

## Tatyana.

*My visit to Tatyana Kazakevich in Yaroslavl', June 1996*

Down metal steps from the road bridge over the River Kotorosl'. Then the three of us make our way through tall grass, buttercups and cow-parsley to one of the most beautiful churches in Russia and the one with the highest number of depicted figures in the world, ten thousand of them: the Tolchkovskaya church of John the Baptist. We climb its broken steps. The doorwoman lets us in – not only to the restored *papert'* ('parvis'? – more than a porch: a curving corridor all round, with murals from floor to ceiling) – but also (because Tatyana is a well-known art historian) through the heavy inner door to the church itself, which for many years has been under restoration. The tall walls, immense columns, dark roof – all are covered with hundreds of damaged frescoes. Everywhere in the half-dark there are ladders, scaffolding, pots of something, heaps of ancient decorated tiles, and dust: an atmosphere of abandon. Where are the restorers – maybe gone for months?

With no wasted words, Tatyana takes over. "Depicted here is the life of Christ": she tells us the year, the artist's name, the names of his helpers, the names of the restorers, and mentions some details in the series of pictures. "Here you see him . . . and here . . ." Then, with a wave to the right: "And here the life of Saint John, starting with the story of how it was announced to Zachariah, his father, that an extraordinary child would be born to him, and Zachariah was struck dumb until the first word he uttered after the birth, the child's name: 'Ioann' " . . .

Probably Zachariah pronounced the name in a loud voice. Tatyana is very far from dumb. Her voice is huge and stately. Reverberant, confident, magnificently loud, it is an elemental voice, the sound of an unexpected passion; it has something in it of a stormwind and downpour; it mounts with aspiration. "Here is the head of John the Baptist", she thunders in the lonely church, "found by a ploughman as he ploughed his field, which bled fresh blood for many years and performed miracles. Here is the sea-dragon feeding on humans which the bleeding head of John drove back for ever into the sea . . ." The resonant strong depictive voice is becoming part of the church, as if it is, itself, a wall of icons, a column, a blue-red-ochre speaking space. Now Tatyana disappears, then calls out to us: "Come in here!" and, feeling the walls, we follow her into the pitch-dark cavity of a chapel. "Feel this!" We put our hands on a dimly perceived stone pillar, slender and crumbly with ornament, presumably beautiful. Tatyana seems ecstatic. Her voice, like that of somebody once struck dumb but suddenly eloquent at the sight of the extraordinary, booms and spreads in the thick shadow.

Then out into the sunlight and a flood of greenery. Tatyana shows us the multiple lace of brick, the finely pointed porches, the network of gold crosses high up on the cupolas that

glitter in the sun, and, on the red brick walls, the triangles sketched in pale yellow to suggest gleaming jewels, so that the eye cannot rest but slants left and right, up and down, and the whole church (of brick) seems a glowing jewel.

We climb back onto the bridge and walk towards the apartment blocks. Walking between Olga and me, Tatyana is suffering. Staring, not outward but inward, breathing hard, anguished and concentrated. "You'd better have a rest." "Inside me, I live all this", she says. She is lost in the seventeenth century. She looks unwell.

Tatyana is a short thickset woman of sixty: the top of her head reaches my chin. She says she is short because of undernourishment in childhood. She says all sorts of things about herself. For example, that twenty years ago someone strangled her in the street at night, nearly to death, and so squeezed her neck that her brain was forever affected. For this she takes tablets every day which, she says, make her feel faint.

On my third morning with her she announced: "You and I are not washing ourselves. Now we must wash." I obey her and have a bath. When I'm in the kitchen she comes in, in her nightgown, with voluminous underwear over her arm: "These are my clean knickers and vest which I'm going to put on." Mildly and with a childlike communicative smile, wanting me to share her cleanness.

Tatyana tells me she knows that she is rather strange. One day, she says, she shouted through the window (nine floors up) that all the icons were being destroyed, and people came and took her away to a hospital, but they ought not to have done so, as she was perfectly well, just upset. She seems to live with many inner pressures and sadnesses. Yet her smile is like some soft creature creeping up out of deep undergrowth; an antique, fleshy, radiant, loving smile.

On my first evening, Olga and I sat with Tatyana in her kitchen, getting to know each other. We sit, Tatyana stands at the table, squat but vertical, gently laughing. We keep looking towards her, wanting her as the silent guide to our conversation. "Tatyana is laughing!" I say, and Olga asks: "Why are you laughing, Tatyana?" "I'm not laughing, I'm in a good mood."

It is quite difficult, being Tatyana's guest. She does not leave me alone but comes into the bathroom when I am bathing, to point out yet again the towels and the *mochalka* (loofah). She always has something more to say, and says each thing robustly without introductions or explanations. The first time I stayed with her (two years ago) she woke me early in the morning to show me a photograph of her long-dead husband: "My husband was a good man. Look at him."

Tatyana took me to Uglich, the town where, in 1591, the Tsarevich Dmitri, youngest son of Ivan the Terrible and heir to the throne, was – probably – murdered. In Uglich, in the church of 'Tsarevich Dmitri on the Blood', we came across the Director of the Uglich museums, a youngish pleasant quick-speaking man, Viktor Erokhin. He knew Tatyana well

and stood talking with her for a while. All museum directors and iconography scholars know her. She is a celebrated icon expert and is said to know the Russian seventeenth century better than anyone else. Towering tall and handsome above her, Viktor talked away, while she stood thick and low in her dark clothes, her large creased smiling face looking upward, delighted. Then she told him about our visits to churches, about me, my work, my children, my habits, and I thought, any moment now she will tell him I had a bath today.

Viktor had picked some sprigs of jasmine and, seeing us, he divided them and gave us a sprig each. When we left the Uglich Kremlin, we laid the sprigs on a bench in the woods there. Later, having walked all over the town and visited its monasteries, we returned and there they still lay, unfaded and fragrant, not taken by anyone. We went and sat on another bench high above the Volga, near the 'Dmitri' Church and again met Viktor, and Tatyana confidently told him at length about the jasmine: it seemed to gain importance from her big ponderous voice which could have been narrating historical events or cataloguing paintings in a crypt.

Tatyana's walk is slow and heavy but very upright. Carrying with her another century and her drug-controlled excitement, she moves along pavements like a short square exclamation mark propelled into motion. I asked her how many kilometres she thought we had walked that day – I thought it might have been eight or nine. "Fifty", she said with complete certainty.

Tatyana has published many learned articles, is finishing a 200-page contribution to the Yaroslavl Encyclopedia of the Arts, preparing a collection of her scholarly notes and essays, and planning to write a monograph on the artist Fyodor Ignatyev. "This will take the rest of my life."

Yet in domestic circumstances she is helpless, defenceless. Dima, an alcoholic and mentally impoverished young man living with his parents in the opposite flat on the same landing, came to her door in the late evening while I was there to tell her that someone had scrawled on the wall of their building 'Who killed Galya?' (Galya was a woman in the same block who had recently died of a brain haemorrhage) and also to ask 'Who will be next?' Tatyana related this to me with horrified eyes, telling me not to worry. In the evening of my third day the same loping and shambling Dima came to her door, drunk, in his dressing-gown and slippers, wanting to "see the Englishwoman". She did not know how to refuse him entry until she thought of telling him that someone was at his door and he went. But he came back twice, dressed now, apparently in his best suit, to show me some toy soldiers he had painted. Meanwhile Tatyana hovered about, went out and in, didn't know what to do. When he knocked for the fourth time I *told* her not to let him in, and we became free of him. "I hate him!" she said to me then. "I *can't bear him*". But he is a neighbour. And his father, an ex-KGB official, does repairs for her.

Tatyana's flat is reached by eight flights of narrow stone stairs, or else by the very old shuddering lift through whose gaps you can see the deep drop. There are smells. On the wall,

on our level, someone has firmly inscribed: 'Do not use the floor as a toilet'. Tatyana's door has lost its number but she has written '42' on it in chalk. You go in to her narrow entrance hall which is dimly lit and crowded with books – three book-cases from floor to ceiling. There is *just* room to hang coats and change shoes. Five doors lead to: her bedroom and her other room (where I slept), both small, about 12 feet by eight; the kitchen; the bathroom; the lavatory; all tiny. In her bedroom there are four sets of book-cases, floor to ceiling, all crammed with bibles, encyclopedias, art monographs, books of history; books in Russian, English, German, French, Italian, Czech. There is a tiny desk and a little table heaped with papers and folders. The walls are hung with crucifixes (one of them made in the seventeenth century, its inscriptions peeling off) and with icons, including the 'Saviour Not Made by Hands',\* and sculptures, some by people she knows, one a weird dark figure of Christ from Easter Island, with wide flat oval body and skinny arms, spectral fingers. The bed in this bedroom is diminished, almost hidden, by all these things. "Nothing has changed here", she told me, "nor been shifted" – that is, since she moved in thirty years ago.

In my room, adjoining that one and with a glass door, a jumble of furniture is stranded amongst the surrounding over-full walls of books and includes some separate bookshelves, at all angles and all jammed full. On one shelf there stand eighteen volumes of church history, in Old Slavonic, printed in the seventeenth century, all of them two to three inches thick, in rotting leather binding. Another fifteen of them lie heaped on another shelf. There are twelve big book-cases in this little room, pressing around my narrow bed, as well as a table on which stand: a vast old typewriter with carriage extending six inches each side, a large paraffin lamp, a small TV scarcely ever used, and some dusty heaps of art journals.

We talk to each other mostly in the tiny kitchen. There, knives, forks and spoons lie in a row on the dresser as if there is no home for them. Plates stand permanently on the draining rack. On rickety shelves are arranged a lot of old 'Khokhloma' bowls\* and other wooden Russian pots, as well as innumerable empty coffee jars being collected for some reason or other. On the wall by the small table hang three pictures: one is a big photo of the church at Rostov, with thick white tower and green cupolas; the second is a reproduction of a twelfth-century Christ-not-made-by-hands; the third is a very fine framed drawing, done by Tatyana in her youth, of a wooden church in Kostroma; it looks like a fairy-tale arrangement of izbas\* with a little tower and cupolas leaning out above them and with a sloping wooden porch, snow all round and a snowy fence along the front. Tatyana makes buckwheat porridge for me in this kitchen, serving it cold and drenched in milk. She also makes a good fry-up of cabbage, carrots and eggs, and gives me bowls of tvoróg\* (pronounced by her as 'tvórog') and any number of cups of tea. The cherry liqueur chocolates I bring she accepts quietly and later seems to absorb them with slow silent joy.

Her bathroom has a very dim light, its old bath is stained and cracked, the hand-basin has not worked for years, the huge round pipes on the wall have peeling-off paint. The

lavatory next door has no light at all, so it shares that of the bathroom through a small top window; and its door does not fasten.

I suppose Tatyana is a person 'without *byt'* – a phrase I first heard from my friend the Tsvetaeva-scholar Yudif Matveevna Kagan when she was talking about scholars in Vitebsk: "Eto – lyudi bez byta": "they are people without byt", 'byt' meaning ordinary everyday life, with a suggestion of some concern for it. However, Tatyana does not sit up half the night – as they did - philosophising with other scholars, artists and thinkers. She is alone and lonely. She rings up Olga (who is not a scholar) every day, and invariably says too much to her dubious neighbours whenever she comes across them. She loves stray cats, she loved feeding pigeons at her window until a neighbour complained of their droppings: now when they come to ask for food she gazes out very sadly. When I told her about mad cow disease in England that year and the planned slaughter of cows, she actually wept, shedding tears: "I'm so sorry for the cows."

During our day in Uglich, Tatyana took me to churches, palaces, cathedrals and monasteries, and explained them all in her wonderful voice, knowing everything: dates and styles and names, purposes, events and anecdotes; and she taught me a lot of Russian architectural vocabulary. She showed me all these things with evident love for them, and, most especially, love for the so-called '*Divnaya*' ('Marvellous') church with its (unique in Russia) three *shatrovye* – tent-shaped – towers. "Look how beautiful, look . . ." She was visibly moved, even disturbed, looking at it. Back in her flat in Yaroslavl, she showed me, in a modest and simple-hearted way, long letters of appreciation and scholarly exchange from an American priest, also several books dedicated affectionately to her by well-known scholars.

The day I left, as my taxi came, Tatyana suddenly gave me a hug. We said goodbye with warmth and with some sadness.

A.M.Livingstone, June 1996

\* Four notes to page 4.

'Saviour Not Made by Hands': Certain much revered icons were said to have come into being by miracle, without human craftsmanship. // Khokhloma: a traditional Russian folk handicraft – gold, black and red flowers and leaves painted on wooden articles. // izba: a peasant-type house built of logs. // tvorog: curd cheese.