

Report to the Board, Moscow 1999.

Following the board meeting of Russian PEN on the last day of my visit to Moscow a most remarkable event in the history of Russian PEN took place on Dec 3rd 1999. The proud but definitely back-yard fairly decrepit 2-story building where Russian PEN has its home played host to a visit by Russian PM Vladimir Putin.

On first contacts, Putin had said yes to meet the board and members of Russian PEN when told of the oncoming Congress, and welcome to the White House. Sascha said no, - you come here. Thus agreed, if nothing else but by surprise, PM secretary and security knocked on the door of Russian PEN on the Wednesday. Rather taken aback by the realities of derelict Moscow behind the front row of redecorated architectural masterpieces of Moscow, they next day sent in a squad to clean up the back yard entrance, sweep up leaves and snow, block off all the busted windows of the forlorn adjoining building, and hang a shroud of provisional green-net protection to screen off yet another crumbling wall.

The screenery thus protecting the scenery in classical Russian style, Putin himself arrived next day on the Friday at 19.15, only 15 minutes late after a full day in the Duma. Russian PEN's 3 x 5 main room was crammed i.a. with 2 tame state TV cameras. Arkadij Vaksberg chaired, and the board and prominent members of Russian PEN attended, including all staff and a few guests – myself, Johan Oberg with wife, Eugène Schoulgin, and Irina Iurna from Ford Foundation – a very smart move by Sascha.

On the way in, Putin had side-lined to Sascha that he was surprised at the humble office standards – probably unwittingly comparing with Author Union localities - to which Sascha replied that that was what reality was all about – and why he had wanted Putin to come to PEN and not the other way round.

A slightly difficult to believe session followed. Putin – given his KGB-qualities of undercover experience – played very low-key. His brief opening statement was, with his half-shy smile, an invitation to dialogue. Arkadij gave a ten-minute introduction to PEN and values, Sascha added on, and the dialogue got underway. Issues brought up with open frankness by consecutive members included Chechnya, KGB in present-day Russia, impassioned pleas about poverty and non-existent pensions among writers, and many other questions. Sascha asked about environment-linked so-called spy cases, and introduced Grigorij Pasko – an incredibly nice-mannered unassuming person –who now was sitting only two seats away in front of the PM. St. Petersburg PEN reminded about Nikitin. Putin referred to process of law, which he could not influence, but that of course led to further reflections on military legal systems. But the PM saw eye to eye with a name he certainly had heard of.

All the time, Putin listened the speakers out without interrupting, then earnestly but unassertively stated his own case or his own opinion. Arkadij looked at his watch, but Putin allowed more time. The members became obviously more and more impressed by his style, if not

by all responses he gave. Arkadij requested short questions, which seemingly had very little effect as the writers got their steam up – and Putin listened, under the continuous gaze of his TV-cameras. Well, someone mentioned afterwards that KGB was known to be very good at listening, but the PM continued well over two hours. As the meeting came to a close around nine-twenty, many gathered around Putin to get a final word across, or smilingly shake hands. Much would surely reach the media, but as I understood it the members had no reason to be ashamed by the questions they raised, and the PM had stood his ground. Maybe mutual respect, if not shared opinions, could summarise the feeling after the meeting.

I think that Russian PEN surely can feel proud of this meeting. A brave initiative led to a historic meeting between free intellectuals and a PM who seemed very well informed, had good ability to handle honest and intensely felt questions, and seemed bent on taking people seriously.

Sascha had in his own opening lines said that Putin had not been invited because the Russian PEN wanted anything – they only wanted the PM to meet members and listen. This accomplished who knows – more may follow. By the time of the Congress we will at least know what happened in the short run.

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