

INTERVIEW ON BORIS PASTERNAK

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*Lev Shilov interviewed IB in Russian in his Albany set in London in 1989; the translation is by Helen Rappaport.<sup>1</sup>*

SHILOV We are in the centre of London, in Piccadilly, in the apartment of Sir Isaiah Berlin, the eminent philosopher, literary critic, and a man of European if not world-wide fame. It is not often ... that one is able to obtain an interview, to conduct a conversation with such an interesting and important interlocutor, and yet you are not familiar to all by sight ... not all of our viewers are acquainted with you. They are particularly interested in knowing what brought you to Russia as early as '45. We know that you had, earlier ... spent your childhood in Russia. But how you came to return in '45, and with whom of our writers and literary critics you met, is also of great interest, as too is hearing about Pasternak from you, although many have already read your book, your reminiscences. But of course, when a live person is relating all this it is more interesting.

BERLIN I can tell it to you. I arrived in Moscow [*inaudible*], I served as provisional/temporary first secretary at the British embassy. I had been sent there from Washington, where I had also been at the embassy, although I am not a diplomat by profession, but in the main, simply a lecturer [*inaudible*], a professor at Oxford. But for some reason, as we had won the war [*inaudible*], they sent people, such as I, to different places, where, you understand, they might not have expected to be sent. In any event, they told us that there was a shortage of people at the embassy in Moscow who could speak Russian. And as I spoke Russian, the then ambassador, who was on very good terms with the Soviet authorities, persuaded me to come for four or five months, which

<sup>1</sup> A [transcript](#) of the original Russian is also available.

LEV SHILOV

I did with pleasure. That was, I arrived, I think, yes, at the end of September '45, and ... what can I tell you? I ... they told me that I would not meet anyone, that at that time ... you understand, the government did not like Soviet citizens to talk with strangers, especially with embassy staff, whom they all considered to be spies [*inaudible*]. I knew that Pasternak was there, because his two sisters, who, you know, were then living in Oxford – one of whom has now died, and the other is still alive – gave me a pair of boots for him. I did not know how to reach him. The following happened ... I [*inaudible*] ... There was a particular paper [*inaudible*], the journal *British Ally*, which the embassy published ... and there was some kind of banquet in honour of Priestley ... the writer Priestley, who at that time was greatly revered in the Soviet Union, because he had said, during the war, that Russian literature was the conscience of the world. This of course, went down well. And two of his plays, you know, were then running, for which reason they gave this official reception, and I was invited. And whilst there, I sat among people who were completely unfamiliar to me, and there was Priestley. And Priestley was introduced to Chukovsky, the famous children's poet and literary critic. Priestley was very out of sorts. He no doubt found his visit to the Soviet Union tedious. You see, he was taken around every kolkhoz and factory, and, as you can imagine, found it horribly wearisome. In the end he became very angry because he was not allowed to take his money [*presumably his Russian royalties*] back to England: currency, he wasn't allowed to receive any currency, the money had to stay in the Soviet Union. This infuriated him somewhat. So much so that he sat there scowling [*inaudible*]. Then they brought Chukovsky up to him and he said: 'Ah, Chukovsky, yes, yes. They've told me you are something of a translator.' This did not please Chukovsky at all. He was insulted. And made it absolutely clear that he felt insulted. That was that. And so they took me up to Chukovsky, in order to placate him. I of course knew who Chukovsky was and I had read him. He and I made friends. And we talked of many things. Then I told him that I had with me a pair of boots for Pasternak. And could he tell me how ... 'We all live in Peredelkino, I don't know whether he would want to receive you, it isn't straightforward nowadays.' Then a woman came up to me who had heard me say this. She was the wife of

#### INTERVIEW ON BORIS PASTERNAK

Prokofiev, the composer. She was half-Spanish, half-Polish or something (she died not long ago in Paris) and she said: 'I know them all, do you want to go there with me?' I said: 'With the greatest of pleasure.' Then I went back to my seat and chatted with different people, if only I could remember, who had been there. There were various writers. [Il'ya] Sel'vinsky was there, the director [Alexander] Tairov. I sat for a while ... sat next to him. He said: 'Your Russian, you know, is absolutely spot on.' I told him: 'Well, you know, I was born in the city of Riga, and although I haven't spoken it for a long time, it's somehow all come back to me.' He said: 'Well, you not only speak it well, but you also have a Russian way of thinking.' I felt so flattered by this that I then proceeded to chat away with him. Poor Tairov, he was not in the land of the living for much longer after this [conversation].

SHILOV Yes, they soon closed his theatre, his theatre was closed ...

BERLIN In '46. He was sent [*to the Gulag*] when? He was, you know, liquidated.<sup>2</sup>

SHILOV No, as far as I know, he died a natural death, but of course he went through an awful lot.

BERLIN Hm ... You sure about that?

SHILOV Yes, yes, yes.

BERLIN About the closing? They told us in England that he had been liquidated some time in '46 ... But maybe not. Very well then. We knew nothing about anything. To this day. Very well. Then, the next day ... no, not the next day, I think it was perhaps four or five days later, I went with Madame Prokofiev, Lina Ivanovna, to Peredelkino, to Pasternak's house. He was there, and his wife ... He greeted me very warmly, I handed him the very same [boots] ... he said: no, no, no, these are not for me. He was

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Yakovlevich Tairov (1885–1950, real name Kornblit) founded the pioneering Kamerny Theatre in Moscow in 1941, but his productions were often vilified by Stalin and he was forced increasingly to toe the line.

very disconcerted. ‘I don’t think these are for me, I don’t need them, no, I think they must be for my brother.’ I said: ‘Well, I don’t know. Your sister, your sister Lydia told me that they were for you.’ – ‘Oh, very well then, very well. Let’s not talk any more about it.’ He was there, his wife and [Lydia] Seifullina was there too. And we talked [*inaudible*]. What can I say? We talked about everything. People such as Pasternak, his wife, Seifullina and other Soviet writers whom I met, were all under the illusion that everything in the West was wonderful, that works of genius were written there, that wonderful music [was being composed] there, about which they knew nothing. I had to find a way of somehow, somehow or other telling them that everything was not by any means quite as wonderful with us. And that perhaps, in Russia, in this respect, there were even more talented people, strange as that may seem. They wouldn’t believe this. They thought that I simply knew nothing, simply wanted to deceive them. Or not say [*inaudible*]. Who do we have? Well, there are, of course, three or four important writers. Do you really think that we have lots of geniuses? No, it isn’t so. And there are even fewer of them left in France. But, in England there is [*inaudible*] Eliot, there’s Auden the poet, of course, there’s ... who else? Still alive, [*inaudible*], but most of them were old, of course, but ... there are people, but not many, I promise you. There’s a certain writer, Virginia Woolf, she’s a very fine writer. There’s the writer E. M. Forster – a good writer. When they asked about this ... Well, fine. Pasternak wasn’t interested in them, he only wanted to know how Herbert Read was getting along. He was some kind of art critic.<sup>3</sup> This was because, he said, Read was a personalist, and I too was a personalist, we were both personalists. I said: what exactly is personalism? It turned out that personalism was some kind of personal anarchism. More or less, that is to say [*inaudible*] ... the main thing is that it’s to do with the individual, his world – and that is the most important thing there is, and so [*inaudible*] he [Read?] was a real anarchist. When they gave him, when they announced his knighthood, he was almost expelled from the anarchist party, because they obviously did not approve of such titles, but they decided that this had been imposed [on Read] and so they didn’t expel him. But then ...

<sup>3</sup> Sir Herbert Read (1893–1968), poet and art critic, author of the seminal *The Meaning of Art* (1931).

INTERVIEW ON BORIS PASTERNAK

What more can I tell you about Pasternak ... After that he asked me to visit him again. Seifullina was there [*inaudible*], she told me about herself, we talked about the fact that there was a Soviet Encyclopaedia of Literature, which had long been in circulation, and in which nothing had been altered. She said: 'Here I am 30 years on, and 30 years ago they were saying: 'Seifullina ... Seifullina has been going through some kind of literary crisis ... That was thirty years ago. The crisis has continued for thirty years, as though I had never got over it.'

SHILOV Yes, she suffered great pain over it, and especially the accusation that she was not writing, that she wrote little. But she *was* writing. But she was very unlucky. During the war she wrote ... a story called 'The Green Ribbons'. But her heroine, a female soldier, who had accomplished heroic things, at that time had been imprisoned [*sense unclear here – may mean arrested/in Gulag? – presumably based on a true story*] and the story was not published. There were only galley-proofs. At about that time she also wrote, finished a play 'The Son'. It was quite a ... dramatic tragedy, with conflict between a son and his father, the father was a high-ranking party official. They asked her to make the father a lower rank. And [because of this] the whole play fell apart.

BERLIN It was a failure.

SHILOV Yes, and for this reason she didn't publish. And they said that she was not writing. But she was.

BERLIN But she didn't publish. The same thing happened with a lot of other people at that time. How much did Akhmatova publish at that time?

SHILOV No, Akhmatova right then, straight after the war, began to publish.

BERLIN In '41, in '40 something of hers came out ...

SHILOV Yes, her book came out in '43, in Tashkent [*inaudible*].

BERLIN Yes – yes, of course, yes.

LEV SHILOV

SHILOV And so they had started publishing her at that time. But then ...

BERLIN We know what happened, indeed we do.

SHILOV So then ... what else was discussed when you were with Pasternak and the others?

BERLIN Well, you know, I was with him quite a lot after that ... quite often. At Peredelkino...

SHILOV And in town too.

BERLIN Yes, I visited him in town. In fact I was at his apartment quite often ... he was always at home on his own or with his wife, and others, as you know ... we talked then about everything. He asked me questions, of course, about abroad, asked me about who was doing what, and so on. And he told me this story about his trip to Paris. But his account, I should point out, did not always tally with that of other people. This is how it was. There was an anti-fascist congress in Paris, I think, in '34.

SHILOV No, later, in '37.

BERLIN In '37, well, ok.

SHILOV In '36 maybe.

BERLIN Perhaps in '36.<sup>4</sup> Around that time, anyway. Very well then [*inaudible*]. The organiser was Malraux, he was no doubt a member of the [Communist] party. And they invited ... invited [Theodore] Dreiser, invited Robert Frost, invited Stephen Spender, Rose Manlerman [*later on spelt Manleiman or possibly = Manlehman*], all the liberal anti-fascist writers. But they didn't invite Pasternak. Then someone in Paris began saying, why not Pasternak? Then

<sup>4</sup> They're both wrong. It was June 1935 – the International Congress of Writers in Defence of Culture.

INTERVIEW ON BORIS PASTERNAK

Malraux, as he himself told me, Malraux, whom I had then come to know after the war, he stopped being a communist and became a ... [*I can't trace this word – degol'levets – but it's something to do with being left-wing*] 'You know, then, I was ... Pasternak, you know, was, Pasternak then, I understood, was not in favour... I sent him a telegram, a telegram ... I am absolutely in agreement with you. Pasternak ... need not be here at all, but as people here are asking for him ... I don't know how to explain to him why he hasn't been asked here, perhaps, it might be more convenient and tactful if you somehow or other invited him. It would be worth your while, and it would be better for us that way ... then we can show that Russia is sending all its important writers ...

SHILOV [Anna] Karavaeva was there, Mikhail Koltsov – significant writers, but not major names.

BERLIN [*inaudible*] But then Pasternak told me the following [*inaudible*]. Some kind of functionaries turned up, you know, some people [*inaudible*] probably from the government and they said to him: tomorrow you are going to London, there's an anti-fascist congress there.

SHILOV In Paris.

BERLIN In Paris, that is, excuse me [*inaudible*] excuse me, in Paris. There's an international congress there. Here's your clothes. And they gave him some kind of frock-coat, some kind of special one, the kind people don't wear any more. And a top hat. Because they thought then that this was what people wore at a [*inaudible*] congress. And he said: 'Listen, I can't, I don't know anything. I don't want to take part. I have nothing to say. What do you want of me? Leave me in peace.' – 'No, no, it's an order, there's nothing to be done, you're leaving for Paris tomorrow, you're going via Berlin, in Berlin you have the right to remain for 24 hours and take a look at whatever you want. And after Paris, you're going to London, and you'll return from there.' So he said: 'Very well. So be it.' And he went. I don't know whom he saw or didn't see, his parents [*lit. = here 'relations'???*], perhaps, or not. It's unclear. No, he saw someone. His sister perhaps? One of his two sisters? His parents? Whether he did or not, I don't know [*inaudible*]. He saw

LEV SHILOV

someone, then he went to Paris. Then he told me that when, in his memoirs, he related how he gave his speech and said: 'Ladies and Gentlemen, I know that you organised this [congress] in order to fight against fascism. Don't organise. Every organisation is death to art. There is no need to organise.' Malraux could not remember whether he actually said this or not. Rose Manlehman couldn't remember. Nor could Stephen Spender. But he [Pasternak] was convinced that he had said precisely this. Well, never mind, he gave some kind of speech, then he went to London. There he saw some man called Lomonosov, who was some kind of old friend of the family [*inaudible*], a Russian who lived in London. And then he went back by boat and shared a cabin with Shcherbakov, who had been secretary then of the Writers' Union, before he joined the Politburo.

SHILOV He was already by then an important party man...

BERLIN Yes, yes, of course, but not in the Politburo at that time, I think. And he said, that he [Pasternak] kept on talking, day and night, without ceasing, [so much so] that Shcherbakov begged him on his knees to stop, if only for a moment, that he wanted to sleep. But no, do you see, he talked endlessly, all day, all night. The exhausted Shcherbakov barely made it back to Moscow. That's how Pasternak told it. And then what else was there? Then I asked him 'What are you reading?' He says: 'I'm reading Proust.' I have no idea who sent him Proust. But he took great delight in him. I left some books or other in English with him, I don't remember which. I visited him once every two weeks in Moscow and talked with him about everything, I don't know now, can't remember what we discussed, what he said to me. You see, the conversation [*inaudible*] was a little strange, but then his mode of expression were extraordinary. He talked like a genius, but like a half-mad genius; sometimes it was impossible to understand anything, and sometimes it was absolutely astounding, fascinating, not like anything else ... He was more like a genius than anyone whom I have ever met in my life. In this respect he spoke animatedly. And he said some amazing things about literature, about everything. He said this to me: 'I made Shakespeare serve/work for me [*literally: but not sure of sense here*] – it wasn't published.' Things like that.

INTERVIEW ON BORIS PASTERNAK

SHILOV That is, he had in mind, the fact that he had translated ...

BERLIN He translated Shakespeare of course. Because he couldn't publish. Couldn't publish. He needed to earn a living. So, he translated Shakespeare, translated Goethe. Translated *Faust*, translated Shakespeare. It didn't come out [*wasn't published*].

SHILOV So that's all ... the meetings in '45 that is?

BERLIN That was in '45.

SHILOV And then you wrote to each other, you carried on ... [*inaudible*].

BERLIN No, no. We didn't correspond, but he, no, he, yes, he wrote to me, you're right about that. He did indeed write, he gave me his books with such very charming, friendly inscriptions to me, and then, I think, he wrote at least, I think, one letter to me. No, not a letter, he wrote a letter in Moscow, which I brought back with me. From Oxford I didn't write, didn't write to anyone, on account of the fact that this might compromise people in those times, as is abundantly clear. I didn't correspond with anyone [*in the Soviet Union*]. Nobody at all. Then I saw [*inaudible*] again ... in 56, when I went to stay with the British ambassador ... an old friend. And I then went to see him again in Peredelkino.. He had a whole crowd of people there. Neuhaus was there – his wife's first husband, then Andronnikov were there, he told all kinds of stories, then there were his sons by his first wife. This was all very nice, interesting and so on. And then he gave me *Zhivago*. He told me, that he had written this thing called *Zhivago* ... no, stop, I'm getting muddled, he'd already written two chapters in '45 ... they had been written. And for this reason he gave me them to take to his sisters in Oxford, which I did.

SHILOV Well this is very interesting, very important.

BERLIN In '45 two chapters had been written. I didn't read them. But I simply gave them, gave them to his sisters, and they put

LEV SHILOV

them away somewhere, and we didn't talk about this, I don't know what happened then. But by '56, you know, it had all, of course, been completed. By that time he had already given one copy to that Italian who took it to Milan, to Feltrinelli, who published it. He gave me the second copy, I knew nothing, knew nothing of what it was about. He said to me: 'You know, everything that I have written till now is worthless; it's all terrible. There is, I know, some there that you think, you couldn't think otherwise, you must think, that all of it is somehow, that all of it is somehow worthless, is artificial/counterfeit, that it's corrupted, that I just could not express myself. But this is the first work of which, in actual fact, you understand, I am proud. It is balanced, it's well written, clear, transparent; I want to give this to the world. Then they will know what I am and who I am [*inaudible*] ... of my poetry. But listen, I know that you will not say this to me, but I promise you, there is in it much, so to say, that is inaccessible, there are many worthless things in it [*presumably referring to his poetry*]. ... And when they talk about 'formalism' in it, perhaps they are even right in [*inaudible*] this respect.' I said: 'Who has an influence on you now?' He said: 'Who has influenced me, for example, many have influenced me. But I was once friendly with Mayakovsky. ' I said: What kind of man was Mayakovsky? – 'I did not love him [*i.e. here – was not close to him?*]' – he said – and he didn't love me. But we were friends, of course. And he had an influence on me. As a poet. We talked about things together, his influence, so to say, was enormous. But all the same, he was a human being, he was just a human being. The others were nothing but monsters [*presumably referring to the literary hacks of socialist realism?*] [*inaudible*]. But he was a human being, a real person, with a human soul. And because of that I could talk to him. But with the others it was much worse.' That is, he didn't say a single word about the others, but I knew to whom he was referring.

SHILOV As you may recall, he wrote with great enthusiasm about Mayakovsky.

BERLIN Yes, I know.

SHILOV And this meeting ...

INTERVIEW ON BORIS PASTERNAK

BERLIN He didn't say that to me. But, God knows, Pasternak probably, you know, everything changed for him, you understand, and everything got turned upside down, everything became different, it was impossible to say ... He was not very, you know ... sometimes, there was this kind of confusion going on in his head ...

SHILOV [*inaudible*]

BERLIN But just listen to his verse – it's still the most wonderful verse of the twentieth century. And you know, somehow or other he dragged this out of himself. It is not, it was not ... 'Here's *Zhivago* for you – this is my testament for the world. It is what I [*inaudible*] to read.' Very well then. I took it and read it all night, then and there, in Moscow. At the British Embassy, where I was living. It gave me the impression of being a thing of genius, a work of genius. There were people who said that it ... for example, Chukovsky said: 'You know, *Zhivago* is not even as good as his worst poetry.' People [*inaudible*] do not like it. But it had a staggering effect on me; it's possible, partly because I read the whole thing during the course of a single night. And then I read it again. Then I went to see him again. He met me again at his apartment [*inaudible*]. And I said ... Listen, then his wife said to me: 'Please persuade him not to send it abroad. But then in Italy ... he doesn't need to be published there. Listen, the children and I – we will suffer. They will persecute him for this here, they won't like it. There was some kind of idea that it would come out here, but that was absurd, they would not be able to publish such a book here. Convince him that it's a dangerous thing to do.' So I said to him: 'Listen, Boris Leonidovich, I shall take it with me, of course, I will take a copy of it. I will take these copies, you understand, and put them in a box and somewhere ... you understand, I will leave [these copies] somewhere – in Uruguay, perhaps, or in Iceland, in southern Japan, somehow or other, I don't know ... in different countries. I will bury it away somewhere, in the earth, you know, so that even if there's an atomic bomb it will survive. I swear to you, six copies, seven copies in different countries of the world, but you must not publish it.' He said: 'Why are you saying all this?' I said: 'Because

LEV SHILOV

of your wife here ...'. And he said to me: 'Oh, I see, she's spoken to you about it ... Listen, don't say such things to me, you do not have the right to tell me whether to publish or not. This is almost impertinent of you.' He told me ... Well, I've already [*inaudible*]. He said to me: 'I have spoken to my children, they are prepared for everything. They are prepared to suffer. If it comes to it, then so be it, we shall all suffer. An artist, you know, is always in danger. That is his lot. It cannot be otherwise.' And so I understood that, of course, I had asked something of him, as it were, that it had not been right to ask ... I took it in my hands, and went back to Oxford and there I gave it to his sisters. And then there were some other copies as well. I think that the translation in Italy was done from this [*inaudible*]. After that, you know what happened. He was very happy.

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