25 March 2011

Dear Publisher:

Enclosed please find tear-sheets of a review (or reviews) of books which your company recently published and sent to us for review. These are from the April 2011 issue (Vol. 70, No. 2) of The Russian Review.

We are grateful for your continued commitment to keeping our readers abreast of the latest scholarship in the field of Russian studies, and we hope to continue to receive review copies of any books related to Russia.

Sincerely,

The Staff of The Russian Review
merely talked about it. Pyman carefully traces the genesis and evolution of this attempt and to
imbed it in Florensksy’s historical period and intellectual milieu. She shows how Florensksy fits into
the emerging modernist culture of his age and how his relations with key figures of the time (Andrei
Belyi, the Merezhkovskys, Sergei Bulgakov, Vasily Rozanov, Viacheslav Ivanov, and others) shaped
his world view, just as he shaped theirs. The reader not only develops empathy for Florensksy’s
achievements and setbacks but also “grows” intellectually with him. Pyman provides a fresh
perspective on the Silver Age in her probing exploration of the dialogue between traditional
ecclesiastical culture and the spiritually adventurous intelligentsia; this is one of the major
contributions of this book.

To her biography of Florensksy Pyman brings the same thorough and meticulous research that
characterizes her other work. Although her work depends primarily on published sources, she
nevertheless succeeds in eliciting the distinctive features of Florensksy’s thought and locating him in
time, place, and mind. She provides clear and thoughtful expositions of both Pillar and Ground of
Truth and the uncompleted “On the Watershed of Thought,” exploring Florensksy’s search for
“complex, eternal reality beyond the law of cause and effect” (p. 77) and his theory of “antonyms”
(that is, antinomies), such as divine providence and free will, which seem irreconcilable in the
world, but not in eternity. She demonstrates how hard this religious philosopher struggled to develop
a holistic system “which opened up the possibility of faith to the educated scientific mind” (p. 84).

Pyman’s skill in life writing is manifest not only in her careful blending of events and ideas, but
also in her often poetic turns of phrase and occasionally nostalgic tone (appropriate to her subject
matter). She successfully eschews hagiography (for which many readers will be grateful) and instead
crafts a living portrait out of the many strengths and weaknesses of one of the most complex minds
of his time, a mind that was idiosyncratic, humble, proud, stubborn, enigmatic, vulnerable,
unconventional, endlessly curious, tenacious, and so on—all at the same time.

Scholars of the period will also appreciate the detailed chronology of Florensksy’s life
(pp. 183–210), the extensive glossary of biographical names (pp. 211–47), and two short appendices
(the first addressing critical responses to Pillar and Ground of Truth, the second on the figure of
Sophia and Sophiology). The text is enhanced by twenty-one family photographs. Historian Geoffrey
Hosking, the doyen of British Slavic studies, provides a larger intellectual context in his “Foreword”
to Pyman’s work.

Pavel Florensksy: A Quiet Genius tells the story of an extraordinarily gifted individual whose
intellect, empathy, and spiritual striving even the Stalinist purges could not eclipse. It brings the
extraordinary life of Russia’s last Renaissance man to the attention of the wider readership it deserves.

Maria Carlson, University of Kansas


Boris Pasternak: Pis’ma k roditeliam i sestram was the title of a two-volume Russian edition that
appeared in 1998 in the Stanford Slavic Studies series, and also of an edition by Novoe Literaturnoe
Obozrenie in Moscow in 2004 containing virtually all the surviving Pasternak family correspondence.
Like these editions, the present English-language version was prepared by Evgeni Borisovich
Pasternak and his wife, and it reflects their own editorial commentaries and abbreviations and a
further judicious selection by translator Nicolas Pasternak Slater that highlights the life and art of
Boris rather than providing all-around family coverage.

Although letters passed sporadically between Boris and his family as early as 1907, the
correspondence that began in 1921, after the parents and sisters left Russia, had a unifying wholeness,
continuity, and richness of content, effectively replacing as it did almost all other communications
among an otherwise close-knit family. Nevertheless, apart from a gap in 1922–23 when Boris and
his wife visited the family in Berlin, correspondence was increasingly riven by interruptions and
lacunae, and overshadowed by guarded statement: the almost uninhibited exchanges of the 1920s continued against a background of oppression in Stalinist Russia, compounded by the jeopardized position of Jewish immigrants in the Third Reich after 1933. Ingenious solutions included occasional resort to correspondence in French and German (to divert and placate Nazi and Soviet postal censors); the pernicious Nazi regime was encoded as “your landlady’s sickness”; and Boris’s elaborate historical references and foreign wordplays alluded to the arrest of relatives and friends, with oblique (and possibly misapprehended) attempts to warn the Pasternak parents against returning to Soviet Russia. After the family’s eventual resettlement in Britain in 1938, wartime postal and telegram contacts were sparse, and a brief postwar relief was followed by an almost complete communication blackout until 1956. Then, in the later 1950s, correspondence was blighted by the Zhivago publication and Nobel Prize affairs, and ensuing persecution of Pasternak, leading to new nedoszczæzannostî, despair of further possible meetings, and resort to couriered messages. Thus, toward the end of the book, meaningful family exchanges are partly overtaken by a saga of frustrated communication, whose fascinating and disturbing details are filled in by helpful editorial annotations. In fact, Pasternak’s work on Doktor Zhivago and the Shakespeare and Faust translations became a cryptic form of communication that partially supplanted exchanges of thought and idea with his family after these were stifled by postal censorship and an all-pervading sense of fear.

This collected family correspondence takes us beyond the well-known peripeteia of external events that can be gleaned from biographies of Pasternak. Reading the letters, one retains a strong sense of the family nature of their messages, and of common interests, concerns, and a unique spiritual kinship that overrode long years of separation. Continuous leitmotifs are Boris’s artistic plans and ambitions, and his unflagging admiration of the artistry of his parents, particularly his father. Individual traits of character also emerge, including an unusual similarity of temperament between Boris and his sister Josephine, and the wisdom, ironic detachment, and intelligent affection of Leonid as head of the family.

Letter writing was for Boris a natural extension of artistic creativity, as in his famous correspondence with cousin Olga Freidenberg and others. Family letters, however, including one fifteen-page monster in 1932, were also a vehicle for tortuous and often storm-ridden processes of private thought and feeling. This extended to an obsession with his son Zhenya’s freckles, a peculiar dislike of his own Jewishness (evidenced also in Zhivago and elsewhere), and some amazing emotional self-indulgence in recounting his passion for Zinaida Neuhaus while commanding his family to continue loving his wife Zhenya as before. We thus get a glimpse here of the baffling Nachtseite of a marvelous creative personality.

The letters have been splendidly translated by Boris’s nephew, Nicolas Pasternak Slater, who as a family member has a natural empathy with all the correspondents. His particular achievement lies in fluently reproducing the angular argument, waywardness, and unusual expression in many of Boris’s letters. Preparation and production of this volume are virtually without blemish. Letters and commentary are enhanced by a preface from Lazar Fleishman, an introduction and translator’s note from Nicolas Pasternak Slater, a set of family genealogical charts, and several photographic illustrations (some from family archives and printed here for the first time). The whole book makes a fascinating read—even for a reader familiar with the original Russian texts.

Christopher J. Barnes, University of Toronto


This book explores the friendship between Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky that transcended “guild solidarity or intimate fraternity.” Engaging an array of sources including private correspondence, interviews, lectures, and her own memories, Irena Grudzińska-Gross traces the poets’ parallel lives and their relationship, beginning with Miłosz’s letter welcoming Brodsky to the