

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

NPC-10

Moscow, U.S.S.R.

1 September 1985

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I.

Westerners often conceive of daily life in the Soviet Union as an unending grind of limited choices, long queues, and few good times. As with all stereotypes, this one is both true and untrue. Much of the merrymaking goes on at home, at friends' apartments, or in private halls of restaurants or clubs, and so is less visible. Instead, we see the aftermath on the streets at night and, not surprisingly, call it alcoholism. Since the liquor restrictions of June 1st, however, Russian gatherings have become considerably more subdued. Official functions are attended by fewer people and tend to break up earlier. Celebrations at home can prove to be a different kind of headache for the hosts, as queues for vodka at the remaining liquor stores number fifty to one hundred people (more on Fridays) by the new 2:00 p.m. opening time. As determined drinkers develop new skills and expertise in acquiring vodka on a regular basis, the dry law is gradually becoming "demi-sec" (polusukhoe): one encounters a taxi driver whose car trunk cannot be opened to carry suitcases; one hears of a place located a brief bus ride beyond the Moscow Ring Road, where the queues are shorter, and so forth. The most desperate Muscovites resort to liquor substitutes, such as eau de cologne, either mixed with wine to increase its potency or drunk straight. One disreputable young man behind me in a food queue pulled a cologne bottle from his jacket pocket, took a healthy (or unhealthy) slug, and squirreled it away again, letting out a long, odiferous sigh of satisfaction down the back of my neck. When liquor does appear on the table in friends' homes, it is much more treasured than it was three months ago. The small supply of Russian white lightning (samogon) or Georgian homebrew (chacha), now illegal either to make or to possess, is brought out only on special occasions. What has surprised me is the almost universal approval I have both heard and overheard in conversations about the anti-alcohol measures. "It's long overdue," said one taxi-driver, stopping to pick up an additional passenger, a young man from the Merchant Marines with two sackfuls of wine bottles, "Alcohol is ruining our young people."

II.

To their admitted surprise, many Russians here are finding that special occasions in friends' homes can be bearable despite the absence of alcohol. At

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least as important to their sense of well-being, especially with winter coming on, are the foods bought at one of the many farmers' markets throughout the city. These markets, the best being the Tsentral'nii Market near the Old Circus, or Cheremushkinskii Market near the University, are outlets for collective-farm laborers and city workers who have been allocated small private plots on which to grow produce in their spare time. Although the plots are usually less than an acre, they are estimated as being about forty times as efficient as collective farm lands, although they constitute only about one per cent of the total agricultural lands.

For those Muscovites who can afford to spend rubles rather than hours, the market is a bounty of pears from the Crimea; walnuts and green apples from Moldavia; grapes and dried apricots from Central Asia; ripe tomatoes from the Ukraine; rose hips, plums, lettuce, coriander leaves, hazelnuts, dill pickles marinated in cherry leaves or estragon and sold from huge wooden barrels; soured apples, vats of sour cream, honeycombs transported in painted wooden boxes; blocks of farmer's cheese; bunches of horseradish leaf, blackcurrant twigs, dill flower and dill weed, bound with thread for pickling tomatoes and cucumbers; pumpkin seeds and sunflower seeds, three-foot long melons, bright orange mushrooms.

The meat section of the markets is less appetizing to those Westerners who are used to tidy, plastic-wrapped cuts of beef. Whole sides of meat under mountains of salt can be found on good days. At other times, the meat section seems to consist largely of spare parts: pigs' tails and hooves, chicken legs, rows of calves' heads with protruding black tongues, goats' heads with the horns still attached, rabbits, their furry feet dangling pathetically over the counter, pigs' heads split open to show the skull cavity, everything except what middle America thinks of as meat. As if to complete this Kunst-kammer at the Tsentral'nyi Market, a tiny old woman, stone deaf and blind in one eye, begs kopeks from the meat-shopper. Here and other places that beggars occasionally appear--churches, trains, underpasses--they are treated generously and kindly by the Russians. Virtually every passer-by gives her coins, for which she convulsively bows and crosses herself, muttering blessings on the giver.

However generous the experienced Muscovite may be to the beggar, she is unwilling to part with her cash for fruits and vegetables until the price has been bargained down, the merchandise handled, sampled, and thoroughly criticized. Cloves of marinated garlic and their long, scallion-like shoots, also marinated, are tasted, considered, and scorned before the purchase can take place. Pinches of marinated cabbage, dabs of honey on tiny squares of waxed paper are handed out; forkfuls of eggplant filling are passed from one mouth to the next. One Baku woman, particularly proud of her spicy sauces, thick, peppery adzhika and the thin, sweet tkemali, doles out dollops of each straight onto the palms of potential buyers, who lick their hands clean and discuss the ingredients. One Moscow dandy outlasted the rest of us in arguing about the perfect combination of spices for tkemali, pitting his worldly sophistication against the seller's local expertise.

The object of particular abuse at the Central Market was a rose-seller, who had flown in from the Caucasus to sell his pink, salmon, and lavender roses

for two rubles apiece. Caucasians are infamous for their ability to supply luxury items year-round at outrageous prices. One woman after another, attracted by the flowers' tight, fresh heads and long stems, asked the price and turned away in disgust at the answer. Meanwhile, the old Muscovite down the counter, selling tired roses, their heads bound together with matching thread so as not to be noticed, received no such abuse for his charging three rubles, and was doing a good business.

While we buyers are a fairly homogeneous lot--harried, urban women trying to save time--the sellers are a wide spectrum of social types. Charlatanism, provincial craftiness, and naive ingenuousness are all here, side by side. Although the buyer must count her change and watch her pockets, she will also encounter the elderly collective-farm woman, head turbaned in numerous faded kerchiefs, feet in heavy rubber galoshes despite the heat, selling crocheted doilies for hopelessly few kopeks. One metal-toothed plant-seller solemnly warned me that the fragile flower on the plant I was admiring was tied on with thread: "It's just a model, honey, to show you what the flower will be like," she explained, "I don't want to fool anyone." One hefty peasant woman, astride a creaking wooden crate, doles out consistently inaccurate change from a grey rag, held together with safety pins; she also doles out advice on how best to cook the long, green squash (kabachok) that she sells. A Central Asian spice-seller, wearing the characteristic black-and-white tiubeteika cap, gives each customer an extra pinch of every spice for good measure; customers' children are given dried berries to chew. For me, visibly pregnant and, in the spice-seller's eyes, too pale, he had medical advice as well: I should steep the rind of a pomegranate in boiling water and use the red liquid to wash my hair. It will restore energy, keep my blood pressure at the right level, calm the nerves, and relieve headaches. To his credit, he didn't even sell pomegranates.

While shopping at the market saves time, it can cost the buyer easily four times the prices charged in state stores. Small green tomatoes selling at fifty kopeks (sixty cents) a kilogram in state stores are sold in the market for two rubles (\$2.40). Larger, juicy tomatoes can cost from three to six rubles in the most expensive Central Market. Green peppers, sixty kopeks (seventy-two cents) a kilo in state stores, sell for two to four rubles (\$2.40-4.80) in the market. Grapes sell for eighty kopeks (ninety-six cents) in the state stores; in the market they range from four to seven rubles (\$4.80-8.40) a kilo. Given these prices, it is not so surprising to hear Muscovites speak of spending seventy-five per cent of their income on food alone.

Anyone concerned that the spirit of private enterprise might wither away under the conditions of real, existing socialism need only spend some time talking with those who work at these food stalls. One young man is saving up to buy a condominium; he spends his vacation time working on a collective farm, where he asks to be paid not in rubles but in pears. Loaded with suitcases of his "earnings," he travels up to the Central Market in Moscow. Another entrepreneur spends three nights on the train from Tadzhikistan (thirty-four rubles to Moscow, plus an extra ruble if you want a cot) to sell his apricots; he could fly, of course, but the profits would be lower. An Azeri woman comes up from Baku

on the train with a huge pot of spicy, stuffed eggplants; her son, a Moscow resident, picks her up at the station and she sleeps in his kitchen. A Georgian woman leaves her three children with her mother-in-law in Sukhumi and comes to Moscow to sell loufas. For those unlucky enough to lack relatives with a Moscow residence permit (propiska), the larger markets provide dormitory rooms, five to six people per room, and—when it works—a common shower. A near-by cafeteria supplies meals. Most of the people with whom I spoke were matter-of-fact about the inconveniences and lack of facilities; the cycle of providing Moscow with grapes and relatives back home with Moscow sausage, clothing, and factory-made goods has become an integral part of their lives, a way of keeping in touch with dispersed family members, seeing the big city, and stocking up on stories to tell. Still, these "in-comers" (priezzhie) are often resented by Muscovites, who complain that the time they save buying vegetables at the market they lose in line for shoes in downtown stores crowded with provincials. Even during the Youth Festival last month, when the city was closed, train tickets to Moscow severely curtailed, roads monitored, business trips not granted, provincial sellers still managed to get as close as Tula, from which they could take a commuter train into the city.

Oddly enough, these itinerant sellers were singularly lacking in curiosity about foreigners. Unlike the shopkeepers, taxi-drivers, and booksellers one encounters, these travellers have no interest beyond the rudimentary questions: what country are you from? what are you doing here? The only exceptions were two Central Asian men in the Bakuninskii Market. They were curious about two things in particular: did I come from America by train or plane? and did I happen to have one of those fancy disposable cigarette lighters they could have?

III.

I wasn't frightened. I'm never frightened of elemental disasters—thunderstorms, bombing raids, or angry men.

—Irina Grekova, "Ship of Widows"

In her bag were fresh vegetables—radishes, parsley, carrots, lettuce. They were moist, fresh, young, and green. She had bought them not at a stand, but in the farmers' market. Expensive at the market, but for that reason good. She had to feed Lialka—Lialka was getting pale.

—Irina Grekova, "One Summer in the City"

It is precisely in the market that one finds the wide range of Irina Grekova's characters: stolid, plodding nightguards, middle-aged, fashionably dressed research specialists, broad-faced, kerchiefed peasant women. If one can judge from snatches of conversation, these women come to the market not because they

have money to spare or something to celebrate, but to add something fresh and green to an otherwise heavy diet, and to ensure that their children have some kind of fresh vegetable periodically during the winter: dill weed to sprinkle on solianka soup, grated carrots, chopped scallions with the meat course.

Grekova, the pseudonym of Elena Sergeevna Ventsel', is a chronicler of the lives of older women, in particular that last generation of women to have some conscious memory of historical events bringing about Soviet Russia. Born in 1907, she was a young girl at the time of the October Revolution, an adult woman at the height of the purges, a mother of three children by the end of World War Two. Grekova is also a highly-skilled mathematician, a specialist in probability theory holding a Doctor of Sciences degree, considerably more advanced in rank than the American Ph.D. Her literary pseudonym, in fact, is the mathematical term in Russian for an unknown quantity. Grekova taught at the Zhukovskii Military Air Academy in Moscow until 1967, when her grim portrayal of Red Army soldiers in the short story "On the Testing Grounds" ("Na ispytaniakh"), published in the Moscow journal New World (Novyi mir), so disturbed military officials that it led to her resignation and re-assignment to a non-military institution; the journal itself was refused distribution among military personnel. Grekova continued both to write and to publish, but has stayed out of literary controversy and politics.

Thus, while not a well-known writer, Grekova's name is not new to active readers of Soviet literature. Her first story, "Beyond the Gate" ("Za prokhnodnoi"), appeared in July 1962, also in New World. She was soon affiliated by literary critics with the Young Prose group,² despite the fact that she was then already in her mid-fifties. Since 1962, her stories have appeared only occasionally, and yet her name is invoked over the years with respect and encouragement by such incompatible critics as Lakshin, Svirski, Dobin, and Edward J. Brown.

The renewed interest in Grekova's work, both here and in the West, is principally due to her novella "Ship of Widows" ("Vdovii parakhod"), the story of five women living together in a communal apartment during the War.³ Although of very different social backgrounds and professions, the characters have three things in common: their gender, the events of the War, and the fact of widowhood. The novella focuses on the life of the youngest of them, Anfisa Gromova, not yet widowed at the outset of the novella. Anfisa works in turn as a loader in a factory, where she met her husband, Fedor; as a nurse at the front lines, where she goes in search of Fedor once the War breaks out; as a childcare worker in a state orphanage, where she supports and cares for her illegitimate child, Vadim; and, last, as a nursery school teacher in Vadim's school. When Fedor, presumably drunk, is killed by a tram, Anfisa is left to bring up Vadim alone, thus becoming the last woman to board the widows' ship.

Anfisa's migrations from one low-paying service job to another always have as their goal additional service to husband or son. It is the latter of these two, the son Vadim, who provides a clue to a puzzling contradiction, of which older Soviets speak with frustration and despair: how can it be that the War- and immediate post-War generations of children, brought up in conditions of

appalling poverty and deprivation, are composed of such self-engrossed and spoiled individuals? While to some extent the question reflects the eternal complaint of the older generation against the younger, many feel it is not simply that. And perhaps there is something to be said for the older generation's confusion at the extent to which the living examples of self-sacrifice and compassion, without which survival would not have been possible under war conditions, failed to inspire in the next generation a comparable response. As one older woman put it, "I thought early childhood experiences were supposed to be formative; how can a child be both deprived and spoiled?" Anfisa's doting on Vadim and her efforts to shield him from deprivation only increase his expectation that he deserved better than those around him; as Anfisa's efforts at self-denial could not consistently provide him with a confirmed sense of superiority, he grew up to be an increasingly angry, brooding young man. Only at the end of the novella, when Vadim is called back from the virgin lands by the news of his mother's stroke, does he step out of the role of angry child and takes on the only other role with which he is intimately familiar; he becomes the self-denying parent to the now incapacitated and infant-like Anfisa, unable to speak, walk, or care for herself in any way. To the outside world, that is to say, to the four remaining widows, he is still the resentful child; to Anfisa, he reflects back the same unflagging care he had known as a child, as if to keep her alive by becoming the person she used to be. The novella ends with Anfisa's death and burial by Vadim and the four widows, who in losing one of their own are, in a sense, doubly bereaved.

While Grekova's work has aroused discussion East and West, the underlying sources of that interest are very different from one another. With the novella's appearance in 1981, Grekova became for the Soviet reader the primary depicter of women's experiences of the War, both at home and at the front. "Ship of Widows" was soon rewritten as a two-act playscript by Grekova and Lungin, and staged in 1984 at the Mossovet Theatre as part of that institution's contribution to the Fortieth Anniversary of the end of the Great Patriotic War, as it is known in this country. As a play, "Ship of Widows" clearly affiliates itself with such works as Roshchin's "Echelon" ("Eshelon"), about the war-time train evacuation of women and children. Not only the subject matter--women's wartime experience--and the title--again, the metaphor of travel--but even the staging of "Ship of Widows"--a boxcar series of rooms in a communal flat--is reminiscent of Roshchin's play. And yet, where Roshchin's work becomes a collection of female types enacting a politically contrived text, Grekova's motley crew of women manages to keep its audience's attention throughout the play. "That's how we lived," commented one woman, now working as a secretary in a large downtown office, "arguments over the gas burner, intimate living conditions with the oddest combinations of women; Grekova shows what war conditions were like for the civilian population, namely for the women."

Indeed, Grekova's greatest strength lies in her ability to maintain distinctly different speech patterns among her five widows. The cultured speech of the novella's occasional narrator, Ol'ga Ivanovna, is immediately distinguishable from that of Pan'ka, the fitter; from the untutored speech of the heroine, Anfisa; from the thespian gushings of operetta singer Ada; from the religious archaisms of Kapa, the nightguard. Grekova's "perfect pitch," as one critic has called it,⁴ for the distortions of literary Russian spoken by the semi-

educated urban-dweller is inherited from the humorist Zoshchenko, and shared by such writers as Il'f and Petrov, Shukshin, and the young prosaist Evgenii Popov. In addition to this chorus of women, the novella is enriched by a device that caused considerable controversy when it first appeared, namely a double narrator. Begun in the first-person narrative from the viewpoint of the educated Ol'ga Ivanovna, a music teacher, the narrative switches without warning to an omniscient narrator, able to provide the reader not only with information to which Ol'ga is not privy, but also with less than flattering views of Ol'ga Ivanovna by her working-class neighbors. The story shuttles between first-person and omniscient narrators, each alternately seizing control of the story, even self-consciously correcting each other:

[Ol'ga Ivanovna] probably felt that Vadim despised her as well. By now Ol'ga Ivanovna had stopped loving Vadim...

No, I hadn't stopped loving Vadim; in some way, he was still dear to me all the same.⁵

Unfortunately, this double narrative is lost in the playscript version. Instead, Vadim alternates as voyeur of his childhood and participant in the drama, thus calling attention to generational, rather than to social divisions within the kommunalka. Moreover, the playscript takes as its opening scene the widows' wake for the dead Anfisa, which occurs only at the novella's end, again, emphasizing the replacement of one generation by the next.

Amidst all the pomp and rhetoric of the past year, Grekova's play was one of the few productions that breathed both life and artistry into that all too frequently represented period of Soviet history. In addition to her play, for which she is currently best known to Soviets here, a collection of her stories, entitled The Department (Kafedra), after the lead story in the volume, has also recently appeared, her first since 1966, a year before her run-in with the military community.

In the West, on the other hand, interest in Grekova focuses on her as a neglected or even undiscovered woman writer, whose only translated work before 1983, "Ladies' Hairdresser" ("Damskii master"), appeared ten years earlier in Russian Literature Triquarterly. I think it is no exaggeration to suggest that, for the Western reader, all women prose writers from this country are undiscovered. While translations and critical discussions of twentieth-century Russian literature have introduced the American reader to the poetry of Tsve-taeva, Akhmatova, and Akhmadulina, prose in translation has remained, despite its richness and variety, a male realm. Now, in the past two years, three English translations of Grekova's works have appeared, the most significant of which is Cathy Porter's translation of "Ship of Widows," published as a separate volume by the feminist Virago Press.⁶ It is to be hoped that, as Grekova approaches her eightieth year, other women prose writers--Baranskaia, Varlamskaia, Katerli--might also gain the readership in the West that they deserve and that only good translation can bring about.

I suppose the most interesting aspect of working in contemporary literature is the fact that one is constantly confronted with living contradiction among the three components of literature: the text itself, the writer's intentions, and the text's various receptions by culturally heterogeneous audiences. In contemporary studies, an understanding of these contradictions is not a matter of constructing a set of assumptions from surviving texts in a central archive,

but rather of making sense of dispersed materials and hotly defended opinions, some of which are not yet in writing, yet no less relevant for all that.

However much the Western feminist may claim Grekova as belonging to the tradition of feminist writers, and however much one might marshal support from the texts, Grekova herself is firmly and volubly opposed to the women's movement, feminism, or any other referent, no matter how circumspect, to women's attempts at influencing traditional relations between the sexes. In a recent telephone conversation, Grekova spoke to me with some bitterness about the Western "mis-perception" of her work, in particular the English translation of "Ship of Widows." I, having examined Porter's translation, myself misperceived what was at issue and defended the Virago Press edition. The problem, Grekova broke in, was not the translation itself, but the entire context in which the work is presented, a context that thoroughly distorts both the novella and Grekova as a person; Porter, for example, praises Grekova as one of a very few women Doctor of Sciences in the Soviet Union. In fact, Grekova asserted, there are many such women, too many. The current lamentable state of advanced technical research institutes is due to the preponderance of women scholars. What is needed to break loose from this "women's authority" ("zhenskaia vlast'") is a men's liberation movement, not a women's movement. Until that can be brought about, there is little hope for change. What is being depicted in the original "Ship of Widows" and other works has nothing to do with feminism, nothing whatsoever. The feminization of men: that is the real danger today. And besides, what is this "Virago" Press? "Virago" means a shrew, a quarrelsome woman; why would the Press choose such an unpleasant name?

This, I thought as I listened, is one of those arguments not worth pursuing unless one has two weeks to spare and a lot of patience. Having neither, I only suggested that the Press undoubtedly intended to shock its readers into reevaluating the word "virago," in the same way many words having to do with labor and the working class were reevaluated after 1917. I do not think she even heard me.

It is unlikely that Grekova could be convinced of the value of an alternate reading of her works, one that exists independently of the author's intentions. The concern for women's experiences and sympathy for the hardships that women bear in Soviet society is nonetheless present in her work as early as 1965 in her short story "One Summer in the City" ("Letom v gorode"), quoted at the outset of this section. In "One Summer" the elderly heroine, upon discovering that her grown, unmarried daughter is pregnant, relates to the young woman her own long-ago attempt to obtain a then illegal abortion, an attempt that ended unsuccessfully (or successfully) with the birth of her listener, the daughter. Such concern for women's experiences can also be discerned in her numerous stories and novellas about single mothers; about women whose very survival depended upon the support of other women; women whose congenital defect is their plain-spokenness, a source of unending difficulties in their dealings with men; and even, as in the case of the neighbor Polia in "One Summer," women who are irredeemably but engagingly misandrous ("the only thing you get from a man is the stink; without his half-liter he's no good. I'm better off going to church...").

Grekova, it must be granted, is an uneven writer. At her worst--the novellas "Little Garusov," "The Hotel Managress," "The Department," "Thresholds," and the short story "In the Train Car"¹ --she is unrelentingly unimaginative in her story-telling technique. There her writing resembles what Volodya has dubbed "commuter-train lit" ("elektrichnaia literatura"), the chief characteristic of which is continuous, flat narrative, ensuring that the reader, in the crowded conditions of the commuter train, never need leaf back through the book to pick up on a complex plot, a shift in point-of-view, et cetera. At her best, Grekova is one of the few promising writers of the early sixties who survived both the mid-sixties crackdown on literature and the grey Brezhnev years without political pandering; and has managed to produce a number of works that deserve to remain in the canon of Soviet literature. Even as severe and anti-Soviet a critic as Grigori Svirski acknowledges, "Grekova's is a genuine talent...we may expect to hear from her again."


Nancy Condee

¹For brief, but informative discussions of the private-plot system and farmers' markets, see John N. Hazard, "Legal Policy in the Soviet Union," The Soviet Union in the 1980's, ed. Erik P. Hoffmann (New York: The Academy of Political Science, 1984), 64-65; Hedrick Smith, The Russians (New York: Quadrangle, 1976), 7, 199-200, 207.

²The Young Prose writers (molodaia proza), including Andrei Bitov, Fasil' Iskander, Vasilii Aksenov, Vladimir Voinovich, Anatolii Gladilin, and Iurii Nagibin, came into prominence in the early sixties. Their name refers both to their age (most were in their late twenties and thirties) and to their frequent appearance in the Soviet journal Youth (Iunost'), then edited by Boris Polevoi. Their work was characterized by its thematic concern for young people's problems, and by its stylistic devices--multiple narrative, mixed genres, non-standard speech, including youth slang--not present in the works of their immediate predecessors.

³Irina Grekova, "Vdovii parakhod," Novyi mir, no. 5, 1981. Reprinted with useful linguistic analysis in Sovetskie liudi segodnia, Serie I (Textes litteraires), Fascicule I.8 (Paris: Institut d'etudes slaves, 1983). A communal apartment, or kommunalka, is a sub-divided apartment. In the best of conditions, each tenant, couple, or family is housed in one of the rooms. Toilet, cooking, and (if available) washing facilities are shared among the tenants, as are cleaning duties. The tenants of each kommunalka must work out their own modus vivendi with each other regarding gas burners, cooking hours, common property, noise, visitors, and payment of common expenses, by person or by room. As one can well imagine, this results in endless feuds, bickering, threats, petty and not so petty retaliation. A prevalent form of urban living until very recently, kommunalki are now disappearing in Moscow. From conversations I have had with low-income women, it would seem that virtually no one of their acquaintance now lives in a Moscow kommunalka, although they do, of course, live with multiple generations in small apartments. In Leningrad, at least in my experience, kommunalki are much more common.

⁴G. Khmel'nitskaia, "Mera chelovechnosti," Neva, 2, 1982, 170.

⁵Grekova, Sovetskie liudi segodnia, 55.

⁶Grekova, Ship of Widows, tr. Cathy Porter (London: Virago, 1985).

⁷Grekova, "One Summer in the City," tr. Lauren Leighton, The Barsukov Triangle, the Two-Toned Blond, and Other Stories, ed. Carl R. Proffer and Ellen-dea Proffer (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984), 264; original Russian, see Novyi mir, no. 4, 1965.

⁸"Malen'kii Garusov," Zvezda, 9, 1970; "Khoziaika gostinitsy," Zvezda, 9, 1976; "Kafedra," Novyi mir, 9, 1978; "Porogi," Oktiabr', 10-11, 1984; "V vagone," Literaturnaia Rossiia, 26 August 1983.

⁹Grigorii Svirski, A History of Post-War Soviet Writing; The Literature of Moral Opposition, tr. Robert Dessaix and Michael Ulman (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1981), 331.