy, people chronically lacked money, but the fertile sunny land of this country generously gave not only its children, but also their friends, grapes, apples, wine, and much more. Each parcel

from Moldova was an event not only for the one who was waiting for it, but also for all his or her ever-hungry friends. It was a good luck if you were asked to help bringing a heavy box from the Vitebsky railway station (parcels at that time were usually transferred with passenger train conductors). After all, it was always followed by opening it and treating all those involved!

The dorm was living at its own rhythm, weaving us all into it. Sometimes I think that I spent all my years of study, 1992 to 1997, in some very strange greenhouse, having minimal contact with the reality of the 90s in Russia. I spent eight months a year between the building of our faculty and the dorm, also located on Vasilyevsky, in the Harbor, an area of new buildings of Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev times. In the process of developing and rebuilding this area, the city constantly conquered land from the Baltic Sea. The embankment of new lands and the riot of architecture, now in the Putin's period, continue there to this day.

I especially remember the silhouettes of friends sitting in the open windows at the ends of the infinitely long corridors of the dorm; the Dummy album of Portishead, which was sounding from almost every room in the spring of 95; the screams and the tramp of the special force policemen checking documents on all floors in the depth of the night. A large photo portrait of Boris Grebenshchikov (a St. Petersburg rock musician, known since Soviet times, who has left the country after the Russia's attack on Ukraine, despite a rather respectable age of 69 years). Boris's hands were decorated with unusually large rings. I am wearing rings like this ever since.

And suddenly there was a knock, the door opened, and the friendly face of Boris Borisovich was replaced by the stunned faces of the dorm alcoholics, Slava and Oleg: "Girls, we just heard on the radio that Kurt Cobain shot himself!" I also remember these wonderful last days of June before leaving home for the holidays, where the warm Black Sea, my family, and my former school friends were waiting for me, and all this against the background of an endless amount of sun and fresh fruits. The dorm was getting empty, the corridors seemed to lengthen, and they became even more booming. Silence, emptiness, only some post-graduate students (PhDs) and students who did not go anywhere because of work, lack of money or the insane high cost of air and railway tickets to the other side of the infinitely vast Motherland.

A FEW MORE MUSICAL memories: it was there, on 25 Shevchenko Str., where my deepest love for the work of the legendary 4AD label's artists, Cocteau Twins and Dead Can Dance, was born. Sometimes it was easier to get interesting music in the dorm than food.

MreMII liked this not-so-easy life very much. I was genuinely surprised by those who wanted to rent a room in the city at any cost. And at the same time, I willingly agreed to live in the "city", in some temporarily empty apartment of the friends of my



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Among the teachers were sinologist Evgeny Torchinov, film director Alexander Sokurov, and philosopher Alexander Sekatsky.

friends. Of course, "own" bathroom, kitchen and toilet were, of a great value for the people like me.

In my fourth year, I was "awarded" a separate room. To do this, it was necessary to have a "ghost soul" – a student who was only registered in the dormitory but did not live in it. Then you could live alone in a double-bed room. It was some privilege!

In addition to the intensive and familiar alcohol culture, psychedelic culture also flourished in the dorm. Thanks to Castaneda's books and other instructive works (by Terence McKenna, Stanislav Grof, etc.), students were theoretically aware of the use of magical "plants of power" to expand consciousness. Of course, when we had the opportunity to taste mushrooms like

the ones fed to Carlos by Don Juan, how could there were any doubt about it in our young heads?!

Psilocibins grew on collective farm fields fertilized with cow manure and on pastures of the Leningrad Region (the region was never renamed after the city was, and St. Petersburg is still surrounded by the Leningrad Region). According to legend, biology students of Leningrad University discovered this mushrooms there back in the 1970s, and since then every autumn the region was plagued by the expeditions of "psychonauts" (as

people who use psychedelics were called, the term was formed by combining the words "psyche" and "astronaut"). Mushrooms were rarely consumed fresh; they were mostly dried and then taken throughout the year for special occasions. Meanwhile, teenagers from the suburbs and villages did not beat about the bush with magic mushrooms and consumed them mixed with alcohol and other drugs.

The police aka militia, of course, was aware of it, and over time, a game of hide and seek and catch-up began on these collective farm fields every autumn. Therefore, the expeditions were carried out secretly, and the "right" fields and their coordinates were transmitted from mouth to mouth.

In my fifth year, a friend of mine and I decided to rent rooms in communal flats (apartments in which several completely different families were living at once). It was too expensive to rent a separate apartment.

The room I ended up renting was truly beautiful, with a high ceiling and a bunch of paintings on its walls. It was on my

"SOMETIMES I THINK THAT I SPENT ALL MY YEARS OF STUDY, 1992 TO 1997, IN SOME VERY STRANGE GREENHOUSE, HAVING MINIMAL CONTACT WITH THE REALITY OF THE 90S IN RUSSIA."

favourite Vasilyevsky Island, of course. However, quite in the spirit of Saint Petersburg, the author of these paintings recently jumped out of the window, and his beloved, the owner of this room, fenced off a corner in a huge 20-meter kitchen with curtains to rent her room to me and to live on this money with her two sons. The apartment was also inhabited by the charismatic Olympiada Nikolaevna, the elderly mother of the owner of the room, and a neighbour who had nothing in common with this family. The neighbour was extremely rare to see, so all the time I was living on the 14th Line, I spent inside this complex and contradictory family of “landlords”. As a result, my friends and I became friends with my “landlady” Jana and her friends, and for many years afterwards our lives crossed again and again.

THE ERA OF THE DORM on Shevchenko Street ended with the university diploma I got in June 1997. How joyful I was looking in the future then, not knowing a bit how it all would continue!

After all, everything worked out somehow, in the fall of the same year I entered the Faculty of Postgraduate Studies (aka Aspirantura) at the Department of Philosophy of St. Petersburg Electrotechnical University aka “LETI” at the suggestion of the kind-hearted Boris Vasilyevich Markov. He headed the Department of Philosophical Anthropology, where I defended my diploma.

To be honest, I did this to a greater extent to be able to maintain my St. Petersburg residence permit. Its absence severely limited social opportunities, although some of my friends and acquaintances lived without it for years or even decades. The situation at the Department of Philosophy of a technical university was very different from what I was used to at the St. Petersburg University. And since my motivation was clearly insufficient, I did not get to the defence of my thesis there. At some point, I started to look for a job. A career in higher education



Oleg Shmyrin and Lada Ilicheva also lived in Shevchenko 25, and was also photographed by Boroda.

was not appealing to me at all. I wanted to prove to myself and others that I was able to earn money normally and to stop being dependant on the support of my caring father.

However, when the crisis of 1998 broke out (rouble crisis or the Russian flu), I took the opportunity to get a room in the dormitory of “LETI”. It was a completely different building in a residential area of the city, where I was given quite an acceptable room, that had even a balcony! I only lived there for a few months. Work (oddly enough, I was hired in the marketing and PR sphere, having only a philosophical diploma and no experience!) gradually

dragged me headlong, I rented an apartment and dropped out of the post-graduate school.

A separate small apartment with my own bathroom, kitchen, and toilet (!) was located in an area where the metro line was washed away by groundwater, and the residents of the northern districts of St. Petersburg had to overcome the gap between stations using the land transport for almost 9 years.

Living in the proximity of Akademicheskaya subway station, I spent a lot of time in so-called “marshrutkas”, small private buses, which ran much more often and more conveniently than the free ones provided by the city. I clearly remember December 31, 1999, I was going not by the most common minibus, but by a huge old Ikarus (Hungarian-made buses that were actively used throughout the USSR). The radio was turned on and was loudly announcing that Boris Yeltsin is resigning, and Vladimir Putin is being appointed Acting President of the Russian Federation. This was how my 90s ended.

Over the next 3 months of 2000, I got suddenly fired from my job, went headlong into music, singing and making a huge number of new friends; my mother finally made her dream come true to return to the city of her student youth and moved to St. Petersburg; and Putin became the popularly elected president of Russian Federation. ❌

About the photographer

I WOULD LIKE TO SAY a few words about the photographer whose pictures accompany my story.

Yura Nosov aka Boroda (Beard), was not an ordinary person, now they would call him a freak. He wore a funny old flat cap, was bald, wore the beard and smoked Belomor. He worked as a plumber, was much older than all of us and had a lot of friends among the university students, mostly from our dorm.

Boroda took pictures all the time. He was

ready to take you out for a photo shooting in the summer as early as 7 am, “when the light is the best and there are almost no people on the streets”. He made pictures simply because he liked it and because he could not imagine his life without it. He never took money for his photo sessions, sometimes he was requesting small amounts to buy film or paper. Many years later, already in

the 2010s, he began to digitize his giant photo archives and tried to distribute the photos on CDs to his “models” from the 90s. He told me:

“When I die, Samokhvalova, you will remember me with a kind word –

I brought you your whole youth on CD!”. It has happened to the word. Yura died of lung cancer on August 24, 2020, and I still remember him with gratitude. And not just me.



The otherness of the city made it artistic

by **Vladimir Rannev**

“The more deviant you are, the more artistic you are,” remarked Boris Groys. I would like to think that this idea came to his mind in St. Petersburg, where he had spent his student years, usually leading to the freedom of judgment and the distrust of everything normal. St. Petersburg, of course, is an abnormal city, which has succeeded in creating deviant forms of life, where the usual is layered with a unique content. Even in the most conformist Soviet years, when everyone was like everyone else, the city was known as the incubator of nonconformity. People who were reflecting and came here for something “different”, were often disappointed, because the “different” should be carried within, and not demanded from others. Thus, the “otherness” of St. Petersburg/Petrograd/Leningrad/St. Petersburg became a myth. History, climate, architecture, and everyday life – everything here is mythologized, because it is deviant in its own way and therefore, following the logic of Groys, it is artistic. This artistic city is more significant than the amount of all the artists who inhabited it at different times; they were well aware of it and paid tribute to it in their work. This was also realized by those who did not work in the artistic field, but while living in this city, cultivated *Lebens-künstler* at any level possible, from bohemia to urban madmen.

IN THE 90S, when I came here having entered the conservatory, the city was a collage of the front facades of palaces, street buildings of the past centuries, left to

themselves since the Siege in the Second World War, and rapidly decaying late Soviet panel architecture. The surrealism of the coexistence of these buildings was picturesque in its own way. This was also observed in the social landscape: splurged life success of a clearly criminal origin coexisted with the blatant poverty, and all the border areas of the social ladder were interlaced with many subcultures. It was uncomfortable, but interesting to live there and then. The density of cultural life went through the roof, and the constant exchange of people and ideas with the outside world (mainly with Finland and Germany) fed the mythology of the “cultural capital of Russia” with new stories.

In the 2000s, the big oil era, the city was touched up with varnish, contrasts were levelled with consumer stereotypes, and cultural diversity began to deplete. Berlin-style cafes, clubs,

The music composer **VLADIMIR RANNEV** describes what he found as a closed “St. Petersburg” community in the 90s, with a mosaic of various subcultures. Vladimir Rannev was born in Moscow in 1970. He graduated in 2003 from the composition department of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, where he studied with Professor Boris Tishchenko.

shops, and squats gave way to more pragmatic commercial formats such as chain coffee shops, brand boutiques, mini-hotels, and shopping malls. Having discovered an art market around them, the artists learned to keep up with it and no longer showed-off their marginality. Glamor spread everywhere, the city culture was the discounted *dolce vita*. In the 90s, this did not happen yet, everything lived in a closed “St. Petersburg” community, which consisted of a mosaic of various subcultures.

“EVEN IN THE MOST CONFORMIST SOVIET YEARS, WHEN EVERYONE WAS LIKE EVERYONE ELSE, THE CITY WAS KNOWN AS THE INCUBATOR OF NONCONFORMITY.”

IN THOSE YEARS, for various reasons, I often travelled to Germany and Finland, and noticed one difference, among others, in the habitat of a resident of St. Petersburg and a resident of Western Europe. The usual dwelling, for example, of a Berliner was well-groomed and had a certain level of habitual comfort, while cafes and clubs cultivated a sloppy, aesthetically ruined style, as if they were freeing the visitor from the *Ordnung* of everyday life. In St. Petersburg, on the

contrary: the life of a citizen remained unsettled (about a third of the population has lived and is still living in the “shared apartments”), the municipal economy was poor (significant funds have been stolen and are being stolen by the corrupt authorities), but the residents of St. Petersburg preferred to spend their leisure time in the oases of well-being – spotless restaurants and clubs designed in the style of “Albanian Baroque” (expression of the St. Petersburg composer, Leonid Desyatnikov). All this defocuses the impression of those years, diverting the attention not to this or that form of life, but to the mutants formed by the chaotic crossing of these forms. It was a wonderful era for the detached reflection taking on the craziest artistic forms, but unhappy for the everyday habitual existence of the inhabitants of this huge and uncomfortable urban agglomeration. ✖



“IN THE 90s EVERYONE WAS IN A HURRY”

The Association of Photographers took form, and young artists, such as Mikhail Borisov himself, began to explore and create together; any non-boring styles were welcome.

text & photo **Mikhail Borisov**



A boy on Nevsky Prospekt
near the oldest bookstore
– House of Military Books.



Boys on the eve of the holiday "Scarlet Sails".

When did the 90s begin in St. Petersburg? During the first rallies against the demolition of the Angletierre Hotel in 1987? In 1989, during the election of Anatoly Sobchak to the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR? Or during the renaming of Leningrad to St. Petersburg on September 6, 1991? Or during the abolition of the compulsory school uniform?

In the 90s, everyone was in a hurry. Some hurried to the TV to watch *600 Seconds* with Alexander Nevzorov and *The Fifth Wheel* with Sergei Sholokhov, others – for money in *Hopper Invest* and *Russian House of Selenga*, the entrepreneurs registered cooperatives and banks. Newspapers were launched for all occasions, publishing houses raced to release books of Dovlatov and Brodsky. Josephus Falvius and Antsiferov's *The Devil* were printed on gray newsprint.

Vanya, a neighbor in a communal apartment, worked as a turner at a factory. One could see the factory entrance from the kitchen windows. In the evenings, Vanya looked out the window and wailed: "All the good things are being taken out of the factory!" Another neighbor, red-haired Eugene, turned on loudly the *Voice of America* at night. One day, a scream was heard from Vanya's room. Everyone entered his room hurriedly. Vanya stood at the open wardrobe and threw up his hands. "Just have a

MIKHAIL BORISOV here shares his memories from a hectic and creative St Petersburg, that he caught with his camera. In this theme section his photos are frequently displayed. Today Borisov is a freelance writer and photographer.

look! That's crazy! How could they do it! It is scandalous! "The wardrobe was filled to the top horizontally with whole bottles of vodka. Vanya, being a law-abiding citizen and non-drinker, bought vodka using coupons, but did not drink it, and the carriage turned into a pumpkin before his eyes. Stacks of vodka, his investment in the future, a commodity that could be sold profitably anywhere and at any time, became once again just a commodity. Coupons were canceled. It was probably in 1992, simultaneously with the decree "On Free Trade", when citizens went out to sell whatever they got on the streets near the metro.

In the Yusupov Palace in those years there was a workshop of Rafael Mangutov, Rafa, the photographer. Rafa was a kind and energetic person, he shot Boris Eifman's ballets for posters and portraits of beautiful girls at the call of the heart and for souvenirs. In Yusupov Palace, where the Teacher's House was located,



Dostoevsky Street 4. The residents of the house N4 had purchased a bust of Lenin at their own expense and installed it in their yard. A teenager at the bust of the leader covered with paint on the eve of the referendum on renaming Leningrad to St. Petersburg. Summer 1991.

there were plenty of girls, so Rafa had no shortage of models. On the antique-sepied prints, barmaids and teachers looked beautifully as actresses of the Silver Age.

Once Rafa started the Association of Photographers and decided to make exhibitions. In Rafa's workshop, young journalists, art photographers, and experimenters gathered, any non-boring styles were welcomed. Lyosha Yakovlev brought absurdist landscapes of the city with garbage cans, Pavel Glebov showed surreal "sandwiches" obtained by combining several slides on an orvo-chrome. Zamir Usmanov, Sasha Belenky and Felix Titov shot social reportages and chronicles of city life. In the first exhibition, which they decided to launch in the open air right on the fence of the Catherine Garden, because no permission was required, Alexander Filippov, Sergey Leontiev, and, probably, even Zhenya Mokhorev took part. Participants gathered on a weekend, quickly hung pictures and enjoyed how the audience reacted vividly to the stories.

Then they decided to make such an exhibition in Moscow on the Arbat, on the fence around some construction site. At that time, artists painted on the pedestrian street Arbat, singers sang, books were sold by booksellers. Guests of the capital were promenading there. At the exhibition, everything repeated itself: there were a lot of spectators.

Raphael organized the third exhibition in some kind of a squat or a youth center in the courtyards near the Griboyedov Canal. Photos were hung all over the building on clothespins, like laundry in a yard.

A LITTLE LATER, with Alex Yakovlev, we came up with an idea of making an exhibition at the Sennoy Market, where there was a flea market. The idea was to shoot a reportage and show it in the same place and to the same characters as in the pictures. We went there several times, noticed good points, looked at the characters. Finally, we decided to do it and on the appointed day Alex arrived at the flea market with a huge camera, hoisted it on a tripod. As soon as he had everything settled, he was "swept away" and dragged to the police station. The action exhibition did not take place.

A partnership of photographers on the initiative of Raphael joined and participated in the movement called Next Stop. A group of Danish young photographers came to St. Petersburg and stayed in our apartments. I got a curly black Sik, I took him around the outskirts of Vasilyevsky Island, he photographed old women at the Smolensk Church and got acquainted with scrap metal collectors on the street. There was also a joint exhibition with the Danes in the Palace of Youth. On my photo, someone glued a sticker, saying



Kazansky Bridge during a street demonstration.



In the train to Luga 1999.



Vasilevsky Island, winter 1992, on the eve of the introduction of free prices.



Artist Natasha Kraevskaya in the Akhmatova garden. Late 90s.



Galina Starovoitova, adviser to the President of the RSFSR on inter-ethnic issues, with her voters on Palace Square, 1992.

they wanted to buy it. I was happy to get some money. But then the buyer offered to exchange works, because he spent all money in St. Petersburg. He has brought a graphic abstraction in return, which is still hanging in my mother's apartment.

The next year, Rafael and company went to Aarhus, and I was not able to join them. As a result, Raphael did not register the association of photographers, wealthy collectors were found for his work, and he lost interest in team projects.

Already when the Partnership disintegrated, *Ogonyok magazine* made a large publication with photos on a spread. Many years later, a funny letter was found on the magazine's website. A lady wrote to the magazine that she was walking past the Kazan Cathedral and got into a frame in which protesters were grabbed. She said that she had nothing to do with the event, but in the picture she looked well, with the hair fluttering beautifully in the wind, so she had no complaints.

Photojournalists slowly scattered among the editorial offices, fortunately there was a demand for energetic and young, eager for business trips and for shooting sensational photos from hot spots.

We went to Vilnius and Tallinn, flew to Tbilisi, Baku, and Karabakh. In the early 90s, there was no censorship in St. Petersburg publications, it was possible to get a permit even to make shooting in Kresty prison. Most newspapers adhered to a liberal line, and reality was more incredible than fantasy.

Photographers from the company of Rafael Mangutov had different lives. Felix Titov became a war correspondent and disappeared in 1995 in Chechnya, Pavel Glebov went to England and stayed there for many years, Zhenya Mokhorev became a famous art photographer. Alexander Belenky today teaches photojournalism at the university.

In the mid-90s, in 1996, Sobchak lost the election to a man in a construction helmet and with the slogan "There is a lot of work to do ahead", to Vladimir Yakovlev.

In 1998, Galina Starovoitova was murdered in the entrance hall of her house. That night, I got a call from the newsroom and had to go to the scene. The day was dawning. Policemen, reporters, and onlookers gathered on Griboyedov's channel.

Soon I left the newspaper. There began the time for maga-

zines, glossy, and entertainment. Magazines generously advertised cars, fitness, doors, and jewelry. These businesses were run by those who changed their specialty, philologists and historians who became entrepreneurs. The texts in the magazines tried to direct to the sphere of their former interests: French philosophy, new cinema, and heroes of the underground. Foucault and Derida co-existed with texts in praise of Gucci and Versace. There was even a special person in the editorial office, who was in charge of the correct spelling of brands. Once a man came to the editorial office with a draft print of the magazine for edits with a finger pointing at one of the lines of advertising text. The man was asked to wait a bit and they forgot about him. So he sat for an hour with a finger resting on the line where something had to be fixed. When he left, they decided that he just did not like to read.

IN THE LATE 90S, with the approach of the Millennium, the idea of a magazine independent of advertisers and devoted to new manifestations of urban life and culture became increasingly relevant, and after several attempts, by 2003 the publishers were found for the *Krasny magazine*. Krasny meant beautiful and revolutionary, not like all others.

In 2013, the last volume of the five-volume series of photo-books about St. Petersburg and Leningrad, collected by University Professor Vladimir Nikitin, called *The End of a Century: Metamorphosis of Being. Leningrad – Saint Petersburg*, was published. The end of the century featured metamorphoses of being – demonstrations, elections, ice swimmers, newlyweds, bankers, crime scenes, and beauty contests.

The end of the century spoke in the language of irony, strange convergences, contrasts, the social seemed to be more important than the figurative.

Today, black and white photographs from the early '90s, made on film, seem older than they really were. As if they were made in a completely different time.

In the late 90s, photography became digital, there appeared Photoshop and color. The dispassionate deadpan, noir, and teenage snapshots trend reached Russia. Between the beginning of the 90s and their end, a chasm was revealed.

Sometime in 2000, in the bookstore Anglia on the Fontanka I saw for the first time the luxury publication of Boris Mikhailov's album *Case History. 1998–1999*, the descent into human hell on snow-white paper caused a physiological bout of nausea and pain. It was impossible to view this story, for which homeless and sick residents of Kharkov posed for a dollar. Just a week later, a review of this album appeared in a St. Petersburg newspaper, the author of which criticized Mikhailov for venality and betrayal. After reading it, I wanted to defend Mikhailov by answering the article, but I never wrote to the newspaper. ✕

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Late 1990s. Demonstration on Nevsky Prospekt, the column of the communist party.



Philosophy students' party at a private one room apartment, Energetikov prospect.

PHOTO: PRIVATE

Leap into the void

by **Anna Kharkina**

I do not know how to best make those times an entertaining story to tell. Was it even a little bit entertaining? It was and we got out of it. By hook or by crook, we managed it. Some people found themselves not in the country where it all had begun, not in the profession they had studied for. These people were lacking a humane state that would support its citizens, they were standing practically on their own free will and curiosity. We were these people, we were the generation of the 90s. The decade began for me in Leningrad and the USSR, and ended with the beginning of the new millennium in the Russian St. Petersburg.

Only those who left the Soviet school in the early 1990s and found themselves in the vastness of a free every-man-for-himself market – an emerging market for goods at market prices and a collapsed labour market – could really understand that time, without explaining the context, interpretations, and references to films (specifically Alexei Balabanov's *Brother*, 1997). On the other hand, every city has its own history. We tell you about St. Petersburg, the place that gathered us under one sky dome. It is the westernmost city in Russia, and not only geographically.

WHAT HAVE THE 1990S taught us? The ability not to make long-reaching plans. We have learned to see the future no further than a couple of years ahead. A two-year contract or stipend seemed to be a miracle of stability. It would mean that for 24 months you were sure that money for food and rent would come

ANNA KHARKINA shares her experiences of a decade that began in Leningrad and the USSR and ended with the beginning of the new millennium in the Russian's St. Petersburg. The students were all badly dressed but genuinely interested to discuss the bigger questions in life.

regularly! And what was beyond this horizon, we would wait and see. Maybe the country would no longer be the same and there would be different employers. In a couple of years, everything, absolutely everything could change. Only the Hermitage was an eternal employer, and its employees went to work there to the last breath, crawling to sit on a working chair, to take a place and not to give it to the younger – having entered this river once, they would never go out of it again.

What time point should we select to start counting down? Not a calendar timer, but a countdown of the era? Viktor Tsoy (rock musician), rock music, *Assa* movie, the romance of the revolution that should have been experienced, but should not have to be fought for, because it was given as a gift by the fate itself, were left behind in the 1980s. We should begin the countdown of 1990s with the attempted coup of 1991. The alternative to inaction was even more dreary than the necessity to act. The majority did not want the continued Soviet boredom, except for those who were

fed by it and authorized it. People went away from the TVs broadcasting classical ballet and went to the square, to the Mariinsky Palace. A few days of the attempted coup did not shake the world but became an important milestone in the choice of future. This choice the citizens of Russia will later betray and forget.

AUGUST, 1991. The calamity did not break out in Leningrad. We got its echoes with the news from Moscow. The tanks did not reach St. Petersburg. I was 16 and had to go to the school soon, to the graduation class. We were living in an outlying residential district of Leningrad. It is called Krasnoselsky, although it is far from Krasnoe Selo. The district consisted of nine-story buildings, built in the late 1970s on a swamp littered with construction debris. It is also a former district of aristocratic palaces and park ensembles built along the line where the seacoast ran thousands of years ago. During the time of USSR, the palaces of aristocrats were turned into art and police schools.

We were living on the border of this cascade of old unkempt palaces on the former bottom of the Gulf of Finland. I remember when I was a child, the ground on the playground was swaying slightly under my feet. It was an old swamp littered with garbage.

Friends who had wealthier parents went to summer cottages, on summer holidays, and had not yet returned. The start of the school year was only on September 1. I was alone – all my peers were in the countryside – I was spinning on a merry-go-round in the kindergarten. For some reason, when I remember my childhood, this picture of a spinning carousel often pops up in my memory. I used it in winter and in summer. In summer, raising dust with my feet, pushing off the ground. In winter, spinning it and falling into the snow. These merry-go-rounds were our Disney Land during the school years. Kindergarten children were taken away by their parents in the evening, and the space around the kindergarten guarded by a lattice fence was allocated to us, schoolchildren.

MY FAMILY DID NOT HAVE a summer house. Before school and in the early school years, my grandmother and I went to visit her relatives in the village, first travelling to Sharya by train, then to Pavino by bus and further to Dobroumovo in a logging machine. This is a separate story and a part of my self-identification – fields, ponds, horseflies, goats, and cows, unpainted wooden huts. Aunt Nyura, grandmother's sister, a pensioner who survived the siege of Leningrad as a child and lost all her teeth because of this, climbed onto the roof herself to repair it. All these summer impressions led to the understanding that our ancestors lived somewhere in a place that was not so easy to reach even in 1980s. Once I asked Facebook friends what was there, at this region where my grandmother grew up? Someone answered – “nothing, just prison camps of GULAG”. The nearby town of Kotlas, which grandmother mentioned several times, for exam-

ple, was a place to which *kulaks* were deported and made to work in the forestry industry. My grandmother was also forced to work in forest industry as a young woman and had a clear memory of sleeping with other workers on the floor of a barrack. She was not a prisoner, and could after a while return to her family, which almost been accused to be *kulaks* but managed to escape this definition somehow, that means that they managed to stay alive.

My summer vacation in the village, of course, included compulsory labour: almost daily picking blueberries and wild strawberries, moulding potatoes, turning over and collecting dry hay with a rake in the field. It was actually fun and now a part of my precious memories about my grandmother. A child was very able to do these duties.

Afterwards my grandmother grew old and had no strength to go to her peasant homeland, instead my mother in the summer took me to a recreation centre in Kirillovskoe in Karelia. After that, there were dachas of my mother's friends, where we were invited to live in the summer. They were located in Tikhvin, Luga, and Taytsy. Then there was more and more lonely walking around the houses in the city, or sitting on the balcony, with overgrown petunia seedlings and a shabby concrete floor covered with old paint. From the

sixth floor, I looked over at the kindergarten, the one where the merry-go-round stood, I looked at the pigeons on the roof of the kindergarten spinning in one place and wrote poems about involuntary loneliness in summer:

*The pigeons whirling around their axis,
The wires swinging and the leaves swaying,
The kindergarten is built as the letter H,
And somewhere there is me standing alone,
making X-sign with hands.
I am the inevitability of drama,
I am the one who wants to be found
So that there were no gaps in the answer of life.
But people standing in pairs
Are wandering symmetrically –
They are sweeping through me
Two hands clutched together.*

Then my friends returned to the beginning of school. August 1991 ended. The attempted coup ended in failure, and we were happy about it.

AS FAR AS I REMEMBER, we did not have any revolutionary or protest feelings in my family. There was only a reluctance to go back to the boredom and to the impossibility to speak the truth openly. We were quite tired of lies and ideology. We wanted to speak freely, or at least have it as an open opportunity. The Gorbachev era did not give anything in terms of material well-being – on the contrary – it became even more difficult to get food on the table,

**“THE MAJORITY
DID NOT WANT THE
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BOREDOM, EXCEPT
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AUTHORIZED IT.”**



PHOTO: MIKHAIL BORISOV

Spontaneous trade at Sennaya Square in 1991.



PHOTO: MIKHAIL BORISOV

there were even fewer things in stores, trips abroad remained, as before, impossible reality. They were not visualized by us even in dreams. For a long time, I imagined Paris as it was depicted in the television series *The Three Musketeers* and was very surprised when I visited Paris much later that it had nothing to do with everyone's favourite Soviet film. But the possibility of telling the truth, of discussing the history not written in Soviet textbooks, was quite an important intangible value that mattered in our adolescence. To tell the truth, one's own truth, suddenly became not scary, and was even inspired by the society. For example, TV crew installed Glasnost (Public Speaking) Booths on the streets, and everyone could come in and speak out about anything. It was filmed and then shown on an official TV channel.

By 1991, the freedom of speech had taken root and we did not want to abandon it. Gorbachev was mostly respected, and it was clear that he was trying to do his best. He was looking and speaking very pleasantly. Those who attempted the coup, on the other hand, looked completely mossy and archaic. Fortunately, it quickly became clear that one could breathe out and the attempted coup failed. The new school year started as usual. The democracy won that time.

During the last year at school, most of us were busy choosing a university which they were going to enter and preparing for admission examinations. At the age of 16, I had no clear idea of various professions. It seemed that by choosing an economic higher education, I could somehow ensure that there would

be money enough to support myself in the future. Therefore, together with my friend, I entered a preparatory course of the Financial Economic Institute near the Kazan Cathedral. For a year, we honestly went to the city centre after school to improve our knowledge of the subjects on which there were entrance exams – mathematics and Russian. At the same time, we were not told anything about the work of an economist, and what we would be studying for five years later if we entered the Financial Economic Institute. Either because I never got a clear idea of the profession of an economist (for some reason, for me, an economist

“IT WAS GREAT TO STUDY IN THE DECADE OF FREEDOM, AT THE FACULTY THAT DID NOT OBLIGE YOU TO ANYTHING AND WAS EVEN PROUD TO GRADUATE FREE THINKERS WITH VAGUE PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE WORK.”

was equal to an accountant then, I did not realise, for example, the fact that the Financial Economic Institute taught also how to analyse financial markets, the subject which I would be interested much more than accounting), or I was tired of solving equations with three unknown elements, but having studied for the entire academic year at the preparatory school at the Financial Economic Institute, I applied for the Philosophical Faculty at the St. Petersburg State University instead. My

reason was something like this – the future was uncertain, and it was not clear what professions will be needed – at the same time the philosophy answered the question about the meaning of life, at least there would be some certainty in existence.

THAT WAS HOW I ENTERED the Philosophical Faculty in 1992. We had four entrance exams: Russian, English, history and philosophy. For Russian I wrote an essay on Varlam Shalamov, I missed



Counters near Primorskaya, late 90s.



Boys display a banner on the Alexandria Column during a rally to call for the renaming of Leningrad to St. Petersburg, June 1991.

all the meetings arranged by the faculty before the exams, where the teachers at the St. Petersburg State University told what to prepare for. It was not on purpose, it just happened every time that before I found the right room, the meeting was coming to an end. Most challenging was to prepare for the exam in philosophy, of which I has not known anything, since I has not studied it at school, I prepared using I. T. Frolov's *Philosophical dictionary*, which I still deem suitable for a beginner in philosophy.

In the university I was directly disappointed that the search for the meaning of life was not conducted at the Philosophical Faculty. In the first year, Professor Sergeev, who taught Ancient Greek philosophy, as it later turned-out retelling Martin Heidegger's lectures, explained that philosophy was not interested in the meaning of life, for this other organizations, such as church, should be contacted. Philosophy, he explained, deals with the question of thinking, how was this thinking possible and why we could talk about this possibility with at least some certainty. Philosophy also deals with the questions of being – why there was something and not just nothing. And that we might know something about it. At that time, we enjoyed reading Merab Mamardashvili and his beautiful lectures that philosophizing itself is a subject matter of philosophy.

In my first year, the meaning of life for me was not the question of finding the meaning of life, but the practice of overcoming the difficulty of reading philosophical books and transforming them into understandable texts in my head. I can say that I started to read philosophical texts freely only by the third study year. Then, finally, studying began to be fun. I finally started enjoying philosophizing itself, like it was described in Mamardashvili's lectures. Professor Sergeev again made fun of students who thought that they had come to the Faculty of Philosophy to learn something that would be useful in life. He proudly and cunningly winked and told us happily that philosophy was useless in ev-

eryday life, and it should be said that more practical classmates slowly started to do something else over time. For example, one girl from Krasnodar, having suffered in the cold and damp St. Petersburg for a year, went back to the fruitful southern gardens and became a fitness instructor.

IT WAS GREAT TO STUDY in the decade of freedom, at the faculty that did not oblige you to anything and was even proud to graduate free thinkers with vague prospects for future work. As my supervisor and our common informal leader Askold Vladimirovich Timofeenko said, “when you receive your master's degree from the faculty, it will say a “philosopher”, with which you will be very happy, followed by a “philosophy teacher”, with which you will be much less happy.”

When we started our studies there, the building of the Faculty of Philosophy itself, next to the library of the Russian Academy of Sciences and one of the first buildings in St. Petersburg – the building of the Twelve Colleges, which housed the Faculty of Philology – was in the state of the cave, presenting a living illustration to the Plato's work *Republic*. Outside this example of Northern classicism, looked not so bad, but inside paint fell off the walls, water leaked along the walls, and you could almost see stalactites hanging from the ceiling.

At some point during our studies, the Queen of Great Britain visited this building. Not the Faculty of Philosophy itself, but the laboratory located behind closed doors in the same building. On the occasion of her arrival, the staircase she was supposed to walk along was put in order – the falling off paint was cleaned, the walls were painted, albeit in a rather unpleasant colour. So, half of the flight leading to our floor looked decent. The funds for the big repairs came when I finished my studies – in 2000s. The walls were painted everywhere in a color acceptable for official buildings, new good parquet was laid, and a chandelier



Celebrating together with lecturers Askold Vladimirovich Timofeenko (upper row, second from the left) and Professor Konstantin Sergeev (upper row on the right) at the Faculty of Philosophy, 1997.



Philosophical discussion in the corridors of the Faculty of Philosophy with lecturers Askold Vladimirovich Timofeenko (left) and Vitaly Genadievich Karavaev (right)

PHOTO: PRIVATE

was hung. Everything became decent-looking, but the spirit of freedom immediately began to vanish. Even then, it was felt that floors like that were not laid for free for no reason and those who distributed money would soon begin to demand something in return.

The Soviet Union ended to exist in 1991, a year before I entered St. Petersburg State University. This meant that the old Marxist and Leninists teachers, mostly mediocre careerists, had to find some new niche for themselves, they were not lustrated. But they lost their power and were not as terrible as they used to be. Rather, they became ridiculous, but nevertheless inevitable. For everyone else, the disappearance of the oppression of the Soviet ideology meant that it finally became possible to freely do their job without cunning, censorship no longer needed to be cunningly bypassed. It was great!

IN SOVIET TIMES, the classical philosophy and the history of philosophy were not banned, although they were often viewed through the prism of Hegel and dialectical materialism. And through Hegel and dialectical materialism you can see anything, even the ancient philosophy. Hegel had created such a powerful explanatory apparatus, which, once accepted, was difficult to get rid of, especially if it was polished by Marx and Engels. In the late USSR, mainly modern Western philosophers were banned at the Philosophy Faculty, as well as contemporary Western culture in general. Therefore, in addition to the Hegel's prism, there was a survival strategy during Soviet time – to write a book about a modern philosopher, to talk about his or her thoughts as they were, and in the introduction to criticize them from a permitted ideological point of view. Everyone, of course, understood that one did not have to read the introduction, that it was written so that the authorities simply get from the author's back.

There was no need to write in Aesopian language in 1992. The state, on the contrary, supported freedom of thought, although

not financially, but at the level of the state discourse and the permission to speak what you think. There were constant debates on television, where representatives of different parties held interesting discussions on all sorts of topics of the hour. This had a positive impact on the atmosphere in academia as well.

We in our group at the Philosophy Faculty deep within were dandies, although we were terribly dressed, if you look at the photos of that time now. All I had was a large jacket from the Chinese market and trousers, which I had to sew myself using a pattern from *Burda* magazine and the Soviet wool fabric stored by my thrifty grandmother. *Burda* and an old sewing machine were my saviour at this time, because there was nothing else to wear. But it did not prevent us students from displaying self-confidence. Absolutely everyone was badly dressed then, if they did not sew clothes themselves, they bought clothes at Aprashka or similar markets, where shuttle traders sold clothes brought from cheap Chinese markets. People who lost their jobs at the collapsed Soviet enterprises used to take a train to Moscow, where they bought Chinese clothes in small batches at Cherkizon (Cherkizovsky market) and then resold them in Petersburg. It may sound sad, but at that time I never thought about what I was wearing, clothes did not matter much at all.

The student aplomb was not about knowing how to dress, but about honing the argument in conversation. My classmates staged real intellectual duels, they challenged both their classmates and teachers. The Socratic method proved to be quite effective in winning this sort of duel every time. It forced the interlocutor to explain all the concepts he or she used, and this was quite difficult, one might say hopeless. We quickly understood which teachers we had a lot to learn from and which ones it was pointless to waste our time with. We were faithful to the first ones, followed them on their heels, stayed after mandatory lessons in our free time to discuss the philosophical texts that fascinated us at that time. It was mainly



Assistant professor Nikolay Borisovich Ivanov.

PHOTO: PRIVATE

Heidegger, Foucault, and Kant. It was even Hegel, whom we tried to read in a different way, outside the framework of classical Soviet dialectics. The classmates were also fond of antiquity and Aristotle.

All free time was devoted either to the preparation for compulsory classes or to non-obligatory discussions of philosophy. It often occurred in an informal setting, just staying at the faculty, together with our favourite teacher. We have read together with Askold Timofeenko, for example, Hegel and Heidegger in the evenings. He did not receive any money or other academic credits for this, these classes were not listed anywhere. It was pure enthusiasm on our part and on his. At that time, classrooms were not locked and there was no watch at the entrance to the faculty, so we could stay as long as we wanted, even until late. Then we continued our discussions in the trolleybus from Vasilievsky island to Nevsky prospect on our way home. Now there is no more freedom to enter and leave the university as one wishes. Five years ago, I tried to enter our faculty, but at the entrance I ran into a watchman checking everyone for a student card, which I did not have.

ANOTHER IMPORTANT institution in our spare time was gatherings at the Borey Club, which was a café, meeting place and a gallery at the same time. I went there to listen to Nikolay Borisovich Ivanov, Associate Professor of the Department of Social Philosophy, an amazingly intelligent, beautiful, and brilliant oral thinker. His beauty and charisma were almost out of this world, that was, not from the Soviet world. I do not even know if Ivanov has written something worthwhile, I have just listened to him. He invented and practiced an interdisciplinary method of analysing fairy

tales and school textbooks, mixing Vladimir Propp and Juri Lotman with his own way of thinking.

On the ground floor of the building where the Faculty of Philosophy was located, there was also a legendary bookstore, where you could buy everything you needed for the philosophical education. First of all, one could buy there the books newly translated into Russian. It was a Klondike both for students and lecturers alike. There I bought Heidegger's *Being and Time* translated by Vladimir Bibikhin. It was probably the main book for our group, which we never tired of reading, re-reading and discussing, comparing it with the German original.

At that time, publishing houses were constantly translating something, often it was previously banned books. In general, the studies were only in Russian and the literature for compulsory reading was only in Russian translation. Nevertheless, we voluntarily studied Ancient Greek, Latin, and German. It was not difficult to sign up for the additional free classes in these languages. I did not learn Greek, but a group of my classmates, together with Askold Vladimirovich Timofeenko, having quickly learned the basics of Greek, sat down to translate one short work by Aristotle, just to see, what Aristotle actually wrote. Aristotle's Soviet translations were strongly formed by the terminology of dialectical materialism, so we wanted to learn and feel Aristotle's language and perceive his conceptual apparatus without this filter. The result was a completely unreadable text for most, but nevertheless the text was quite logical and understandable for the group of philosophers who had translated it. In my first year, I struggled with the Aristotle's texts failing to understand them. But in this

“IT SEEMED THAT THE COUNTRY WAS ON THE RIGHT COURSE AND THAT WE SHOULD NOT FEAR FOR DEMOCRACY.”

strange translation, Aristotle suddenly became much more approachable and clearer. However, it was not possible to publish this translation, because it was not Russian proper, but a new language which had been invented in the spirit of the languages of the Slavic group.

At that time, there was no money for cafes and restaurants, so we often gathered at someone's home. Most often, it was the home of my most ambitious classmate Vitaly Ivanov. His father, unlike other parents

who lost their jobs in the early 1990s and saved the family budget as best they could, sometimes in quite radical ways, such as raising rabbits to feed their family in a two-room apartment, discovered his real talent in the new Russia. He became a businessman, opened a gas station, and made good earnings on it at that time. His business went so well that he had bought his son a one-room apartment in St. Petersburg, where we often spent time discussing philosophical questions or preparing for exams. We drank not much, cheap vodka Royal was unpopular in our philosophical circle. We bought Georgian red wines in a cellar store on the Kadetskaya Line of Vasilyevsky Island, conveniently located just on the way from the university to the metro station. For the holidays, we made a classic Olivier salad and a radish salad, prepared according to a recipe brought by the classmates from Siberia from two main ingredients – radish and mayonnaise.

WE WERE NOT INTERESTED in politics at all, we simply voted for the democratic party of Yabloko, which was in opposition, we voted for the freedom of speech, and for the capitalism with a human face. It seemed that the country was on the right course and that we should not fear for democracy.

At the university there were a lot of old-school intriguers. We fought against them by ignoring them. The intriguers intrigued, pushing themselves up the career ladder at the Faculty of Philosophy, and we kind of did our own business, which was love for Sofia, philosophy, and were not very interested in getting promoted on the career ladder in a complex academic hierarchy. I guess we should not have been so careless and selfless. We should have been smarter to cement democracy at least at the faculty. This would have been difficult, but not impossible, because the resistance of the conservative power was weaker at that time. In principle, we simply did not understand much about the matters of power. And looking at where my classmates are now, we still have not comprehended this matter. Our student group was not about securing a good academic position. It was about how to lead a meaningful life in the situation of significant financial uncertainty. How to reconcile poverty with dignity and meaning.

AT THAT TIME, despite the great interest in the West, we stewed mainly in our own juice. We did not have any projects initiated with the European colleagues almost throughout our studies. There simply was no funding for any form of academic exchange from our university; there was no funding for academic research either, just for teaching. It was only at the end of my time in St. Petersburg State University that I was able to participate in the Nietzsche summer school in Finland in Jyväskylä. We travelled to Finland on our own money, in a private taxi, which was certainly not an official business and rather cheap. The difference in food prices between Russia and Finland was significant, so I took a package of oatmeal with me, and I planned to eat it for a week I was spending at the summer school in Finland. The dormitory where we were accommodated was a 40-minute walk from the university, and I had no money for the bus either. I walked from the university to the dormitory under lunch time to cook my porridge and then back to the university. As it took more than an hour, I inevitably missed some lectures. A couple of days later, Finnish colleagues from the University of Jyväskylä, the organizers of the summer school, realized that some of the participants were disappearing during the lunch to make their own meal in the dormitory, and reduced the price of lunch in the student



On the Razzzhaia Street, late 1990s.

PHOTO: MIKHAIL BORISOV

canteen for us. It was a student buffet, and it was some kind of feast with a few salads! This Nietzsche summer school was attended by students from the universities of Jyväskylä and Greifswald, and I think there were also the Poles there, but I do not remember which university. German professors were impressive in size of their well-fed bodies, with fingers as thick as sausages, and that they ignored the fact that most students did not understand German well enough to follow their lectures. They read out their pre-written texts in German ex cathedra and were very pleased with themselves. In their free time, they did not try to communicate with the students on friendly footing. Although we managed to make friends with the teachers from Finland. In general, it was the Finns who understood our problems best of all. They also knew a bunch of Soviet songs translated into Finnish and we were singing them at the end of the summer school together to the guitar after the evening sauna.

GEORGE SOROS, in one of his speeches recorded and preserved in the Open Society Archives in Budapest, said that he was almost the only one who came to Eastern Europe to support the emerging democracy with substantial funding. He really helped many humanitarian scholars in Russia and other countries in Eastern Europe to survive in the 1990s, supporting scientific projects and publications and allowing young people to receive a European-level education at the European University in Budapest. But he was right, he was almost the only one who had tried to give young Russian democracy and open society a chance. One can say by now, that the rest of the West have missed this opportunity. Ten years of the 1990s passed for many in the struggle for existence, and then the completely different 2000s began, oil prices rose, and thanks to this, the Russian political elite was able to start compensating for the gaping hole in budget funding of the society needs, in their own manner and according to their own taste and aims. ❌

Fabulous lost years

by **Olga Serebryanaya**

In 1997, I found myself in Budapest as a political science MA student at the Central European University and was surprised to see the crowds of my fellow students frantically arguing about something. They would sit at a long table, puff clouds of tobacco smoke and leave batteries of empty bottles, yelling at each other in their language. We didn't understand them – we only knew that they all came from the former Yugoslavia and were having a never-ending argument about the war. As students from Russia and former Soviet republics, we didn't want to know anything about it, although Russia had quite recently finished its own war in Chechnya.

As my country that I left long ago is waging a war against a neighboring country I've never been to, I'm starting to understand my former Yugoslav student friends. Yes, now we *are* those Yugoslavs, almost 30 years later, claiming we're not responsible for the killings and shelling and marauding our soldiers have done. Now I, too, would like to sit at a long table anywhere on Earth where I can find a group of compatriots and, being unable to produce clouds of tobacco smoke, to present even longer batteries of empty bottles. Not that I actually do this. But now I can easily imagine what my fellow former Yugoslav CEU students were arguing about. I apologize for not understanding them then. I do understand them now.

THEN, IN RUSSIA, trees were greener. We had survived. And not only that – we had won. In September 1992, I became a philosophy student at the St.

Petersburg State University. That wasn't guaranteed. I was born and finished school in Siberia, in a place I used to call “the center of Eurasia”: the Altay region, close to the border with Mongolia, the so-called “16th Soviet republic”. If you are born in a place like this, you are short of the means to escape: it takes four days of a

For **OLGA SEREBRYANAYA** growing up close to the border with Mongolia Perestroika meant a lot. In the former Soviet reality, she could not enter a major university, not without special quotas, Komsomol membership, protection, or family ties etc. Then things changed. Today she is a journalist and news editor living in Prague.

train journey to reach either the Western sea (the Baltics) or the Eastern one (the Pacific) – perhaps, it could be a shorter trip to the shores of the Arctic Ocean but nobody tried because it was hardly an escape. And the escape *was* a topic of my childhood because the late Soviet life in general felt suffocating.

I remember the day Perestroika started: my out-of-school activities were, due to my mother's dictatorial nature, restricted to a music school, and in January 1987, when the Communist party plenary session declared that we should rebuild ourselves, we

were performing for some audience. My female choir fellows came to the music school in white aprons with huge white ribbon knots in their hair (because of the Communist party plenary session) and for the performance we changed into something equally festive. Radio, I remember, was vividly talking about Perestroika – without yet realizing what it was. Next several years proved extremely interesting: I was reading the émigré and dissident literature Perestroika allowed to be published and was frantically following the reassuring

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political developments. They were in my favor: in the former Soviet reality, I could hardly hope to get a place in a major university without special quotas, Komsomol membership, protection, or family ties whereas in the new reality I was free to try. I tried and I won: I got my place at the second-best higher school in the



Queen Elizabeth II visits the Peter and Paul Fortress in St Peterburg in 1994.

PHOTO: MIKHAIL BORISOV

country without anyone's help and despite my mother's opinion that it was impossible.

I won over my dictatorial mother, over my country's totalitarian past, over grey remembrances of my childhood and, finally, over the need to escape. I didn't want to escape anymore, St. Petersburg felt like my true home. A place where I could explore the vastness and depths of European philosophical thought against the backdrop of architectural splendor.

I chose philosophy because I felt underinformed about what was happening in the history of human thought outside of the Marxist tradition that was only allowed in the Soviet Union. I felt that even the most famous Russian classical writers and, it goes without saying, Soviet scribes looked somehow stupid against that tradition. I wanted to be a writer, but I thought that – to become a good writer – I should first study European philosophy in detail in order not to get trapped into that stupidity again. And I did plunge into it.

My five years at the university were the years of total freedom: one could read, watch, and listen to anything one wished. Libraries were available, the nascent publishing houses financially supported by the Soros Foundation were mass-publishing translations of the classics of European thought, and we were mass-buying (and reading) the books. Cinema houses organized retrospectives of the greatest western and eastern European film

directors and one could meet Peter Greenaway's cinematographer Sasha Vierny not only in a movie house but also on the street. He came to take part in a film screening but also to have a look at the city that used to be the capital of the country his Jewish parents emigrated from before his birth. He even spoke some Russian.

You never knew whom you could meet on the streets of

St. Petersburg in those years. I personally saw the Queen of England crossing the Palace bridge, Prince Philip at the wheel, Her Majesty waving at me. But I also met Brian Eno at a private party. Everything was possible – apart from (sometimes) a proper dinner: we were as poor as a church mouse but didn't care much. We thought that money would come one day. While we had none, we plunged into the history of human knowledge. But what is impor-

tant here is that we plunged into that history at the expense of ignoring what was going on in our country.

"I'm a child of Perestroika", I often proudly repeat to my foreign friends. Yes, that's true – but I always forget to mention that I'm also a betrayer of Perestroika. When Yeltsin became the president of my country, I wasn't 18 yet, I couldn't vote, but I was happy that people elected him. He *was* my president. When he – whose political trajectory I'd been closely following ever since he emerged as a possible leader – became a legally elected head of state, I thought my political mission was accomplished. Now

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President Boris Yeltsin at the entrance to the Mariinsky Palace, 1996.

PHOTO: MIKHAIL BORISOV

that he was the president, the future of my country was safe and I should mind my own business, *i.e.* do my reading.

That was my true belief. I didn't vote in the parliamentary elections of January 1993 (though I had the right to) when the hateful Liberal Democrats of Vladimir Zhirinovsky became the biggest party in the Russian parliament and one of Russia's famous intellectuals, Yury Karyakin, declared publicly: "Russia, you have gone crazy". At that moment, I didn't know and didn't want to know anything about that. My mantra was that "we won" and that I had to do what my profession required me to do. I became completely indifferent to anything political. And the whole country did.

When Yeltsin shelled the Russian parliament in October 1993, I lived in a student dormitory not only without TV but also without radio: it was somehow fashionable then to despise any kind of straightforward journalism and, above all, I was catching up with a group of historians who'd started learning ancient Greek half a year earlier than me: Greek irregular verbs were my true agenda. I learned about those events at a lecture on Philosophy of Religion because the lector happened to be in Moscow at the time of shooting. She told us what she'd seen; her lectures weren't interesting; six years later she, famously unstable, was hit by a

car and died. After her death, we learnt that she had been caring for her crazy husband, a philosopher, too. Their generation was prone to craziness because of the doublethink, we thought. Ours was to become the first sane one.

Another moment that flashes in my memory: I'm a third-year student, I'm at home alone, and I wash my then-husband's white shirt while listening to the radio. And the radio says with the voice

"THE NOTION OF CIVIL RESPONSIBILITY WAS AS FAR FROM US AT THAT MOMENT AS MY BIRTHPLACE WAS FROM ST. PETERSBURG. POLITICS WAS SOMEONE ELSE'S AREA — EVERYONE THOUGHT SO IN THE 1990S."

of my president Yeltsin's that "we are sending troops to Chechnya". God remembers, I was against it at the moment — I even stopped washing the shirt and spent some minutes sitting silently on the side of a bath-tube. I thought it was a wrong decision (Chechnya, in my view, should have gone its own way) but I repeated to myself that we won and because of that I should work on the revival of national philosophical thought while Yeltsin minds the war.

We thought Yeltsin was a political actor and we, his supporters,

somehow lost that ability by having elected him. The notion of civil responsibility was as far from us at that moment as my birthplace was from St. Petersburg. Politics was someone else's area — everyone thought so in the 1990s.

The philosophical tradition we tried to revive was based on Heidegger. No, that's not true, it was going as deep down as 5th

century BC, and every respectful student of philosophy was studying ancient Greek and Latin. But all that was because of Heidegger. In 1992, we were not aware of any political implications that Heidegger's name would raise later. Even in 2000, when I was participating in a great summer school on Heidegger and Nietzsche in Tuebingen, it was OK for Porsche to finance us – the lady from the company who greeted us as a sponsor was referred to by the participants as 'Frau Ueberporsche' and there was nothing criminal in that. (One of the organizers of that conference, Professor Guenter Figal, resigned from the presidency of the Heidegger Society after the publication of *The Black Notebooks*).

Heidegger was introduced to us by Konstantin Sergeev – an extremely charismatic professor who taught any period of Western philosophy on the basis of Heidegger's lectures about it. That wasn't exactly cheating (though textually it was) – it was the reflection of Sergeev's own discovery of how to construe Western philosophy outside the Marxist tradition. His authority was based on the fact that he read Heidegger's lectures a few years earlier than we did, though, unlike us, he read them in English translation. We took it as our principle to read everything we could in the original.

But Heidegger was fashionable anyway: everyone lectured about him, and one of our less able teachers even demanded from students during her aesthetics exam to discuss *Sein und Zeit* (it hadn't been yet translated into Russian) because she genuinely believed that the *Origin of the Artwork* was the same text as *Being and Time*: some excerpts from the latter were published in a collection devoted to philosophy of art.

That is to say, some of our teachers didn't really know what they were teaching, curriculum was a mess, and we truly believed we would clear it up. In a sense, we did. Quite a few of my peers became sound specialists in various fields although they either left the country or functioned outside the university. Anyway, the philosophical literacy we acquired was perceived as a kind of obligation and when anyone of us hears philosophical terms used incorrectly, one always stands up to correct.

HOWEVER, WE CLEARED UP the mess in our own heads only. Western philosophy appeared to be rich, demanding, prohibiting, changing and generally unstable: the more you studied it, the less you were sure that you understood anything. We were submerging into the depths to get the grip of the tradition and to renew the Russian thinking while in reality it was the institutional structure that primarily required renewal. We didn't think about that – we only thought about the "flesh" of thinking, i.e. details, the slightest turns of thought, underestimated books and authors, the need for new translations and other material (in a different sense from materialism) things.

What we definitely should have thought then was our own reality – the university. In 1992, when I entered St Petersburg State University, the faculty of philosophy seemed to be in ruins: the pillars of Marxism-Leninism had been sent into retirement and new people invited from the army of rebels. The problem was that most of the rebels didn't know how to teach while the curriculum stayed unchanged in its essence: they only renamed "dialectics" as "ontology and theory of knowledge".

Since that time, I have a prejudice about political science: I think of this branch of social theory as non-existent simply because I saw with my own eyes a man in robes replacing the plate "Department of Scientific Communism" with the plate "Department of Political Science". Our new teachers from the rebels were very inspiring but they, too, somehow didn't rebel against the academic system they were supposed to renew. We kept thinking that the Soviet system of 40 hours of lectures per week was a sane one, we thought it was better to listen to forty general courses on various philosophical schools than to study just some of them closely. We never questioned the oral exam format, and, above all, we never thought of reforming the "dissertation defense" procedure. "Dissertation" is roughly a PhD thesis. And here I can tell an illuminating story.

AMONG THE YOUNG rebel teachers, there was a very bright married couple. St. Petersburg wasn't a native city for both of them though they came from the different ends of the formerly huge

USSR: he was from the West and she was from the East. The huge country ceased to exist as they were starting their postgraduate studies but before they could get to writing their theses they were gripped by prosaic poverty: he was working as an assistant professor but the salary the University paid was hardly enough for the monthly supply of cigarettes, and they have had a child already. Because of that (and many other factors such as an irregular supply of

hot water and failing heating in St. Petersburg), she left for her hometown to raise the child under her mother's care while she was writing a doctoral thesis about Kant. She wrote it in three years. During those years, he was lecturing almost daily, generously spending his time with his students and doing menial side-jobs to get the money to pay for his food, cigarettes being paid for by his university salary. However, he, too, was supposed to write his dissertation in those three years. But he didn't – he had no time to.

When those years passed, they both faced the necessity of "defense". Defense is a procedure of presenting one's dissertation to the learned public. This sounds good enough but "public" here means the "academic council" appointed by nobody knows who and – at the time of my studentship – consisting of people who knew nothing. To make things worse, the dissertation itself isn't published but presented in the form of a "self-

“OUR NEW TEACHERS FROM THE REBELS WERE VERY INSPIRING BUT THEY, TOO, SOMEHOW DIDN'T REBEL AGAINST THE ACADEMIC SYSTEM THEY WERE SUPPOSED TO RENEW.”

retelling” booklet (autoreferat). The academic procedure didn’t require for the thesis itself to be read by anyone, and since it didn’t require that, one could infer that it also didn’t require for it to be written.

What I saw at the day of “defense” was hilarious: while he successfully defended the thesis that wasn’t even written but consisted of random sheets of paper put together, she was almost stopped in her “defense” because one member of the council whose native language wasn’t Russian couldn’t believe that “transcendental” spells as “transcendental” and not as “transdental” as he insisted. The philosophical dictionary was presented to the audience to persuade the professor that Kant’s “transcendental” had nothing to do with teeth, regardless of teeth’s failing state in most of the members of the council. That’s the epitome of the 1990s Russian academic practices: the key to his easy success was his constant presence at the university. The grid of science was so non-existent that one had to be physically there to persuade everyone one was doing some studies. If one took the liberty to vanish from the sight of one’s colleagues, one became suspicious to such an extent that the dictionary had to be brought to remind the academic council of the meaning of basic terminology.

That “defense” was a defining event. It sent him into madness (because, as a final step, he had to present the text for the approval of a committee in Moscow and he didn’t dare to send random sheets), it showed her that it was hopeless to seek any recognition based on one’s merits (and she retreated to her native city where she had the protection of her mother) and it put me into a pensive state. I saw it all, I promised myself to never behave like him. However, neither I nor anyone else thought of reforming the “defense” procedure itself. It has not been reformed to this day.

I personally had one more encounter with that system. Several years after my graduation from the St Petersburg state university and the CEU and having given birth to a baby, I came to the department of philosophy to find out how I could get to the point of “defending” my own dissertation. I was told that there were a few academic magazines that would gladly publish my articles (according to the rules, one had to have some publications to acquire the right to ‘defend’ one’s thesis) for as small amount of money as five thousand rubles. Since I was earning my living as a journalist at the time, I asked to confirm that five thousand rubles were to be paid to me for presenting an article to these magazines. “No”, I was answered, “you pay five thousand rubles to have your article published”. That was my last conversation with the department of philosophy, and I don’t regret.

WHAT I REGRET is the many things my generation failed to do. We didn’t reform the academic system, and as early as in 2010 it was appropriated by “patriots” for whatever goals Putin’s state might

set for them. Having gone very diverging ways in the search for the means of survival (for the common ways didn’t simply exist), we didn’t create a unity that could stand against the re-sovietisation of our sphere. Being discouraged by our “rebel” teachers from moral assessment of one’s actions, we failed to say that their and other people’s doings were unacceptable. ‘Western’ education didn’t help – it only put one in a conflict between the right principles and Russian reality.

In the end it turned out that the only pillar our generation can cling to now, in 2022, is neither some kind of common experience, be it success or failure, nor moral principles, nor professional reputation. The only pillar is the truth in the simplest sense of “white is white”, “black is black” and “5+7=12”. And as we are witnessing the disastrous toll of the war in Ukraine, we must recognize that in the previous decades we were passively looking at what happens to the idea of freedom when no one is ready to actively attend to it.

First, it dies under one’s private engagements with European philosophical tradition (or whatever it was on one’s mind then), then it is buried against the

background of general indifference partly caused by financial difficulties, and finally it becomes forgotten: it was easier to forget it than to face daily the popular question “tebe bol’she vseh nado?” roughly translated as “were you appointed by God to improve things on earth?”

This devil-may-care attitude was helpful in the 1990s to legitimize the practices that were prohibited by the Soviets – from free love to liberal attitude towards alcohol and recreational drugs. But the same attitude sends us to the pit now when we’re discussing who’s responsible for Russia’s invasion into Ukraine. None of us. But still every one of us. For the invasion (and Putin’s reign in general) became possible because we took freedom for granted and chose not to apply what we read in our philosophical books to the current reality.

THE 90S WERE FABULOUS – the longer I live, the happier they seem. But what we face now is also the consequence of those happy years. Remember the Yugoslav friends sitting at a long table? Sit down now and discuss. But it seems there is no one willing. Is this, too, the result of the 90s? Yes. But at the same time, it is tempting to believe it’s not. It’s so much nicer to think about those lost years as if they happened on a different planet, with different Russia, under a different, brighter sun. ✘

“THE 90S WERE FABULOUS – THE LONGER I LIVE, THE HAPPIER THEY SEEM. BUT WHAT WE FACE NOW IS ALSO THE CONSEQUENCE OF THOSE HAPPY YEARS.”



PHOTO: SERGEI SHAMAKHOV

Left to right: Evgeniy Timchenko, Sergei Sirotkin, Vladislav Sapov. September 13, 1992. The Rooftop Concert in Sosnovy Bor..

The Pravednick's band project

My musical experience in the 90s

by **Andrei Patkul**

The 90s of the last century in Russia were an amazing, unusually intense time. Remembering it, it seems that each year of this now distant decade was unique, had its own unique aura. The 90s, by some magical power, managed to split and separate themselves into different parts, thereby exposing them, those opposites hiding in the fate of each person: the enthusiastic discovery of the new, the entire semantic continents, the delightful trust in hopes and the fascinating construction of plans for the future, and at the same time, disappointment and hopelessness up to the ruthless obviousness of *no future*.

However, it was precisely these extremes that showed the pricelessness of private human communication, the main language of which for me and my immediate environment, at least until a certain time, was music, more precisely, rock music. Now it seems to me sometimes that it has been a universal horizon from which people close to me and I have realised the world as a

ANDREI PATKUL reveals his own and his friends' take on the music development in St. Petersburg at this particular time. He and the band introduced necrorealism, and they were there when the genre of Zagrob-rock (Afterlife-rock) was born. Today he holds a PhD in philosophy and still plays in Pravednick's band.

whole and everything belonging to it. Friendship, love, reading books, communicating with nature, hours and days of loneliness, discovering piercing truths about the randomness of our existence and the inevitability of death – all this has happened in its single universe. And its heroes were for us not just unattainable idols and role models, but also the teachers of life.

IT IS NOT SURPRISING, therefore, that the attempts to pick up the initiatives of our masters and to produce, albeit at the level of

amateur activity, something in this field has not seemed to my friends and me something unnatural. It all started as if by itself.

Actually, my first experiments in the music occurred already in the mid-80s. At first, they were attempts to perform songs by foreign bands, first of all, The Beatles, the first acquaintance with whose music had been for me a real metanoia, an event after which I could no longer be the same as I was before. Since I had no musical education, and I did not show any special musical abilities at all, initially I was assigned the responsibility for percussion instruments and there was some logic in it. I played on a relatively small concrete ring covered with roofing material, one of my comrades played on a homemade electric guitar, the body of which was sawn out of the countertop, with homemade acoustic pick-ups, and another friend played on a maracas. This was our simple band, which did not even assume a full rhythm section.

The birth of Zagrob-rock

By 1988, the situation had changed. First, I was assigned with a bass guitar, also homemade, where bass strings were installed, designed for a conventional electric guitar. The reasons for which I got this instrument were about the same as the concrete ring with the roofing material that had previously fallen into my area of responsibility. It was believed that since the bass guitar (as far as we knew at the time) had the least strings, it would be easier learning to play. Secondly, and more importantly, by this time we felt in ourselves not only a craving, but also the ability to compose songs. The first topic of our opuses was somewhat unexpected, it was the life in the afterlife. (However, for someone who in the secondary school had to undergo a socially useful practice at Smolensky Orthodox Cemetery among dilapidated crypts and muddy tombstones, while visiting at rare moments of rest the Lutheran part of it, this topic would not seem too exotic). The afterlife, on the one hand, seemed to us to have the flair of mystery, just as any absolute Other should be mysterious. On the other hand, it was not at all gloomy and sinister: in the afterlife with prowess and fun, it was not boring, usually without any conflicts, except for one epic war between Hell and Heaven, devils of different ranks, angels and archangels, revived skeletons, spirits of famous people who had already left this world. It was not hard to guess that their favourite pastime was playing music together. So, first in theory and then in practice, the genre of Zagrob-rock (Afterlife-rock) was born; and so the Zagrob universe came into being.

As for the topology of the Zagrob universe, it was two-part and quite predictably consisted of Heaven and Hell (there was no Purgatory, according to the Russian tradition), between which there was a border – at times impenetrable, and at other times almost non-existent, everything depended, so to speak, on the

current political situation in the afterlife. Much of the toponymy of mythologies of various times and peoples could have been found also on the map of this world: Lethe, Styx, Champs-Élysées etc. Rather, the revolutionary fact was that in this case both Heaven and Hell had their own capitals, each of which contained diplomatic missions of the other side. In general, the development of civilization in the Zagrob universe was so great that on both sides of the border there was its own currency that could be freely converted: in Heaven it was heavenly hells, in Hell – hellish paradises. It is noteworthy that in comparison with the classical toponymy of the afterlife, many new names of otherworldly cities and other settlements have appeared in our Zagrob universe, for example, Helldamsk, Coffinford, Coffin City, Cemetery City, Columbariumburg, etc.

THE INHABITANTS of all these areas had an irresistible inclination to communicate and to form musical groups, which together constituted the phenomenon of Zagrob-rock. The tradition emerged that in playing guitars and percussion instruments, the devils (Devil of Helldamsk, Devil of the Underworld) achieved outstanding success. In keyboard playing, there were skeletons that nominally differed from each other in patronymics – depending on whose skeletons they were (so in Zagrob-rock Skeleton Ivanovich, Skeleton Petrovich and Skeleton Nikolaevich became especially famous, a special case was the Skeleton Ramone). On bass

guitars played the spirits of deceased musicians (so, according to legend, the spirit of Stuart Sutcliffe, the bass guitarist of The Beatles in the early stages of their career, who during his lifetime abandoned musical activity in favour of painting, after death nevertheless – already as a spirit – became one of the central characters of the afterlife music). It was also believed that some examples of the most complex afterlife genres were performed and recorded with the participation of a choir of spirits and a symphony orchestra of the All-Afterlife Television and Other-

worldly Radio. The themes and the content of the works of the afterlife music were grotesque. Instead of such frequent words in the names and the texts of classic rock hits as love, peace, and sex, words were used that were in one way or another associated with death, funeral rites, and transition to another world. (For example, *Cemetery on the Left Bank* (1990) instead of *Cafe on the Left Bank* (1978) by Wings).

Initially, this whole cheerful company found its embodiment in a kind of bandes dessinées, accompanied by more or less detailed “analytical” articles that parodied articles about rock music and rock musicians, which in the second half of the 80s and early 90s were increasingly published in the editions designed for teenagers and youth, primarily in *Rovesnik* and *Studencheskiy Meridian* magazines. At first, the names of the afterlife bands were not particularly original: they were all called Zagrob, only the

“IN THE AFTERLIFE WITH PROWESS AND FUN, IT WAS NOT BORING, USUALLY WITHOUT ANY CONFLICTS, EXCEPT FOR ONE EPIC WAR BETWEEN HELL AND HEAVEN.”

sequential numbers of the groups varied. For example, Zagrob 109 and Zagrob 205 bands remained in memory. But after the exploitation of such a name as Zagrob N, it became clear that this practice had exhausted itself. At first, it was replaced by the technique of transforming the names of real bands in the spirit of the afterlife genre, for example, Deep Purple – in Deep Zagrob, but this was quickly found to be trivial. In this situation, quite by chance, the name was born that our – quite real – team took for itself: *The Pravednicks' Band*.

And it began by trying to transfer some of the achievements of Zagrob-rock from paper to the sphere of sound. In this regard, by the end of August 1988, the songs were recorded and processed in the format of a magnetic album, which original version was subsequently destroyed. It contained songs like *Coffinus*, *Being for the Funeral of Mr. Kite!*, *A Murder in the Merry Coffin Bar*, *What Scientists in Hell Will not Come up with*, *She Came in through the Coffin Window*, *Shady Cemetery*

Alleys, etc. In 1990, the already mentioned song about the cemetery on the left bank was added to this group of songs, and in 1991 – an early version of the song *Rock-and-Coffin* (*Rock Around the Coffins*). Genre-wise, the songs in the album were mostly rock and roll and rhythm and blues, and most of the tunes had well-recognizable Western originals. However, in this cycle, it is worth mentioning the lyrical ballad called *The Dead Man's Love* based on the poignant lyrics (somewhat reduced) of Mikhail Lermontov.

At the same time, by 1990, the repertoire of the group, which had already discovered new, more complex, forms of rock music (psychedelic, art rock, hard rock) was changing. A special influence on the formation of the topics and the genre affiliation of the band's work in the 90s was caused by Pink Floyd, first of all, their first leader – Syd Barrett, both as part of the group and solo, The Doors, King Crimson, Yes, Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple etc., in a word, by the classic Western rock of the 60–70s.

The formation of The Pravednicks' Band

As a result, at this time the work of the group divided into three different directions.

First, it was a direction represented by short dynamic songs or lyrical ballads. Basically, they were devoted not to fictional events from the afterlife, but to the real acquaintances. These songs were lyrical, often ironic, sometimes there were cases of rather harsh social satire. Their recordings were planned to be collected in an album called *Cast off the lines!*, the full recording of which the band never started, in part because the material planned for it was not completed. Nevertheless, songs of this direction, such as *Tsushima Blues* (1990), *Oh, Zoya!* (around 1991), *Little Lida* (around 1997) were repeatedly performed by The Pravednicks' Band at its concerts.

The second direction – chronologically, perhaps the latest –

was dedicated to Lisiy Nos. Lisiy Nos was a village in the suburbs of St. Petersburg, nominally a part of it, a place where I was lucky enough to have grown up, and where The Pravednicks' Band had done its first musical experiments. In fact, this direction is a thematic cycle that reflects nostalgia for childhood and fascinating impressions from the nature of the northern coast of the Gulf of Finland, at different times of the year and at different times of the day. Individual songs of the cycle also reflected the unhurried life of the village inhabitants. I think the connection between the title of the series (and its title song) and the Beatles' *Strawberry Fields Forever* is striking. The Beatles in this case, indeed, served as a source of inspiration in many respects. This was shown by the presence in the cycle of a song dedicated to Mirnaya Street (*Everything Is Fine On Mirnaya*, 2000), where the country houses of the band members have been located, as an addition to the title song, just as The Beatles have paired *Strawberry Fields Forever* with *Penny Lane*.

But the key source of inspiration and even the prototype of the cycle was the album of The Moody Blues – another decisive influences on The Pravednicks' Band – *On the Threshold of a Dream* (1969). The cycle opens with the song *Jiakhon Fionaf* (1995), which has been inspired by the eponymous children's book by the Soviet writer Elena Vereyskaya with the story of an evil wizard living in a castle, from which in the day-

time only an old gate is visible – without an adjacent fence – on the road between two houses, and which becomes visible with the onset of nine o'clock in the evening. The song *For the First Time* (1997–2000) is dedicated to the childhood friendship of two boys. The core song of the entire cycle, *At twilight* (1999–2000), talks about the semi-mystical experience of the transition from day to night. The whole cycle is permeated by a sub-cycle associated with the seasons, these are four songs *Days to the sunset of January* (1997), ... *And Spring Whirls* (1997), *Seeing Off Summer* (completed around 2013), *September* (around 1995), resulting in the last song in the sequence, *Lisiy Nos Forever* (1996), in the first part of which summer, and in the second – winter pictures of the nature of the village are described.

Thirdly, according to its plan, the most ambitious and epic direction was represented by *Voices of the Universe* project. The first step towards its implementation was taken in the summer of 1990 in Lisiy Nos thanks to the recording of the magnetic album called *Lapse of Cosmic Reason*. Later, the idea grew to a plan to record a double album. The general genre voiced in the *Voices of the Universe* could be described as a new cosmic epic with small lyrical inclusions, playing the role of itinerarium animae in Deum.

The implementation of these three multi-scale ideas was the goal of the creative search of *The Pravednicks' Band* in the 90s. At that time the band already had at its disposal Orpheus, a guitar produced in Bulgaria, Ural, a Soviet bass guitar, a twelve-string acoustic guitar, and a minimalist drum set, assembled from sepa-

“A SPECIAL INFLUENCE ON THE FORMATION OF THE TOPICS AND THE GENRE AFFILIATION OF THE BAND'S WORK IN THE 90S WAS CAUSED BY PINK FLOYD.”



Left to right: Vladislav Sapov, Sergei Sirotkin, Andrei Patkul. Ca. 1997. Rehearsal. 24 B, Maly Prospekt, Saint Petersburg, Vasilievsky Island.

rate percussion instruments. In addition to the aforementioned *Lapse of Cosmic Reason*, in early September 1990, another three songs were recorded, one of which was *Tsushima Blues*. This marked the beginning of the first direction of the band's work. The recordings were made in a private home in Lisiy Nos, in relative isolation from the public.

A MUCH MORE significant event in the history of the band this summer was a three-hour concert, which we organized on the walking side of Mirnaya Street on August 4, 1991. We built a wooden stage with our own hands, and the power supply was provided by connecting an extension cord to an outlet in one of the houses. All the original members of the group and two new members who joined us participated in the performance. Also, the friendly group *R*ozhestvo* played its set. As for *The Pravednicks' Band*, the band dared to present a retrospective of their work, starting with a cover of *A Hard Day's Night* of The Beatles and ending with the material already written at that time for *The Voices of the Universe*. Also one of the early versions of *Rock-and-Coffin* was played, for which at that time only two verses were written (out of the final five + sixth, repeating the first one), and the back vocal of "dal-duba, dal-duba" was performed not in each verse, but once separately during the instrumental break. It is worth noting that the atmosphere at the concert was very warm, there were quite a lot (by local standards) of neighbourhood residents of all ages present who gathered to watch and listen to us. Some of them settled on the chairs and sun loungers that they had brought with, and others listened, standing, and sometimes even dancing. Elderly people watched what was happening from the windows of their homes. The relationship between the performers and the audience was so close that both of them shouted at each other in the pauses between the compositions. The listeners were especially impressed by the percussion solos performed by the new drummer.

Encouraged by the success, we decided to intensify our musical activity in the very near future and to transfer it from the suburbs to the city. However, this intensification was rather conditional, since regular rehearsals in the cold season were not held, primarily due to the fact that different members of the



Left to right: Sergei Sirotkin, Vladislav Sapov, Andrei Patkul, Roman Orlov. The Festival of Street Musicians, September 21, 1997.

group lived in the remote places in the city. We rarely met, and if we played music at that time, we immediately tried to record it with the help of household appliances.

Another notable event of this time was the performance of the group, although represented only by a couple of members, as part of an amateur concert party of the students of the First Pavlov State Medical University of St. Petersburg in early May 1992. We had been preparing for this event for a long time, which eventually took place on the stage of the Nevsky Palace of Culture, an iconic place where many recognized Russian rock musicians performed. However, for various reasons, two of the four members of the band could not come to the concert – a drummer and a keyboardist, therefore we had to change the composition of the instruments on the go, reducing it to a guitar and a percussion, or a guitar and a bass guitar, which made the performance, to put it mildly, blurred. The general impression was acknowledged by the reaction of the jury, which, quite reasonably, gave extremely low marks for the performance. Nevertheless, it was a unique experience of performing on a big stage and communicating with the sophisticated audience.

The Office: A creative community

In the summer of the same year, the central event of the entire history of the group took place. By June-July 1992, a common creative space had somehow developed by itself, both in the physical and ideological sense, called the Office by its participants. In a physical sense, the Office was a two-room apartment on the ground floor in Number 34 Chernyakhovsky Street (an apartment building built in 1910) in the immediate vicinity of the Ligovsky Prospekt metro station (therefore, the alternative name of this space was also Ligovka). This apartment was called the Office because it was rented by acquaintances of our drummer for business purposes. He also managed to get from them a temporary permit to stay in this apartment, so as not to travel every day from Sosnovy Bor in the Leningrad Region, where he was from. On his side, he had to repair it.

The Office, however, quickly turned into a kind of community, representing rudimentary forms of what today is usually called co-living and co-working. Only the drummer lived in the



PHOTO: SERGEI SHAMAKHOV

Dmitriy Polguev. September 13, 1992.
The Rooftop Concert in Sosnovy Bor.



PHOTO: SERGEI SHAMAKHOV

Left to right: Andrei Patkul, Evgeniy Timchenko, Sergei Sirotkin. September 13, 1992. The Rooftop Concert in Sosnovy Bor.

apartment permanently, who occasionally held meetings with the clients of his comrades there. But the doors of the Office were constantly open to visitors, and it quickly began to be a platform for the communication, often heated by alcohol, of like-minded people, united, among other things, by the love of classical rock music. The time of stay in the Office was not regulated in any way, and if you wanted – and the free beds were available – you could have stayed there overnight. I should say that music was not an exclusive topic of conversation: literature was no less animatedly discussed, that at that time was becoming available to the Russian-speaking readers, from fiction to mysticism. Particular attention was paid to poetry, which was easily explained by the role it played for the rock music.

Time has erased many details of the premises, but in general it could be described as follows. Through the front door, the visitor got into a rectangular shape of a fairly spacious hallway, in the right wall of which there was the entrance to the kitchen, directly, opposite the front door, – the door to the living room, and on the left hand – the entrance to the bathroom. The small room, the bedroom, could have been accessed both from the kitchen and from the living room. The companies gathered mainly in the kitchen, behind a table attached to the wall opposite the door, quite quickly overgrown with chairs and armchairs. Instead of the planned repairs, we only slightly stripped off the wallpaper in this part of the Office, and the rest painted – from the walls mountain peaks and dragons soaring above them were looking at us. The profile of the heroine of one of the band's songs – a girl named Zoya – was also depicted, and a quote from the lyrics of another of our songs was written: *Love is a Feast*. At that time, we had a strong feeling that we were at the very beginning of some great achievements that would forever change the national musical culture, at the very least. The sense of com-

munity was unprecedented. The summer of 1992 we called, not originally, “the summer of love of The Pravednicks’ Band.”

IT IS NOT DIFFICULT to guess that pretty soon our musical instruments moved to the Office, including the drum set, the already mentioned synthesizers, the Musima bass guitar and the Fender Telecaster electric guitar, which according to the legend belonged for some time to the guitarist of the band accompanying Anzhelika Varum, a famous Russian pop star. All this equipment was placed in the living room, which we equipped to record our compositions. It was decided to focus on recording the *Voices of the Universe* aiming to finish the album by the end of summer – beginning of autumn. On July 16, rehearsals began and before the end of the month several test recordings were made by the full band: I remember that we recorded and then listened to *Sun-Bellatrix Space Flight*, *Drunken Blues*, *Tell me, Max, Max's Space Radio*. During the recording of the last of these compositions, the neighbours came in, who surprisingly very politely said that although our music was beautiful, the room where we were performing was not intended for this, and we should stop playing music. That did not stop us, though. In the last days of July, everything was ready for a full-fledged recording of the *Voices*, but it turned out that our keyboardist unexpectedly moved to Bulgaria, where he was engaged in the field of grape harvesting. This did not fit into the plans of the team, but there was nothing to do: we had to try to record the compositions without him, using a lot of overlaps. However, the atmosphere was no longer the same: the resulting recordings did not bear the trace of the inspiration that accompanied the songs recorded by the full band. To save the situation somehow, we undertook a creative experiment, known in the history of the band as the recording of the *Drunken Album*. When recording the

Drunken Album, the tape ruthlessly documented the process of our ever-increasing intoxication and ever-diminishing ability to sing, play, and speak. After the last more or less related words “Take a music stand!”, said by one of the participants in the experiment to another, there were no articulate sounds on the record, either musical or linguistic.

THE PRAVEDNICKS’ BAND switched to the street concerts, which they arranged in the underground passage on Nevsky Prospekt (the so-called Warm Pipe) with a full set of musical instruments. At that time, St. Petersburg lived in a smash, the future was completely uncertain, and this created the illusion of some unprecedented opportunities, the opportunities for both success and failure. Freedom was intoxicating. In the underground passage, it was enough to put a drum kit on the floor. Another one immediately appeared next to it and a friendly duel began between the musicians who did not know each other only a minute ago. At that time, we often had the opportunity to share the underground passage with such groups as, for example, *Ad Libitum* which was famous in St. Petersburg and performed the music close to folk, actively using violins and flutes. Once someone sprayed tear gas in the underground passage, and it was very difficult to restrain ourselves and not leave our musical post. Another time, someone spilled some combustible material on the asphalt and set it on fire. However, it looked not like a provocation, but as an element of a continuous carnival. On the street, we played mostly other people’s music, which could be immediately recognized by the passers-by. The standard compositions that we had played then were *Whiter Shade of Pale* of Procul Harum, *Light My Fire* of The Doors, *Stairway to Heaven* of Led Zeppelin, *I Saw Her Standing There* of The Beatles, etc. The public was always recognizing and enjoying *Dazed and Confused* of Led Zeppelin, as well as *Anarchy in UK* of Sex Pistols performed by our keyboardist, who by that time had managed to return safely from Bulgaria. However, sometimes we played our own compositions, and for the performance of one of them, someone even threw us a large dollar bill once. The culmination of the concert activity of The Pravednicks’ Band was not the performances on Nevsky Prospekt, but an epic concert organized on the roof of one of the houses in Sosnovy Bor. It took place on September 13, 1992 and was timed to coincide with the twenty-first birthday of one of the band’s friends living in this city. It’s hard to believe now, but then on the morning of the same day, with the help of our fans, we transported from the Office by public transport in one go all the musical instruments, including the drum kit, and the equipment – amplifiers and speakers. To bring all this back to St. Petersburg took much longer time.

While the band was tuning in before the performance, our keyboardist began to play the fragments of the compositions of J. S. Bach, and it created an amazing feeling that this day already

belonged to eternity. The concert itself lasted four hours and consisted of four parts, in the intervals between which some participants even managed to slightly modify their stage image.

NOTHING SIGNIFICANT happened in the remaining months of 1992. In October, we had to vacate the Office – its lease ended, and the apartment seemed to be bought by someone. With the onset of cold weather, our performances on the street also became less and less frequent. In mid-December, however, a joint celebration of the birthdays of the keyboardist and the guitarist was organized at the latter’s dacha (summer house) in Lisiy Nos. Many guests were invited, including those from among the members of the group R*ozhdestvo, and an electronic concert was arranged right in the living room, at which the performance of our author’s songs was quickly replaced by improvisations on the themes of classical rock, primarily Pink Floyd. While the concert showed that the capabilities of The Pravednicks’ Band in its current composition were close to exhaustion, the party had its own charm. The communication itself remained as relaxed as it had been earlier. I also remember the performance at the invitation of the musicians of the same R*ozhdestvo on December 25, 1992, in the Ely-Paly Club, located somewhere on the Petrograd side, in the area of the embankment of the Karpovka River. At that time, too, the keyboardist and drummer could not take part in this even, but an unfamiliar drummer helped me and the guitarist to perform, which, in general, did not give coherence to the performance. We played mostly short catchy songs at that time,

and I liked the club itself for its spicy, smoky atmosphere and reckless behaviour of the spectators, who were pedalling to the music, sitting on a bicycle screwed to the floor, or were actively swinging on a rope tied to the ceiling.

1993 began with disappointments, there were no rehearsals and the scheduled concerts were disrupted. The members of the group began to move away from each other, each hav-

ing their own interests and hobbies, including participation in parallel musical projects. By February, it was clear that the group would no longer be able to function in the way it did before. Our guitarist even announced its dissolution. However, by May we began to appear on stage again in the compositions close to the composition of 1991–1992. By this time I had become a member of a very interesting art-rock band called *Friday the 13th*, which played long and complex compositions. Since this band lacked keyboard and drum players, I invited teammates from The Pravednicks’ Band to their performances, and everyone from The Pravednicks’ Band of the previous two years had managed to play with *Friday the 13th*. This cooperation was most clearly manifested at the concerts in a club called Shtig, which at that time operated at the Leningrad Steel Rolling Plant, located on the Kosaya Line, near its intersection with Bolshoy Prospekt of Vasilyevsky Island. The politics of the club was run at that time by a certain People’s Deputy Vyacheslav Marychev, who

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rumoured to be No. 2 in the LDPR after Zhirinovskiy and focused the club's activities mainly on the performance of the imitators of Viktor Tsoy and the Kino band (the permanent groups in the club were the Shtat and Igla, who performed covers of the songs of Kino and even copied their manner of performance and behaviour on the stage).

In my case, it was the concerts in ShtIg that were the most intense experience of the stage life in my entire biography. Most of all, I remember the concert in which my former classmate – a professional musician – who played the viola took part: during her solo, which we accompanied, the motley audience of a small house of culture, which included both drunken fans of Tsoy and aggressive punks with shanks hidden in shoes, became a single whole, including the musicians on the stage. It seemed that everyone who was present in the club at that time was pierced through with some kind of electrical discharge. The audience was rocking.

Another agenda in the mid-90s

The concert organized in the summer of 1994 on the pattern of the street concert of 1991 on Mirnaya Street in Lisiy Nos did not save the band. It was clear that there was no trace of the former fellowship, and group, invited to share the scene with The Pravednicks' Band, was much more successful. At that time, our former drummer played there: the level of performance of this group was much higher, and the repertoire was more recognizable.

Only in 1995 there were some serious attempts made to revive The Pravednicks' Band. The situation, however, was complicated because our keyboardist at that time joined the military service in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, and the performance of the band in its full composition was out of the question. He was enlisted for one year, but already during the service it was extended by another six months, so that the reunion was constantly postponed. In addition, by that time I had already studied at the Faculty of Philosophy for almost a year and felt more and more that it was actually high metaphysics, and not music, that was my vocation.

It was not so easy to combine these passions, since both of them required painstaking preparation and consumed a lot of time. It so happened that I preferred reading Aristotle and Hegel to the detriment of playing music. There were also purely pragmatic reasons for this: if you severely limit yourself, you could save money to buy a book, but you obviously could not buy a normal instrument that could at least be configured. At the faculty, where at first, as it seemed to me, some distance was maintained in communication with fellow students, of course, not without happy exceptions, few people knew about my musical hobbies, and those who knew about them were condescending. The people who studied there were often musically educated

people or, at least, had a developed artistic taste. My hobby was perceived by them, rather, as an entertainment permissible for a serious person, obviously devoid of any prospects, which therefore should not be particularly promoted. However, some of my friends at the time even came to The Pravednicks' Band concerts or the parties where the band performed. I can't say that these were two different lives, but, in the language of phenomenology, it took some effort to switch from one attitude to another. Yet, so far I associated my private life with the community of musicians, not future philosophers.

The team also had difficulties finding a permanent drummer. Nevertheless, on December 22, 1995, our concert took place at the Petersburgskaya Moda Lyceum, where the guitarist led a guitar hobby class. His students (vocals, percussion) and one of my friends at St. Petersburg State University (bass guitar) helped us to perform. I myself played an acoustic twelve-string guitar at that concert. Also in 1995, we managed once, quite unexpectedly for ourselves, to perform in the legendary club called Pereval, which was located on the corner of Bolshaya Monetnaya and Kotovskiy Streets.

By the middle of 1996, when the song *Lisiy Nos Forever* was written, the contours of the cycle of the same name began to be outlined: we realized that some of our other compositions could be included in it. The keyboardist returned from the army, and we managed to find a drummer who had a very interesting, slightly jazzed, playing technique. We also found a fairly spacious and equipped with high-quality instruments "point" for rehearsals in the courtyards at the corner of Maly Prospekt of Vasilyevskiy Island and the 10th Line. This room has also become a place of our creative communication and constant feasts – unfortunately, often to the detriment of the creative process. However, the intensity of this communication could hardly be compared with that which we had in the Office: at the "point" the paid time of presence was extremely limited, and there was no common table at which it would be possible to gather. Nevertheless, this period can also be recognized as one of the most productive in the history of The Pravednicks'

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Band. The album *Lisiy Nos Forever*, however, was never recorded then, but at that time several songs were recorded, which received the status of a mini-album called *Probe No. 97*.

ODDLY ENOUGH, we did not play regularly in clubs, where rock music moved in the 90s. Often it was the club scene that opened for the artists the way to the public fame at that time. However, for some reason, we relied on recordings that did not rise much interest among listeners unfamiliar with the group. The Pravednicks' Band somehow isolated themselves from the musical process going on in St. Petersburg at that time. It could be, however, that this process itself did not include The Pravednicks' Band.

Perhaps the only bands with whom we maintained – and then infrequently – creative contacts were R*ozhdestvo and Bird C who achieved success in the mid-90s and were gathering full clubs. One pleasant exception was our joint concert, which is now difficult to date, but I think it was somewhere in 1996 in the White Rabbit club, which was located in the House of Culture of Communication Workers. The audience at the concert was motley dressed and very enthusiastic, they were mainly fans of the aesthetics of the late 60s and Tolkienists, among whom the song about Jiakhon Fionaf caused a special delight. The Pravednicks' Band, with its fictional worlds, utopian dreams and focus on the music of the 60s and 70s, was hopelessly left in the past during the cynical and merciless 90s.

Such isolation can be explained not only with the insufficient performance level of the group, but also with its general concept, which by the mid-90s turned out to be archaic. By the beginning of this decade, Russian rock music began to lose the scale and the influence that it had gained by the end of the 80s, its golden age, when many bands of the recent underground effortlessly assembled stadiums, and Russian rock itself became the musical mainstream of the whole country. However, already in the late 80s it began to be replaced from the leading positions by more popular music, and in the first years of the 90s – by rave. Rock concerts in stadiums, of course, were also arranged, but they became like a routine. The general commercialization of life almost immediately turned rock music into a market segment, which was insignificant compared to various forms of pop music. Rock musicians ceased to be masters of minds, and either improved the technique of performance to play covers of famous songs in clubs (in St. Petersburg there was and still is a club very popular in the mid-90s called Money Honey, where bands brilliantly copied the style of rockabilly), or played commercially unpromising alternative music. Punk, grunge, hardcore have become favourite genres of Russian amateur musicians, fully corresponding to the era. They bloomed with wide colours in small clubs. In both cases, however, the space for one's own creative search narrowed: even in cases where the composition and performance could not be monetized, the musical repertoire was determined by the demand.

ONE OF THE RARE ATTEMPTS to make a name for itself in public was participation in the Festival of Street Musicians-97. On September 21, 1997, we performed on the stage located at the intersection of Nevsky Prospekt and Sadovaya Street, with a full electric composition, playing only two songs – *Little Lida* and *Tsushima Blues*. The jury was manned by such stars of St. Petersburg rock music as Andrey Burlaka and Oleg Garkusha. The group managed to go to the second round, but after the performance in it, which took place on June 27, 1998 in the Alexander Garden near the Gorkovskaya metro station, the band dropped out of the competition program. The new drummer could not take part in this performance, and it was decided to perform without a rhythm section, which greatly weakened the position of the band.

In April 1999, The Pravednicks' Band was joined by a new

drummer, a classmate of the guitarist, and the band began regular rehearsals. In general, this year was quite fun and promising for the band. We spent a lot of time together at the apartment of our mutual friend, located near Staraya Derevnya metro station, listening to other people's music and composing our own music, discussing creative plans. It was another reincarnation of our Office. On June 26, we took part in the Tsarskoye Selo Carnival in Pushkin, where we sang songs and staged a show that lasted until the morning. The reception of the audience was very warm, and we even managed to earn some money, to drink free beer and to eat dumplings. On July 24, The Pravednicks' Band performed in a full composition a short electric program at the Sunstroke Festival, which was held at Kirov Central Park. We even got the audience's sympathy award, several bottles of Baltika dark beer. Much more impressive was the performance of The Pravednicks' Band on December 16, 1999, at the festival at the Baltic State Technical University "Voenmeh" D.F. Ustinov. It was very well coordinated, it felt that the musicians had already achieved a good interplay. The concert hall was crowded, the audience eagerly responded to all initiatives from the stage, so that with its dynamics the concert reminded me of the most successful performances in the Shtlg. After the concert, we parted at the Technological Institute metro station very encouraged by our success and joint music-making, we were eagerly discussing our prospects. It seemed that a wide horizon of possibilities was opening up to us again. In any case, this was the first and the last time after 1991–1992 when I sincerely believed that something serious could come out of our project. However, the fate ruled otherwise. A few days before the New Year 2000, the drummer announced his departure from the band, motivating it with his family circumstances. And on New Year's Eve itself, apparently, influenced by the resignation of the President of the Russian Federation B. N. Yeltsin, the keyboardist also announced his departure from the band. He, however, still took part in several events held by the group, but only as a session musician. The band still functioned somehow until 2004, performing at the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Lisiy Nos (2000), as well as in the Polygon club after the Beatles music festival (2002). In the period from 2006 to 2014 it was actively performing in various St. Petersburg clubs, especially often in the White Rhinoceros club, with rare reunions in 2018 and 2019. However, its performances were fuelled by the energy, which developed in the 90s, especially in the period from 1990 to 1992. ❌



Holy Trinity
Alexander Nevsky
Lavra, mid 90s.

PHOTO: MIKHAIL BORISOV

The revival of the Orthodox Church

by **Julia Kravchenko**

In 1991, while walking around Moscow, my friend and I came into one of the Moscow churches. It was crowded there, full with candles and the smell of incense, there was singing. I asked timidly: “Could I be baptized?” I was told the price quite business-like and told to wait a bit. After a while, me and ten other people were placed in a semicircle in front of the font, the priest mumbled something, tilted us in turns over the font, poured water on our heads and smeared with odorous oil (myrrh, as it turned out later). The baptism process took fifteen minutes, then everyone went about their own business.

Later there was an admission to St. Petersburg University, a stormy youth, parties, and friends. We, the students of the Faculty of Philosophy, did not notice our poverty, did not pay attention to politics and economics, bandits fighting on the streets, shootings, explosions – it was some kind of parallel universe that could have been bypassed and simply ignored. We were flooded with books, music, movies, that were banned until recently, and freedom. All this had to be read, heard, watched, and discussed. We did not think about the future in practical terms, we just reveled in freedom. It was as if we did not notice our poverty, the TV promised that the market economy was about to start booming, and we would all live well and happily. It seemed to us that it was enough just to absorb this freedom and to wait for the European cozy prosperous world to grow around us itself.

In my third year of philosophy, I began to study ancient Greek and soon became absorbed in Byzantine theology. Such a depth and freedom of human thought, such an abyss of meanings opened before me, which, it seemed, one could perceive endlessly, constantly finding more and more new facets. I spent all day in the library, studying all the literature about Byzantium accumulated in the Public Library of St. Petersburg over the past two centuries. I read Orthodox canonical texts and studied the structure of worship, the texts of Byzantine theologians and their interpretations by theologians and philosophers of the 19th and 20th centuries. I experienced a similar delight again many years later, immersed in quantum electrodynamics and the string theory. The two fields of science that turned my life upside down were Byzantine theology and quantum electrodynamics. One made a revolu-

JULIA KRAVCHENKO, as a young student, approached the church looking for the parish life as described in the library. Instead she met a demanding obedience to a multitude of rules and prohibitions. Today she has a diploma in Byzantine theology and performs as a vocalist and pianist.

tion in the existential sphere, the other blew up my everyday life, making me wonder daily about everything I saw around me.

FINISHING THE FOURTH YEAR of the Faculty of Philosophy, I once came to a small church on the outskirts of St. Petersburg, which was destroyed in Soviet times, and now was being restored, and started to sing in the church choir. On the wave of the public enthusiasm and general interest in Orthodoxy, it seemed to me very logical. However, the real parish life was nothing like the Orthodoxy I got acquainted with in the library. At the beginning I was shocked by the incredible number of superstitions and immediately afterwards I had to acknowledge numerous prohibitions. No sooner had I been frightened by the monstrous illiteracy of the parishioners in matters of their own faith than I was struck by an understanding of almost the same illiteracy on the part of the priesthood. Ignorance generated fear in people and fear gave rise to prohibitions. The God of the Russian man turned out to be a capricious tyrant, demanding unquestioning slavish obedience to a multitude of rules, for which he generously distributed all sorts of earthly goods, while for disobedience he severely punished by deprivation of money and health. It was like a market bargaining, a game of Monopoly, or a party meeting in a changed scenery. In the midst of the 90s, with complete reckless intoxicating freedom in the country, the people of this country slowly started to search for self-restrictions and prohibitions. And also enemies. Even the demand for material well-being was carried out not in the sphere of a market economy, not by creative activity, but by passive expectation of encouragement and handouts from God, the president or the higher authority. The timid ecclesiastical ecumenical movement

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Holy Trinity
Alexander Nevsky
Lavra. Mid 90s.

PHOTO: MIKHAIL BORISOV

“THE RUSSIAN VERSION OF ORTHODOXY IS REPLETE WITH THE PATTERNS OF ‘HUMILITY AND OBEDIENCE,’ ‘SLAVISH SERVICE,’ ‘DIVINE MANDATE,’ AND GLORIFICATION OF STATEHOOD.”

was not accepted by the public at all. Catholics, Lutherans, and other Christians were secretly deemed almost worse than the Communists who, until recently being in power, were blowing up churches and eliminating people. New technologies were alarming and frightening. Any new technology was immediately overgrown with horror stories, transmitted from mouth to mouth as sacred knowledge: the microwave oven destroys the human body with emitted waves, brain cancer occurs from the use of mobile phones, and the chips in passports contain the number of the devil. The logical chain of folklore conclusions was built ornately: all technologies are evil, evil comes from the devil, technologies came from the “West”, which means that the devil is also in the “West”. The older generation suddenly began to talk about the great Russian spirituality and contrast it with a soulless “beautiful” Western life. Yesterday’s Komsomol members warned against communicating with Catholics and Lutherans and against jointly celebrating church holidays. It seemed that the whole country had a quick change of scenery in their heads while the actors remained the same. Now pre-revolutionary Russia was considered great, beautiful, and spiritual, and the Soviet Union was an unfortunate misunderstanding. As for the West, it has quickly gone from being an enemy of workers and peasants to the threat to our time-honored spirituality.

EVERY YEAR, the TV more and more propagandized the “return to the roots”, more and more people came to churches, more and more Orthodox literature was printed, resembling fairy tales of the poor quality. There appeared many experts, keepers of the great knowledge of how to properly dye eggs for Easter, where

to take the shell from these eggs, in what clothes you can come to the temple, how to set a candle correctly, where and what relics help and for what purpose, from which saint what and how to ask, in order to get what you want. This “tawdry” Orthodoxy, which came out of all the cracks, was as strange and ridiculous as the magicians and psychics who flourished everywhere at that time. It was a mystery where at one point “scientific Marxism” and the much praised Soviet natural science education have gone. On the one hand, we had unlimited freedom of information at that time, on the other hand, there was impassable incompetence and paralysis of the mind. Fear of responsibility for one’s life, learned helplessness, and even Stockholm syndrome toward the authority characterized our society then and still characterize it now. The Russian version of Orthodoxy is replete with the patterns of “humility and obedience,” “slavish service,” “divine mandate,” and glorification of statehood. The total lack of critical thinking skills is also associated with fear, the fear of thinking, as such. Byzantine Orthodoxy, which has grown out of late Antiquity and Neoplatonism on the scientific and philosophical background of the Greeks and has been forcibly planted by Prince Vladimir in Kievan Rus, that has not had such a background, coincides with the Greek original only in appearance, but not in essence. All this, from the time of Vladimir the First to the present time of Vladimir the Second, turns Orthodoxy in Russia into an instrument of control and suppression rather than a way of spiritual perfection and a path to God. The events that now seem terrible and unexpected to us, the submissive behavior of Russian citizens, which now looks completely irresponsible, is in fact understandable, predictable and, alas, inevitable. ❌



Festival on
Pushkinskaya 10,
1990.

PHOTO: MIKHAIL BORISOV

Summary.

The Weimar Republic analogy seems unavoidable

by **Konstantin Zarubin**

I went to university in 1996–2001, a few years later than the contributors to this issue. My alma mater, if one can call it that, was a lowly teacher-training college on the outskirts of St Petersburg. Temporally, spatially, and socially, my university experience was a kind of missing link between today's Russia and the lost paradise described in this collection of memoirs.

On the one hand, I do remember a grim crumbling city where I felt like nothing could ever again be forbidden. Freedom, it seemed, had somehow triumphed once and for all. I also remember not caring much whether our student dorm had a functioning shower (it didn't) or reliable heating (the temperature in our room could get as low as 8°). What mattered was that I got to read all those books you could never find in my hometown. I got to learn English and German and feel like I was reclaiming my place in a world where I was always meant to live.

At the same time, I was keenly aware that living in that world required a decent salary. Like some of the contributors, I had a vague interest in philosophy when I left school, but majoring in it never occurred to me back then.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, my university was Putin's Russia in a nutshell well before Putin.

In these concluding reflections on the lost paradise described in the collection of memoirs, the author dwells on the analogy with the Weimar Republic. He finds that the overlap is too striking to ignore.

The university management was ignorant and authoritarian in equal measure; students were already being forced to collect signatures for a pro-Kremlin party; a special department was already in place for studies of the "Russian soul" and other pseudo-scholarship with an imperialist slant. Four years into my degree, my roommates and I were personally grilled for an hour by the university president because I had drawn a picture showing Lenin as a bird in a cap and put it up on the wall next to our dorm room. We were told that we were unpatriotic scum; that

any "strong" Russian leader had to be respected. I was told to take the picture down and stuff it up my ass.

In other words, as I read the memoirs collected here I found myself occupying the awkward vantage point of someone who is certainly not an outsider but isn't quite an insider.

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Late 90s Rave
on Vasilyevsky.

“THERE IS THE SAME EXHILARATING, SHORT-LIVED FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND LIFESTYLE. THERE ARE THE DRUGS AND THE NEW MUSIC. THERE IS THE CHEERFUL BOHEMIAN POVERTY.”

With that established, let me say a few words about one aspect of this fascinating collection that I keep thinking about, namely the philosophy.

We often use analogy to make sense of the world. Some analogies turn out to be more useful than others. Some turn out to be more useful than we ever wanted them to be.

One such analogy is that between post-Soviet Russia and the Weimar Republic. Once upon a time, I used to feel that comparing Russia after 1991 to Germany after 1918 was lazy thinking. Sure (I would say), both places were defeated empires. Both had crippling economic crises, widespread poverty, gaping inequal-

ity, and fragile democratic institutions. However (I would say), those similarities were superficial. Russia’s “defeat” in the Cold War was very different from Germany’s defeat in World War I. Russia’s “glorious past” was different. Its elite and its people were different. The world around it was nothing like it was in the 1920s or 1930s.

AS I WRITE THESE WORDS in the ninth year of Russia’s war against Ukraine and the seventh month of the full-scale invasion, I must admit I was wrong. It is the differences that were superficial, not the similarities.

The memoirs collected here are a case in point. Try as I might to read them without thinking of Germany between the wars, the Weimar Republic analogy keeps popping up in my mind.

To be sure, St Petersburg in the 1990s was not quite *Babylon Berlin*. The philosophy department of St Petersburg State University (freshly renamed back from Leningrad State University, along with the city itself) was no Freiburg. And yet, the overlap is too striking to ignore. There is the same exhilarating, short-lived freedom of thought and lifestyle. There are the drugs and the new music. There is the cheerful bohemian poverty. In philosophy, there is the same desire to go “back to the roots”: to an imaginary time when pure spontaneous thought had not yet been corrupted by ideology.

When seen through the Weimar Republic analogy, the prominence of Heidegger in these memoirs seems almost spooky. We learn that in the early 1990s, in the shabby philosophy classrooms on St Petersburg’s Vasilyevsky Island, young post-Soviet men and women dressed in heaven knows what spent a lot of their time reading *Sein und Zeit*, first published in German in 1927. Their introduction to Western philosophy was a rehash of Heidegger’s lectures, taught by an enthusiastic professor who had first read Heidegger just a couple of years earlier than his students.

WITH MY SWEDEN-ISSUED philosopher hat on, I want to be careful here. The reasons why, of all the non-Marxist thinkers of the 20th century, the first post-Soviet philosophy students ended up overdosing on Heidegger are surely complex. At least one of those reasons has little to do with post-Soviet Russia and everything to do with Heidegger’s fame as a particularly forbidden fruit in Soviet academia. Perhaps because of his Nazi connections, Soviet censors saw Heidegger as a “decadent bourgeois philosopher” par excellence. Vladimir Bibikhin! recalls in his essay *For internal use (Dlya sluzhebnoy pol’zovaniya)* how happy and proud he was in 1974 to have a hand in a 250-copy print of “the first Russian Heidegger”. The copies were meticulously numbered and distributed among a select few.

With my writer hat on, however, I feel like throwing caution to the wind. So let me suggest that the Heidegger-heavy curriculum of the early 1990s and the whole going-back-to-the-roots project are telling. They say something about Russia’s Weimar Republic experience.

To begin with, they are indicative of what one American observer of Russian intellectual life in the 1990s called “a sort of

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supersaturated space” “crammed” with Western ideas and texts from the previous 70 years. In that space, intellectual imports from the West appeared “stripped of their original contexts and genesis”.² Equally importantly, they came stripped of years, often decades, of copious interpretation, ruthless critique, and further refinement.

This often meant that the illusion of rejoining the West, whether philosophically or politically, was just that – an illusion. Modern Western thought, just like modern Western politics, was not a set of authoritative texts or unassailable ideas that you could simply copy or memorize. Instead, it was and is a messy, never-ending argument, carried out by communities and institutions. Even if we take at face value Whitehead’s quip that all of Western philosophy is a bunch of footnotes to Plato, the fact stands that there is no Western philosophy without those footnotes or the debates raging therein.

THE SOVIET UNION has been described as “the most astounding ... case of a philosophy-centric society”, “an amazing sanctuary where philosophy’s nominal public role was greater than anywhere else at any other time”.³ It is no secret, however, that Soviet philosophy, just like Soviet “democracy”, did not allow for any genuine critique or disagreement. Rather than being an argument, it was a never-ending ritual of invoking the true prophets and doing word magic. In the last decades of Soviet history, it seemed largely accidental that the prophets were Marxist or that the verbiage revolved around dialectical materialism. To paraphrase McLuhan, the ritual was the message; Marxist debates were just as suspect as anything non-Marxist.

Heidegger fit this framework perfectly. In life, he was never one for messiness or pluralism, and he resisted both across the board: from academia to art to politics. In philosophy, he wanted to wipe the slate clean by going back not just to Plato but beyond Plato: all the way to the pre-Socratics, whose thought helpfully survives only in tiny fragments open to creative incantation. Heidegger was a fan of going back to the roots in his conceptual analysis, too: time and again he strives to elucidate a term by trotting out its old use or the literal sense of the morphemes that make it up. In fact, Heidegger’s fondness for word magic famously goes much further than that. While back at the roots, he felt that he needed a pristine new vocabulary to talk about things. Finally, he had a habit of using his trademark vocabulary in sentences so convoluted that one cannot but suspect deliberate obfuscation.

None of that is a fatal flaw for Heidegger as a philosopher. Like so many other important thinkers, he was saved from himself by the messy, never-ending argument – in other words, by

the international philosophical community he was part of. A fundamental feature of this community is that it can be inspired and fruitfully provoked by whatever you say without ever fully subscribing to your assumptions or methods – or indeed while outright dismissing them.

Another community that saved Heidegger from himself were the Allied forces that defeated the Nazis. While cooped up in the Third Reich, Heidegger used his word magic to praise the Führer, expound German exceptionalism and openly rail against “the Anglo-Saxon world of Americanism” [*die angelsächsische Welt des Amerikanismus*], hell-bent on destroying Europe and the cradle of Western civilization.⁴ With the Nazis gone, such rhetoric came to an end. For the 30 remaining years of his life, Heidegger would be spared the temptation to voice his chauvinistic and authoritarian tendencies.

Lone geniuses do not make philosophy. Good leaders do not keep democracy alive. Communities matter. Institutions matter. As Olga Serebryanaya, one of the contributors, puts it, while we were trying to “renew” our thinking, “it was the institutional structure that primarily required renewal” (see page 107 in this issue).

THE STRUCTURE was never renewed. The fragile new institutions created in the 1990s have since been destroyed or rendered utterly decorative. Russia’s Weimar Republic has gradually mutated into a Reich that is likely to be around much longer than Hitler’s for the simple reason that it has the largest nuclear arsenal on the planet. No Allied forces will be coming to save Russia from itself.

Our memories are all that’s left. That’s not much, but it is more than nothing. The lost paradise described in this issue did exist, however brief or however confined to the philosophy classrooms of Vasilyevsky Island and the cold dorm rooms where we read our precious books and drank our cheap booze. ✖

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Late 90s rave
on Vasilyevsky.

PHOTO: MIKHAIL BORISOV

Note: The contributors to this theme have been writing their memoirs as private persons, and not as representatives for their present working places or positions.

BALTIC WORLDS

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