



PODSTROCHNIK: TRANSLATION BETWEEN THE LINES (Part 1)

Susan Welsh

Film:

Подстрочник. Лилианна Лунгина в многосерийном фильме, режиссер Олег Дорман (Podstrochnik. Lilianna Lungina

in a multi-part film series directed by Oleg Dorman), 2009
15 TV broadcasts, 5 hours 20 minutes. Only “bootleg”
DVDs are available, plus online postings, such as:
http://video.mail.ru/mail/bubich_vera/1432/1431.html

Book:

Подстрочник. Жизнь Лилианны Лунгиной, рассказанная ею в фильме Олега Дормана (Podstrochnik. The life of Lilianna Lungina as told by her in the film by Oleg Dorman)

An edited transcript of the film, but with about one-third additional material.

Moscow: Izdatelstvo Astrel, CORPUS, 2009; 383 pages, hardbound, \$24.95

No index, but a searchable copy is at
<http://lib.ololo.cc/b/211635/read>.



Director Oleg Dorman’s 16-part TV series *Podstrochnik*, which explores the life of literary translator Lilianna Zinovyevna Lungina (1920–1998), has created quite a storm in the world of Russian literature and television. Interest in the film was further heightened when, on September 25, 2010, Dorman rejected the TEFI-2010 prize—the equivalent of the Emmy—awarded to him by the Russian Academy of Television, charging, in an open letter, that members of the jury and other leaders of the TV industry were personally responsible for the fact that the film languished for 11 years before seeing the light of day. These same people, he wrote, are among those who have made television “the main factor in the moral and social catastrophe of the past ten years.... They have no right to award a prize to *Podstrochnik*. Lilianna Zinovyevna’s success does not belong to them.”

The reasons for the 11-year stall have not been fully elucidated. Whether due to bureaucratic indifference or politically motivated malice, or both, the film was ignored. Sometimes Dorman was told by TV producers, “I watched it at home, I liked it; but the public doesn’t need it.” Lilianna Lungina died on Jan. 13, 1998, just five months after the filming, and never saw even a minute of this marvelous work.

Journalist Leonid Parfenov, whose intervention, along with that of writer Grigory Chkhartishvili (better known by his pen-name Boris Akunin), finally convinced Rossiya TV to show the 16-part series over four successive nights in

July 2009, writes in his foreword to the book that TV producers deemed it financially too risky to show the film. “You know how it is, they said, you know what mass audiences will think about an old Jewish lady.”

Well, what did they think?

The fact is people loved it. Many of the viewers were young, exactly the audience that Lungina and Dorman hoped to reach. *Izvestia*’s Irina Petrovskaya titled her article “An Extraordinary Miracle” (July 10, 2009). Maiya Belenskaya at *Novaya Gazeta* called it “one of the best documentary films in the history of Russian-Soviet film,” and urged that it be shown in schools (March 5, 2010). Parfenov and others remarked on the superb quality of Lungina’s Russian language. The book, which has sold 80,000 copies, was #1 on the bestseller lists in Moscow and St. Petersburg for 3–4 months, and was voted the best Russian non-fiction book of 2009 by readers at OpenSpace.ru. Dorman himself told *Izvestia* that had he seen the film as an ordinary viewer, he would have “been wild with joy and ready to live forever in a country that has such people in it” (February 1, 2010). And Dorman reported that a young Russian woman living in Europe had posted this message to the blog of Zhenya Lungin, Lilianna’s youngest son: “The way my life has been going lately, I was about to put an end to it. I was that close. And suddenly, I heard your mama on television. Believe me, I am not hysterical and not crazy. But I have to tell you that your mama saved me” (interview on the website Jewish.ru, February 2, 2010).

A Unique Story

Many fascinating memoirs have been produced by Lungina’s generation in the Soviet Union—the World War II generation, the generation that lived through the Stalin years, the gulag, the “thaw” and its aftermath, and the collapse of the USSR. The rich fare includes Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s classic *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (not a memoir, but close), Evgenia Ginzburg’s *Journey into the Whirlwind* (“Крутой маршрут”), and many more. But Lungina’s story is quite different.

For one thing, she did not go to the camps. By some miracle, neither she nor her close family members were ever arrested. Her father was a Communist Party member, for whom, by 1937, arrest was perhaps *more* likely than for those who were not. Her mother feared the Bolsheviks and never joined the Party. Lilia and her parents had lived abroad, had relatives in Palestine and friends in Europe, and spoke several languages: not good things on your CV during those years, as Stalin’s repression and xenophobia

Continued on page 14

grew stronger. But she was never arrested, and so she had the experience of current events and “normal” everyday life that nobody can have who is confined for 10 or 25 years in prison or a forced labor camp.

Therefore Lilianna, a keen observer with a phenomenal memory, tells a side of her generation’s story that Ginzburg or Solzhenitsyn did not experience, and her story is every bit as gripping as theirs. It seems that she knew “everyone” in the Soviet intelligentsia, at least its literary domain, and many who were in the “dissident” camp. And she does not hesitate to name the names of erstwhile colleagues on the other side of the moral divide. (Could that have something to do with why her film was put on the shelf for so long?)

But more profoundly, Lilianna’s story conveys an entire sweep of history, in a century of unimaginable trauma but also efforts to achieve a better world, to be truthful, to create artistic beauty, to develop science and technology for the benefit of man, to raise living standards, to achieve peaceful cooperation among nations. Having lived in Western Europe as a girl, fluent in at least four languages, educated to treasure the best of European and Russian culture, and with an abiding love of her fellow man, she is a universalizing and inspiring personality. This quality of her soul shines through the twinkle in her eye. It is this universal humanity that draws the audience close, especially young viewers who are searching to find universal principles and meaning, in a world where these intangibles seem in very short supply.

Who, then, was Lilianna Lungina? Born Lilianna Zinoviyevna Markovich (1920, in Smolensk), she describes herself, with a characteristically impish chuckle, as a “German girl” or later, a “French-Jewish-Russian girl.” Her father, an engineer and Communist, had learned German in a World War I POW camp. He was sent to Berlin in 1925 to promote trade, and the family lived there until their daughter was 10. But when Lilia’s father brushed aside the warning of an anonymous visitor not to return to Russia and did so for what he thought would be a brief interlude, he was forbidden to leave. Lilianna’s mother, fearful of what the future held, refused to go. She remained abroad with Lilia, mostly in Paris, until she finally rejoined her husband in 1934. She knew that neither of them would leave the USSR again.

After high school, Lilia attended the prestigious Institute of Philosophy, Literature, and History (IFLI), where she met many young people who would become leading lights of the Soviet artistic world. At each step along her way, she was blessed with excellent teachers and made lifelong friendships. She married filmmaker Semyon Lungin, and they had two children, Pavel and Yevgeny (“Zhenya”). The 48-year marriage was zestful, merry (*весельный*), she says, even at the financially and politically worst of times. She became a famous translator, from Swedish, French, and German into Russian (best known are her translations from Swedish of Astrid Lindgren’s classic stories for children,

Karlsson on the Roof and *Pippi Longstocking*). As the dissident movement emerged and went through its various phases, the Lungin home became an informal meeting place for an independent-minded set of political and literary friends.

A Few Highlights

What, then, makes Lungina’s tale so special? Here are just a few highlights:

- Her arrival with her mother at the Soviet border in 1934, at the age of 14, returning to Russia from Paris. Entering the train station, she sees with horror that the floor is covered with the bodies of people dying of starvation. “Mama, I don’t want to go. Let’s go back. I’m afraid, I don’t want to go on,” she says. And Mama replies, “We’re on the other side of the border, darling, we’re in the Soviet Union now. There is no way back.”
- Her interrogation at the Lubyanka prison while still a student at IFLI in 1939. Several of her schoolmates have already been arrested. She receives a call at home from the school’s *кагэбэшник* (KGB agent), asking her to come to school immediately to do a translation from French. She protests that she has the flu, has been in bed for a week with a fever. He insists and sends a car for her. She asks for the French document; there is none. An “absolutely faceless young man” appears: “Come with me.” They drive to the Lubyanka. She recalls the elevator ride up six, seven, maybe eight floors, the long corridors with identical doors: no numbers, no markings of any kind; one door after another, one corridor after another. She is taken to a room where suddenly another “faceless” individual appears, her interrogator, who presses her to become an informer against her teachers and fellow students. She refuses. To her surprise, she is released. Leaving by elevator again, she looks down the shaft and sees that there are 8-10 more stories below ground: “terrifying!”
- Her evacuation from Moscow, at the outbreak of World War II, to Naberezhnye Chelny. When they arrive, no one will rent them lodgings, because local residents are suspicious of Muscovites. Lilianna learns, to her amazement, that the Terror had not been confined to the big cities. Here there is not a single family, whether Russian or Tatar, that does have one of its members in prison. Finally the Markoviches find a woman who will give them a room in exchange for personal belongings—not money. “What good is your money to me?” She wants shoes, then a dress, then a sweater. “And when we have nothing left?” Lilia asks. “Then you leave,” was the reply.

To be continued.

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