

DOCUMENTARY II

A LETTER FROM THE "MOST LOYAL SON"



Very few letters have been preserved from the correspondence between Shostakovich and his friend, the musicologist Lev Lebedinsky. One of these rarities is presented here and commented by Sweden-based Per Skans, who is also the translator.

Actually it is little surprise that there aren't more letters from Shostakovich to Lebedinsky, given that very few were written in the first place: the friends did not live far apart and would normally meet in person, and as often as several times a week. The need for writing letters generally arose whenever Shostakovich was in a rest home, at his dacha near Leningrad or in hospital. Many of their meetings took place in Lebedinsky's apartment, and they were subject to considerable curiosity on the part of the secret police. Mariya Konisskaya, Lebedinsky's widow, tells how in 1956, after they had moved to a new apartment, "those upstairs" (a common expression meaning the authorities) asked the family to move out for a few days, since their apartment "was needed". The "need" had allegedly arisen because some criminal gang in the vicinity had to be observed - from that particular apartment! The Lebedinsky couple were even offered those few days in a luxury hotel at the expense of the State.

It is obvious why the authorities "needed" the apartment. They had forgotten to install monitoring devices - in plain English, bugging microphones - and now wanted to remedy this oversight. Mariya Konisskaya told the hilarious account of how she absolutely refused to vacate the apartment, pointing out that there still were several empty apartments in the same house, and how the agent who was trying to persuade her abandoned his original relatively polite attitude, stating menacingly that there had been some really bad people in the

Gestapo, and that: "They were not at all patient." Clearly meaning that 'we are more patient than the Gestapo - but don't strain our patience too much.'

It is remarkable, even admirable that the Lebedinskys did not give in. It is not too bold a guess that they would not have dared to assume this position three years earlier, when Stalin's shadow was still present; but even in 1956 their attitude was courageous.

In 1993, Lebedinsky's widow offered a few of the letters from Shostakovich for publication, and they were printed in *Muzykal'naya zhizn'* 1993:23-24. The letter presented here is typical of the small collection. Mariya Konisskaya's words about their style is worth quoting:

The majority of these letters are written in that strange language, which someone termed "double-speak". One thing was written, and the exact opposite was meant. A camouflage. You know, for many years we had been fearing omnipresent eyes and ears.

It has often been pointed out that Shostakovich mastered this kind of language to perfection. To understand the letter here it is not necessary to be familiar with Kochetov's novel he cites, nor indeed with Zhdanov's article. The interesting thing is the virtuosity with which he conveys his message, which might be: "have you read this - what a piece of garbage!". His way of speaking was very common in the USSR. If one disliked something intensely, one praised it to absurdity. Whenever the presence of a censor's eye or a hidden microphone was suspected, the wisdom of the leadership was wildly eulogised, though rarely as ludicrously as here. The letter proves that Shostakovich was also well familiar with other languages, in particular the bombast of official

Soviet writings and speeches. Moreover, by including a number of the most common set phrases he almost devilishly deprives the censor of anything that could be turned against him. It is easy to imagine the degree of teeth-grinding with which a zealous, keen and ambitious censor might have read the text (in fact probably did read it), the sarcasm of which is so obvious, yet so untouchable.

A few words about Yuri Zhdanov. He was the son of the "real" Zhdanov (Andrey), whose intelligence he seems to have inherited, though he chose to use it in other, less controversial ways. Soviet encyclopedias usually referred to him as a chemist, and his greatest achievements were in this field (involving advanced medication for various cardiac conditions), but his first dissertation was presented (in the fateful year of 1948) at the faculty of philosophy. His speciality there was in social and political problems, but he also was very interested in cultural matters, and the not disturbingly modest title of one volume in his truly enormous output is "The Essence Of Culture" - one would assume that his father had inspired, perhaps even tutored him on that subject. In later years he was appointed Chancellor of the University at Rostov-on-Don. Oh yes, let us not forget that in 1949 Yu. Zhdanov married Svetlana Stalin (Alliluyeva), allegedly on orders from the Leader and Teacher, in this particular case also Father-In-Law. The marriage was however not a long-lasting one.

"Criticising Stalin is like spitting into one's own face!" Thus Vsevolod Kochetov managed, probably involuntarily, to characterise his own personage in only nine words, and it would indeed seem that this sentence was the most valuable literary feat achieved by someone whose mediocrity marked a

milestone - even among the bootlicking wing of Soviet writers. He also was one of the most ardent combatants in the "struggle against cosmopolitanism" and, as if anti-Semitism had not been enough, he was one of the initiators of the campaign against Anna Akhmatova and Mikhail Zoshchenko. In spite of, or more probably because of this, he was appointed leader of the Leningrad Union of Writers. In 1955-59 he was editor-in-chief of the *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, but after it had lost half of its readership, he was dismissed. His political position was nevertheless so strong that he in 1961 was appointed editor-in-chief of the journal *Oktiabr*, whereupon a saying made its round among the population: "Now all journals have wished their readers 'S novym godom', except for *Oktiabr* who has wished 'S novym gadom'" (roughly a Happy New Year and a New Rat, respectively). Another nasty saying was the claim that the Peking newspaper *Renmin Ribao* had

praised him as a "true Maoist" (at the time the USSR and the PRC were on extremely bad terms). And in a parody by the famous writer Sergey Smirnov, who became editor-in-chief of the *Literaturnaya Gazeta* soon afterwards, his novel *The Yershov Brothers* was called *The Yezhov Brothers*, as a clear allusion to Stalin's infamous Great Terror butcher Yezhov.

In his own words, Kochetov represented the "great Marxist truth" in its struggle against *Novy Mir* and its editor-in-chief Aleksandr Tvardovsky. After reading *The Yershov Brothers* the latter said: "I am stunned by this piece, or rather because such a 'phenomenon' is possible in literature", adding with disgust that "if this is literature, I cannot do anything about it, nor can indeed all good people." Kochetov's writings in general can be seen as examples of "partynost", i.e. adherence to the party line at all costs.

Kochetov eventually committed suicide.



One word concerning the postscript of the letter, where Shostakovich praises Yu. Zhdanov's knowledge of Latin. It has been pointed out to me that this innocent little remark may not at all be innocent: Anna Akhmatova, who had been persecuted by the political leadership during many years, was famous for her superb mastery of Latin.

Before we turn to the letter itself, let me express my sincere thanks to the brilliant White Russian musicologist Marina Demina at the State Music Library, Stockholm, and to Magnus Ljunggren, Professor of Russian literature at Gothenburg University, Sweden, who have rendered me great help in evaluating (and devaluating...) Messrs. Zhdanov and Kochetov.

Moscow, September 7th, 1958

Dear Lev Nikolaevich,

Quite often you reproach me for working too little on myself, for studying too little the classics of Marxism-Leninism. There is some truth in your reproaches. But "Whose cow would moo, and whose would remain silent?" [1], as our native Russian popular proverb says. I, too, for example, have often caught you not reading the newspapers. For this reason I have taken a cutting from the "Literaturnaya Gazeta" of January 6th, 1958, No. 107 (3918), a magnificent article by Comrade Zhdanov (Yu). You have of course already read the novel "The Yershov Brothers" by Kochetov. The article by Comrade Zhdanov (Yu) is a brilliant appraisal of this capital and revolutionary, purposeful, progressive, anti-reactionary, positive novel. Comrade Zhdanov (Yu) really turns out to be a worthy follower of the immortal directives of Comrade Zhdanov (A). This is not surprising. You see, he is the flesh and blood, the son of A.A. Zhdanov, whose radiant image has been preserved so lovingly in the hearts of those involved in music. In the article by his worthy son the radiant image of the late A.A. Zhdanov appears before those involved in music in yet another new and splendid form. Judging by the article by Yu. Zhdanov, the radiant image of his father appears to those involved in music not only as a prominent Marxist, a true student and a comrade-in-arms of Lenin and Stalin; not only as an eminent person involved in music, a thinker, a philosopher, a pianist; not only as a fighter for the immortal ideas of Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin; but also as a superior educator. An example of this, and a brilliant example, is his son Zhdanov (Yu). I can only say: if there only were more of these outstandingly brought up young people. So therefore I am sending you this cutting to remind you that you do not always read newspapers.

Yours, D. Shostakovich

P.S. And what an educated person, Yu.A. Zhdanov. How superbly he knows Latin!
D. Sch.

[1] As can be seen, the Russian proverb that Shostakovich quotes is a charming but for us rather unintelligible locution about mooing cows and their silent sisters. I am grateful to Gary Goldberg for helping me to find an English equivalent, which would be "the pot is calling the kettle black." A little less poetically, one might also say: "Who are you to say...?"

