

ELENA VLADIMIROVNA DUSHECHKINA

(May 1, 1941 – September 21, 2020)

Elena Vladimirovna Dushechkina, historian of Russian literature and culture, professor in the Department of the History of Russian Literature at St. Petersburg University, passed away in St. Petersburg on 21 September, 2020. Her death was one of many painful losses the humanities in Russia have suffered during this terrible year.

Elena Vladimirovna was born on May 1, 1941 in Rostov-on-Don, into a family that, on her father's side, connected to the progressive traditions of the nineteenth century. Her grandfather, Ivan Ivanovich Dushechkin (1876–1950), of whom she sometimes spoke, had been a *Zemstvo* doctor in the Novgorod region and for many years headed a local hospital. Her father, Vladimir Ivanovich (1907–1977), a noted specialist in plant physiology, during the 1930s, worked at POSVIR (Polar experimental station of the All-Union Institute of Plant-growing) in Khibiny, Kola Peninsula and at other experimental stations. Elena Vladimirovna's mother, Vera Dmitrievna Fomenko (1908–1995), a secretary-typist by profession, was born in the Grodno region, but grew up in Rostov-on-Don. They married in 1936.

Following the start of the war with Germany, Vladimir Ivanovich was called up for military service; Vera Dmitrievna, together with her two daughters, Elena and her older sister Tatiana, and her mother, Domnika Moiseevna Domnitskaia, remained behind in Rostov-on-Don. The city was twice occupied by the Germans (the second time from June 1942 to February 1943). After it was liberated, in May 1943, the family moved to Krasnoufimsk in Sverdlovsk oblast, where the Institute of Plant-growing had been evacuated. In October 1944, they moved back to Khibiny, where they spent the rest of the war.

Vladimir Ivanovich returned to civilian life in the autumn of 1945. He first worked in Khibiny and later at the Maikop experimental station in Adygeya. Elena Vladimirovna recalled the varied landscapes of her childhood with fondness.

In 1952, the family moved to Estonia. Initially, Vladimir Ivanovich served as Director of the Institute of Agriculture of the Academy of Sci-

ences of the Estonian SSR (in 1956 reorganized as the Institute of Agriculture and Melioration of the Estonian Ministry of Agriculture). In 1957, he was transferred to the newly formed Institute of Experimental Biology of the Estonian Academy of Sciences, where he served as Head of the Department of Plant Physiology and Genetics. Both institutes were located in Tallinn.

A new period in Elena Vladimirovna's life began. After finishing her secondary schooling in 1958, she worked for four years in an electronic components factory in Tallinn. During this period she first enrolled in an extramural study program (*zaochnoe otdelenie*) at the Tallinn Polytechnical Institute, and then, in 1960, changed her subject and enrolled in an extramural program in the Philological Division of Leningrad University. With the factory behind her, from 1962 to 1966 Dushechkina studied full-time in the Historical-Philological Faculty of Tartu University, and was subsequently admitted to graduate study in the Department of Russian Literature. She then made a seamless transition from student to teacher; from 1972 to 1977 working as a senior lecturer in the Department.

In a February 2012 interview, speaking about her nearly forty years spent in Estonia, Elena Vladimirovna noted that "There were many mishaps, but there were also many strokes of luck. One of the most important – encountering Yury Mikhailovich Lotman" (Dushechkina 2012: s. p.). Dushechkina's study and teaching at Tartu coincided with the rise and florescence of the Tartu-Moscow (Moscow-Tartu) School. A unique atmosphere of intellectual exploration, far different from what generally prevailed at other institutions, brought together mature scholars (well-known researchers in their areas of specialization) with students in early stages of their education, many of whom went on to leave a lasting mark in scholarship. Numerous publications of Tartu University featured successful efforts to retrieve the legacy of Formalism, Prague structuralism, Bakhtin and his circle, and other marginalized or suppressed scholars, to apply new methodologies to the study of literature, other sign systems, culture as a whole, and to rediscover and interpret the rich culture of the Russian Silver Age. The years Elena Vladimirovna spent at Tartu shaped her as a scholar and a teacher.

When prompted, she would sometimes reminisce. Through her stories, at times slightly ironic yet loving, she recreated the *res gestae* of Lotman and Zara Grigor'evna Mints, of their colleagues, and of their many students.

While at Tartu, Dushechkina focused on Old Russian literature. Her early papers dealt with, among others, Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich (two of her articles on him from the 1970s were reprinted in Aleksei Mikhailovich 2015) and the Archpriest Avvakum. The principal academic advisor on her *kandidatskaia* dissertation, "The Artistic Function of Reported Speech in Kievan Chronicle Writing," was Dmitri Sergeevich Likhachev, Russia's leading medievalist. Dushechkina eschewed the traditional approaches to the chronicles, which either treated them as sources for historians writing about the East Slavic tribes, or focused on the history of a given text, seeking to trace it back to an earlier original. Instead, she approached the chronicle genre as a "literary phenomenon, a fact of verbal art" (Dushechkina 1973: 65). In studying the functions of *chuzhaia rech'* ("reported speech"), so plentiful in the Russian chronicles, she successfully combined the results achieved by medievalists (Likhachev, I. P. Eremin) with the new analytical apparatus being developed in the writings of Lotman and Boris Andreevich Uspensky. She defended her dissertation at Tartu in 1973, with Uspensky and Lev Aleksandrovich Dmitriev, a senior specialist on the history and textual study of Old Russian monuments, serving as her opponents.

While at Tartu, Dushechkina met and married Aleksandr Fedorovich Belousov, a folklorist and literary scholar. In 1977, they moved to Tallinn with their family and, from 1977 to 1990, they both taught in the Department of Russian Literature at the E. Vilde Tallinn Pedagogical Institute. During her time there, Dushechkina was highly active as teacher and scholar. Her publications from that period, like those of Belousov, mostly appeared in small print-run collections featuring the work of both Department staff and colleagues from other institutions. Typically, these were presented as "pedagogical materials" (*uchebnyi material, metodicheskie razrabotki*). Dushechkina's experience of teaching Russian literature to students, for whom Russian is a second language, informs several articles in which she discusses individual poems. Some of these

were on texts by Tiutchev, whose work she again turned to years later. A fine example from the 1980s of her ability to interpret a poetic text in a sophisticated yet accessible manner is her discussion of Nekrasov's famous "Yesterday, at six o'clock..." ("Vcherashnii den', chasu v shestom...") (Dushechkina 1983: 28–49; reprinted: Dushechkina 1996). Her teaching experience in Estonia also stood her in good stead much later, when she found herself in classrooms in the United States facing students with varied knowledge of Russian and of Russian culture.

For both Elena Vladimirovna and Aleksandr Fedorovich, the Tallinn Institute proved an environment in which they could give free rein to their talent for the organization of science and for stimulating discourse in different disciplines. A number of conferences brought together both leading and younger scholars from Moscow, Leningrad, and other cities. At the same time, thanks to the cooperation of the Institute press, they published a number of important collections and monographs (see: Utgof 2015: 195–214).

Work on medieval Russian literature led Dushechkina to a new area of research and writing – calendar prose – with Yuletide tales (*sviatochnye rasskazy*) as a principal subset. She moved into that study in stages, starting with a concise (93 pages) publication on a 17th-century secular narrative, the "Tale of Frol Skobeev" (see: Dushechkina 1986), subtitled "Pedagogical material on Old Russian literature." The major part of the monograph is devoted to a historical-philological discussion of "Frol Skobeev." In the last part, however, Dushechkina argues for treating "Frol Skobeev" as an early example of an oral Yuletide story. She concludes with a programmatic appeal stating that "This genre of oral narrative art, at present mostly forgotten, gave birth to a persistent tradition in 18th–20th century Russian prose which still awaits someone to research it" ("eshche zhdet svoego issledovatel'ia") (Dushechkina 1986: 85).

Dushechkina herself took up the challenge, a decision that would lead her to produce a body of pioneering investigations into Russian culture. She embarked on an ambitious program of collecting examples of calendar prose and bringing them into the purview of both scholars and a broader reading public. She first published a small anthology of "pedagogical materials for a specialty course" (Dushechkina 1988) which

included both oral tales and selected stories that had appeared in print during the 18th and 19th centuries. This was followed by a selection of stories set in St. Petersburg (see: Petersburgskii 1991) published in the series “Petersburg Light Reading,” as well as another, broader anthology (see: Sviatochnye 1991). Two years later, a much larger volume, which opened with folkloric memorata and ended with texts from the Russian émigré press of the 1920s–1930s, was published by what was then a major publisher (see: Dushechkina, Baran 2013). The book found its readers. The entire print run of 50000 copies (!) was sold out, and has since become a source for pirate editions: the sincerest form of flattery.

Dushechkina’s research into the origins, evolution, poetics and historical-cultural contexts of the Yuletide story was presented in several articles and culminated in a *doktorskaia* dissertation, defended in December, 1993 at the Department of the History of Russian Literature of St. Petersburg University. Her monograph (see: Dushechkina 1995), based on the dissertation, explores the role of folk oral narratives, of 18th-century reworkings and the expansion of the genre in the early 19th century, of the influence of Charles Dickens, of the role of Yuletide tales in the popular press of the late 19th century, and of the varied uses of the genre during the Silver Age and beyond. According to one review, the author “brings to the surface enormous layers of previously untouched material” (Maiorova 1996: 411). Further on, the reviewer praises both the “specificity of the study, the detailed argumentation behind each observation” and Dushechkina’s readiness to put forward “the broadest possible generalizations,” elaborating that “She has shown convincingly – and in this, perhaps, lies her main achievement – that not only folkloric tradition, but entire strata of written culture ‘are oriented on the calendar cycle’” (Ibid: 412).

In October, 1990, the Belousov family moved from Tallinn to what just a year later would become St. Petersburg. Dushechkina initially worked as an associate professor in the N. Krupskaya Institute of Culture. In 1992, she started teaching at St. Petersburg University’s Department of the History of Russian Literature, where over the years she taught courses and specialized courses and seminars at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, and advised students on yearly papers, diploma

essays, M. A. theses and *kandidatskaia* dissertations. In 1999, she was awarded the rank of professor in the Department.

The 1990s brought Dushechkina opportunities to teach outside of Russia. During April – May of 1990 she was a visiting lecturer in the Slavic Department at the University at Albany, SUNY, returning to Albany as a Fulbright Lecturer during Spring, 1992, and again in Fall, 1994. In the fall of 1996, she was a visiting professor in the Slavic Department at the University of Kansas (Lawrence). Over the years, she also taught specialized courses and conducted seminars at Daugavpils Pedagogical University (1998, 2001), at Tallinn University (1997–, various semesters), at the University of Joensuu (Finland), and other institutions.

During the 1990s, Dushechkina, together with the author of this obituary, prepared several publications on the history of Slavistics. These were based on materials from Roman Jakobson's archive at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and focused on his correspondence with the folklorist and literary historian Petr Grigor'evich Bogatyrev (1893–1971), the linguist Sergei Iosifovich Kartsevskii (1884–1955), and the historian Aleksandr Vasil'evich Solov'ev (1890–1971). Baran and Dushechkina did further work on Kartsevskii's biography and intellectual legacy. Two articles based on this research appeared; regrettably, a nearly-ready volume of Kartsevskii's unknown or little known literary and publicistic writings remained unpublished.

As Dushechkina noted in the preface to her next monograph, her scholarly interest in the “Russian Christmas tree” (*russkaia elka*) “arose in the mid-1980s, when I began to study the history and artistic characteristics of the Russian Yuletide story” (Dushechkina 2002: 5–6). In her new book, based on a vast body of folkloric, ethnographic, and literary materials, she described the role of the fir tree in Slavic pagan traditions, the limited impact of Peter the Great's calendar reform on the holiday tradition in Russia, the growing popularity of celebrations involving a Christmas tree and their treatments in 19th and early 20th-century literature, the assault on the Christmas tree tradition during the early Soviet years, the “rehabilitation” of the fir tree as the Soviet New Year's tree, and the spread and popularity of the holiday tradition in the later Soviet period. As always, Dushechkina's prose is both precise and

highly readable. She fully succeeds in making the book informative and interesting for both specialists and a wider readership. Not surprisingly, the first edition sold out quickly. A second, revised and expanded edition (2012) and a third, corrected and expanded, edition (2014) sold out as well.

Dushechkina had long been interested in problems of onomastics. In yet another monograph linked to her previous writings on Yuletide traditions and literature (Dushechkina 2007), she focused on the name *Svetlana*: absent from the Russian Orthodox calendar. The name is entirely artificial, purely literary, and entered Russian culture early in the 19th century thanks to Vasily Zhukovsky's famous ballad "Svetlana." In her book Dushechkina traces the fascinating cultural-historical "life" of this name, which at first (starting in the mid-19th century) was frequently given to naval vessels, industrial plants, and other objects. Subsequently, during the early Soviet period, where new "ideologically correct" names were being invented, it came into widespread use, including among members of the Soviet elite – Svetlana Allilueva, Stalin's daughter, is the most famous example of this practice. As Dushechkina shows, by the mid-20th century, Svetlana became one of the five most popular women's names; however, two decades later its popularity declined, in part, perhaps, because it was overused and too common.

A reviewer of the monograph paid the author an unusual yet very appropriate compliment stating "E. V. Dushechkina's book is, I repeat, systemically attractive, with all its contents, in addition to everything else, it poeticizes philological and culturological searches" (Dmitrienko 2008: s. p.).

While working on the Russian Yuletide story, Dushechkina had paid considerable attention to Nikolai Leskov, who was a master of the genre. In recent years, she published several articles on the writer (for example: Dushechkina 2017: 179–85). Among her new articles on other topics a study on a rhetorical formula that emphasizes the sheer size of Russia ("From the White Sea to the Black Sea") (see: Dushechkina 2015: 167–82) is particularly noteworthy.

Most recently Dushechkina returned to the text which proved the starting point of her lengthy and impressively fruitful exploration of Russian calendar prose and traditions – "The Tale of Frol Skobehev." She

published a revised, significantly expanded version of her original study (see: Dushechkina 2018). A review of the monograph acknowledges her past efforts and lauds her new accomplishment. After noting that the “Tale” had been studied by distinguished scholars of the late 19th – early 20th century, as well as by such outstanding philologists as Lotman and Aleksandr Mikhailovich Panchenko, the reviewer hypothesizes that “it undoubtedly took considerable courage for the author of the republished book to have made this unusual literary monument the subject of her scholarly interest and to have been able to say something about it, something previously unnoticed.” As for the new monograph, it “is created in the best traditions of academic scholarship and is an example of a classical historical-philological study of a monument” (Savel’eva 2019: 226).

In the last three and a half years of her life, Elena Vladimirovna, previously a tower of strength for all around her, found herself confronting various medical problems. In spite of that she continued teaching to the end, completing all the work for the spring semester in 2020. Starting in August, her health deteriorated rapidly. She passed away at home – a home which had been open to so many friends, colleagues and students – with her closest family members at her side. She is survived and mourned by her husband, Aleksandr Fedorovich Belousov, by her children, Ekaterina and Sergei, and their families, by her sisters, Tatiana Velitskaia and Irina Reyfman, and their families. Elena Vladimirovna’s many students, colleagues, friends and readers – both in Russia and abroad – share their grief.

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