

Wiktoria i René Śliwowsy, *Rosja — nasza miłość* [Wiktoria Śliwowska and René Śliwowski, *Russia — Our Love*], Warszawa 2008, Iskry, 539 pp., ill.

In this book, two eminent scholars look over their past, over the profession they have been passionately pursuing for more than half a century. It was and still is Russia that has been the subject of their research, studies, and reflections, that has made them read countless books and inspired them to take part in animated discussions. Wiktoria and René write about a life filled with a passion for study. What this means is not only an interest of scholars who devour books and indefatigably carry out searches in archives, but also (perhaps to an even greater extent) a fascination with people. During their journeys, and also in Poland, the authors came across and made friends with many prominent scholars and artists from what was at that time the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and later Russia. Most of these friendships have proved to be durable. The book presents recollections devoted to the Śliwowskis' Russian friends.

The title 'Russia — Our Love' refers first and foremost to personalities who embody 'another Russia', a country without frontiers, passports and official bureaucracy.

Wiktoria and René met during their studies in Leningrad. She was a student at the Department of History of the Alexander Herzen Pedagogical Institute, he at the faculty of Russian philology of the same institute. Being of leftist views, they had both a positive attitude to the Land of the Soviets when they were leaving for Leningrad in 1949. The Soviet reality was to revise their opinions somewhat. Wiktoria Śliwowska writes that the first meeting with the USSR was a civilizational and mental shock to her. The authors were taken aback by the all-embracing fear which paralyzed the inhabitants, by their distrust, their readiness to denounce their neighbours and colleagues (the atmosphere among Polish youth was much more open at that time), by the importance attached to mere appearances, ostentation, by the absurdities of bureaucracy and the difficulties of daily life (queues, low level of sanitation). Some manifestations of the so called 'fight against cosmopolitanism' which was then being conducted, e.g. the change of the name of the famous 'Nord' café to 'Sever' (it is now called 'Sever-Nord') seemed funny to the young Poles. There were things which upset them, for instance, the fact that the lectures were full of lies, the disappearance

of prominent scholars from the Institute. But there was nobody they could 'discuss this with'.

After finishing their studies and returning to Poland the authors took up their duties, she as a historian, he as a philologist and translator. They kept up contacts with Russia and Russian people during their journeys to the East and, when this became possible, also during their visits to the West (e.g. during conferences in Paris devoted to Mikhail Bakunin and Nikolai Evreinov or during the visits they paid to Russian emigrants), and also in the course of meetings in Warsaw. Their memoirs also concern the Warsaw milieu of scholars, especially its relations with Soviet centres and researchers, for great importance was attached to these relations in the Polish People's Republic. Wiktoria describes the frequently comic situations when as a young worker of the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences she accompanied Soviet historians who came to Poland to participate in scientific conferences or start scientific training. Some of these official contacts turned into friendships, but conflicts did occur too. One of the strongly politically-committed Soviet historians submitted an unfavourable report on Śliwowska after his visit to Warsaw, but this led to a determined reaction from the director of the Institute of History, Tadeusz Manteuffel, who offered an apology to the young scholar. This occurred before October 1956 and might have ended with a dismissal from work.

The book contains expressions of high esteem for such outstanding historians as Tadeusz Manteuffel and Stefan Kieniewicz, Wiktoria's academic patrons. We read about important persons and persons respected by Wiktoria, also those professing other political views than those held by the author. René Śliwowski writes about relations among students of Russian philology at the University of Warsaw. The authors show goodwill towards fellow creatures and understanding for their weaknesses, but they do not hesitate to name the persons who have disgraced themselves, both Poles and Russians.

The action of the book takes place in France, Poland, Estonia and in Russia itself: in Leningrad (popularly called Peter), Moscow and in the 'Polish Siberia'. Wiktoria and René emphasize their equivocal attitude to the cities which are important in history and in their own lives. The authors were not enraptured by Leningrad when they saw it for the first time. Many years later their friends showed them the real 'Peter'. The same can be said about other places in Russia which the Śliwowskis could discover thanks to their unusual friends. The 'Siberian' chapter tells about their impressions of the visit they made in 2002:

In the local archives I found interesting materials about the escapes of Polish exiles from Tomsk. The workers at the archives were friendly, cheerful. On the whole, it is much easier to get the necessary documents and make use of them in provincial Russia. Even the passers-by are much more sympathetic than in Moscow which has been spoiled by the new rich and wealthy foreigners, especially the Americans. To feel well in the capital, you must have true friends there (p. 453).

Thanks to the people whose friendship with the authors had been well tested, the climate of even unfriendly places became warm and cheerful. This applies to both Soviet and Russian times.

Most probably all the persons about whom, and as a tribute to whom, the book has been written deserve closer attention, for most of them are wise, noble people and their fate was usually tragic. The master of the Śliwowskis, the historian of literature Julian Grigorievich Oksman, a Gulag prisoner, was a prominent scholar and a brave man. Arrested in 1936, he 'kept pleading not-guilty and did not sign anything'. After being freed, he devoted himself enthusiastically to scholarly work and remained intransigent until the end of his life, an attitude which had cost him dear in Soviet times.

The authors say that Natan Eydelman, a historian known in Poland, a man passionately fond of his work, enchanted them during their first meeting. Like his family, he suffered oppression (his father spent many years in the Gulag), but he did not give in. Repressive measures and difficulties with censors did not discourage him from research work. He was under the spell of Pushkin and the Dekabrists, he could always scent out interesting things in archives and had an excellent memory. He was very helpful, and willingly shared his knowledge with friends. He was known for his courage and truthfulness. The authors emphasize that there is not a single lie in his publications, nor did he ever agree to a compromise with the 'controllers'. He was the first Soviet citizen to dare to say openly that the Soviets were responsible for the Katyn crime.

Since it is impossible to mention (let alone characterize) all the positive heroes of the book, let us quote what the Śliwowskis say about Stanislav and Alina Rassadin, for the same can be said about the authors' other Russian friends:

They were among those magnificent Russians who were completely free of even the slightest tinge of xenophobia, those Russians who without a trace of false ostentation shared the tragedies of other nations and individuals: the massacre of the Armenians, the Holocaust, the Katyn Forest, the Warsaw Uprising, the Stalinist expulsions of entire nations. They have told us about the shame they feel when they look at Praga [the district of Warsaw on the right bank of the Vistula — A.J.L.] where Soviet forces stopped and did not help those fighting on the other bank of the river. They did not take *raison d'état* into account, what interested them was only the tragedy of those people ... We cannot understand how it is possible that in a system which degraded so many wise and talented people, they were aware of what was going on around them, that they kept a clear head and remained inflexible, that they did not agree to any compromise, at most they held themselves aloof (p. 297).

These firm, deep friendships were not confined to visits filled with hour-long debates and — even in hard times — to meals at tables loaded with delicacies acquired with great difficulty and prepared with utmost care. They also included correspondence, which was regularly carried out for many years, despite raging censorship (whenever the occasion arose, letters and more important things were sent through trusted persons). In the days of mobile phones and electronics,

the art of epistolography is now almost dead, almost but not quite, thanks also to Wiktoria and René Śliwowski. The authors who, of course, use these latest achievements of technology day by day, have not given up letter writing, this splendid, traditional way of communication. This old-fashioned custom — in the good meaning of the word — consolidated and still consolidates old friendships. And besides, letters (and even more so, collections of letters) are an excellent historical source. Sometimes, they are real literary works, like the letters of Yuri Lotman, whose refined 'epistolary prose' has been compared to that of Anton Chekhov. There are some mistakes and omissions in the book but I will not point them out for the authors have noticed them themselves and want to correct them in the next edition. They have been put down in Wiktoria Śliwowska's unpublished text 'Yet another mistake. I am deeply ashamed'.

In their book about another, 'their own', Russia the authors have shown a completely different country from the one known from official situations and propaganda. Such approach was known in the 19th century when high-minded individuals (both Poles and Russians) could rise over mutual hate and contempt and over the stereotypes supporting them. In the 20th century, too, there was a yearning for a 'third Russia', different from both the 'white' and the 'red' Russia known for its oppression of smaller nations. In our times such an attitude was presented by Andrzej Drawicz. I think that the Śliwowskis' book is spiritually reminiscent of Drawicz's *Pocalunek na mrozie* [A Kiss in Frosty Weather].

*Russia — Our Love* presents a bright picture of our eastern neighbour, a picture that differs substantially from universal ideas and the Poles' less general hard personal experience. The authors also pay some rather incidental attention to the dark sides of the USSR, to bureaucratic Russia and its Gulag, to the people who faithfully served the regime and did not shrink from committing the most villainous deeds. It is true that the 'bad' Russia is not the subject of the book and much is known about it anyhow, but, in my personal opinion, a slightly larger dose of the dreadfulness of everyday life in the Soviet Union would, by contrast, throw full light on the heroism of those who were indomitable.

The book is (and will probably be in the future) an excellent source of knowledge on Russia, especially the 'unofficial' Russia, on its intellectual elites, on the moods and atmosphere that prevailed in Stalinist times and during the Khrushchev thaw. From the recollections of the Śliwowskis, who witnessed the events they describe, we can learn much about Poland and the Poles, about Russia and the Russians and about their mutual relations. Interesting photographs constitute an important supplement to this beautifully written book.

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